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They're, Like, Way Ahead of the Linguistic Currrrve

By DOUGLAS QUENQUA

From Valley Girls to the Kardashians, young women have long been mocked for the way they talk.

Whether it be uptalk (pronouncing statements as if they were questions? Like this?), creating slang words like “bitchin’ ” and “ridic,” or the incessant use of “like” as a conversation filler, vocal trends associated with young women are often seen as markers of immaturity or even stupidity.

Right?

But linguists — many of whom once promoted theories consistent with that attitude — now say such thinking is outmoded. Girls and women in their teens and 20s deserve credit for pioneering vocal trends and popular slang, they say, adding that young women use these embellishments in much more sophisticated ways than people tend to realize.

“A lot of these really flamboyant things you hear are cute, and girls are supposed to be cute,” said [Penny Eckert](#), a professor of linguistics at Stanford University. “But they’re not just using them because they’re girls. They’re using them to achieve some kind of interactional and stylistic end.”

The latest linguistic curiosity to emerge from the petri dish of girl culture gained a burst of public recognition in December, when researchers from Long Island University [published a paper](#) about it in *The Journal of Voice*. Working with what they acknowledged was a very small sample — recorded speech from 34 women ages 18 to 25 — the professors said they had found evidence of a new trend among female college students: a guttural fluttering of the vocal cords they called “vocal fry.”

A classic example of vocal fry, best described as a raspy or croaking sound injected (usually) at the end of a sentence, can be heard when [Mae West](#) says, “Why don’t you come up sometime and see me,” or, more recently on

television, when [Maya Rudolph](#) mimics [Maya Angelou](#) on “Saturday Night Live.”

Not surprisingly, gadflies in cyberspace were quick to pounce on the study — or, more specifically, on the girls and women who are frying their words. “Are they trying to sound like Kesha or Britney Spears?” teased [The Huffington Post](#), naming two pop stars who employ vocal fry while singing, although the study made no mention of them. “Very interesteeeeeeeeeeang,” said [Gawker.com](#), mocking the lazy, drawn-out affect.

Do not scoff, says [Nassima Abdelli-Beruh](#), a speech scientist at Long Island University and an author of the study. “They use this as a tool to convey something,” she said. “You quickly realize that for them, it is as a cue.”

Other linguists not involved in the research also cautioned against forming negative judgments.

“If women do something like uptalk or vocal fry, it’s immediately interpreted as insecure, emotional or even stupid,” said [Carmen Fought](#), a professor of linguistics at Pitzer College in Claremont, Calif. “The truth is this: Young women take linguistic features and use them as power tools for building relationships.”

The idea that young women serve as incubators of vocal trends for the culture at large has longstanding roots in linguistics. As Paris is to fashion, the thinking goes, so are young women to linguistic innovation.

“It’s generally pretty well known that if you identify a sound change in progress, then young people will be leading old people,” said [Mark Liberman](#), a linguist at the University of Pennsylvania, “and women tend to be maybe half a generation ahead of males on average.”

Less clear is why. Some linguists suggest that women are more sensitive to social interactions and hence more likely to adopt subtle vocal cues. Others say women use language to assert their power in a culture that, at least in days gone by, asked them to be sedate and decorous. Another theory is that young women are simply given more leeway by society to speak flamboyantly.

But the idea that vocal fads initiated by young women eventually make their way into the general vernacular is well established. Witness, for example, the spread of uptalk, or “high-rising terminal.”

Starting in America with the Valley Girls of the 1980s (after immigrating from Australia, evidently), uptalk became common among young women across the country by the 1990s.

In the past 20 years, uptalk has traveled “up the age range and across the gender boundary,” said David Crystal, a longtime professor of linguistics who teaches at Bangor University in Wales. “I’ve heard grandfathers and grandmothers use it,” he said. “I occasionally use it myself.”

Even an American president has been known to uptalk. “George W. Bush used to do it from time to time,” said Dr. Liberman, “and nobody ever said, ‘Oh, that G.W.B. is so insecure, just like a young girl.’ ”

The same can be said for the word “like,” when used in a grammatically superfluous way or to add cadence to a sentence. (Because, like, people tend to talk this way when impersonating, like, teenage girls?) But in 2011, Dr. Liberman conducted an analysis of nearly 12,000 phone conversations recorded in 2003, and found that while young people tended to use “like” more often than older people, men used it more frequently than women.

And, actually? The use of “like” in a sentence, “apparently without meaning or syntactic function, but possibly as emphasis,” has made its way into the Webster’s New World College Dictionary, Fourth Edition — this newspaper’s reference Bible — where the example given is: “It’s, like, hot.” Anyone who has seen a television show featuring the Kardashian sisters will be more than familiar with this usage.

“Like” and uptalk often go hand in hand. Several studies have shown that uptalk can be used for any number of purposes, even to dominate a listener. In 1991, Cynthia McLemore, a linguist at the University of Pennsylvania, found that senior members of a Texas sorority used uptalk to make junior members feel obligated to carry out new tasks. (“We have a rush event this Thursday? And everyone needs to be there?”)

Dr. Eckert of Stanford recalled a study by one of her students, a woman who worked at a Jamba Juice and tracked instances of uptalking customers. She found that by far the most common uptalkers were fathers of young women. For them, it was “a way of showing themselves to be friendly and not asserting power in the situation,” she said.

Vocal fry, also known as creaky voice, has a long history with English speakers. Dr. Crystal, the British linguist, cited it as far back as 1964 as a way for British men to denote their superior social standing. In the United States,

it has seemingly been gaining popularity among women since at least 2003, when Dr. Fought, the Pitzer College linguist, detected it among the female speakers of a Chicano dialect in California.

A 2005 study by [Barry Pennock-Speck](#), a linguist at the University of Valencia in Spain, noted that actresses like Gwyneth Paltrow and Reese Witherspoon used creaky voice when portraying contemporary American characters (Ms. Paltrow used it in the movie “Shallow Hal,” Ms. Witherspoon in “Legally Blonde”), but not British ones in period films (Ms. Paltrow in “Shakespeare in Love,” Ms. Witherspoon in “The Importance of Being Earnest”).

So what does the use of vocal fry denote? Like uptalk, women use it for a variety of purposes. Ikuko Patricia Yuasa, a lecturer in linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley, called it a natural result of women’s lowering their voices to sound more authoritative.

It can also be used to communicate disinterest, something teenage girls are notoriously fond of doing.

“It’s a mode of vibration that happens when the vocal cords are relatively lax, when sublevel pressure is low,” said Dr. Liberman. “So maybe some people use it when they’re relaxed and even bored, not especially aroused or invested in what they’re saying.”

But “language changes very fast,” said Dr. Eckert of Stanford, and most people — particularly adults — who try to divine the meaning of new forms used by young women are “almost sure to get it wrong.”

“What may sound excessively ‘girly’ to me may sound smart, authoritative and strong to my students,” she said.