

Gender Differences in "Uptalk" in the College Classroom?

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Abstract

The gender differences in language use have been studied often and in a variety of contexts since the 1970s (Lakoff 1973; Fishman 1978; O’Barr and Atkins 1980; Hirschman 1994; Swann and Graddol 1998). Historically, final rising intonation on declarative statements or “uptalk” has been a linguistic feature associated with women because of its perception of demonstrating or feigning uncertainty and its association with powerlessness. Many studies have also found that women use this feature more (Lakoff 1973; McConnell-Ginnett 1978; O’Barr and Atkins 1980; Hirschman 1994; Shokeir 2008). However, a more recent development is the use of this feature more generally among all young people, regardless of gender, in many different places and contexts (Guy, Horvath, Vonwiller, Daisley and Rogers 1986; Warren 2005; Linnemann 2013; Tyler 2015; Prechtel and Copper 2016). Many people, regardless of any extralinguistic factors, may also use “uptalk” for a variety of semantic and pragmatic purposes (Ching 1982, Guy, Horvath, Vonwiller, Daisley and Rogers 1986, House 2006, McLemore 1991). This study examines the behavior of students during class discussion in an upper-level sociolinguistics course at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and compares the frequency at which men speak in class versus women, and the frequency that men use question intonation versus the frequency that women use question intonation. In a class where the gender distribution is 19% men and 81% women, men speak about 38% of the time and women speak 62% of the time. Men use question intonation 34% of the time and women use it 33% of the time. These data show not only the disproportionate number of times that men take the conversational floor in classroom discussion, but also that at least in this context, question intonation is not necessarily exclusively a feature of women’s speech and may be used by all speakers in a pragmatic way to facilitate interaction and indicate further propositional meaning. The results of this study in conjunction with previous work on the gender differences in “uptalk” usage suggests that the high frequency of men using question intonation may also be a strategy for these men to index their masculinity in a more acceptable way in a class that is majority women. These data also show the tendency for younger speakers in general, regardless of gender, to use question intonation or uptalk more frequently.

Background

- **Rising intonation/question intonation/“uptalk”** is when a speaker ends a declarative statement with a distinct rise in intonation, **as if they are asking a question**, traditionally thought of/has been observed as a feature of women’s speech (Lakoff 1973; McConnell-Ginnett 1978; O’Barr and Atkins 1980; Hirschman 1994; Shokeir 2008) or powerless speech (O’Barr and Atkins 1980), but categories such as “women’s speech” are culturally constructed and defined (Gal 1995)
- More recent sociolinguistic research shows that **youth rather than gender** is the main extralinguistic variable predicting “uptalk” use & perceived by speakers (Warren 2005, Linnemann 2013, Tyler 2015, Prechtel and Copper 2016), it **may also be used for particular pragmatic functions**, particularly indicating continuance, interactiveness, or inconclusiveness/non-finality, connecting turns between speakers, eliciting agreement, or holding the conversational floor for longer (Ching 1982, House 2006, McLemore 1991, Schegoff 1982)
- This feature is **prevalent in some regionally-defined varieties of English** such as Ontario English and Australian English (Guy, Horvath, Vonwiller, Daisley and Rogers 1986, Shokeir 2008)
- Despite this, **there is a lot of criticism of this particular feature directed mostly at young women**, particularly white middle-class women (Cameron 2012, Linnemann 2013), in part due to the negative media portrayals of uptalk, especially in "Valley Girl English"
 - This creates the popular perception that young women are the only ones participating in the linguistic trend (Nycum 2018)
- **Changes in progress (which are lead by women) can often be resisted by men because they come to be associated with women**, politeness, and powerlessness even though the change is there for all speakers, true especially of working-class men (Eckert 1989; Guy, Horvath, Vonwiller, Daisley, and Rogers 1986)

Research Question

Who holds the conversational floor more often in the classroom, women or men?

Who uses “uptalk” or rising intonation more, women or men, and why might this be the case?

Hypothesis: Based on personal experience, I thought that men would speak disproportionately more than women. Based upon the public perception and linguistic research suggesting that rising intonation is a feature of women’s speech, I thought that women would use it more in the classroom.

Method

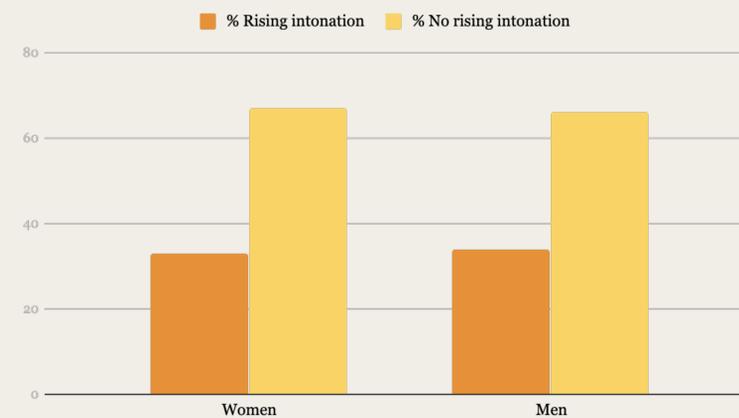
- Data was collected in ENGL/LING 471 (Sociolinguistics) at the University of Tennessee over the course of **10** class sessions
- Data was collected **rapidly** and **anonymously** during classroom discussion (Labov 1972)
- When a student gained the conversational floor, their gender was marked down, along with the category of the utterance (question/answer), and **whether or not they used “uptalk”** (utterances were marked as using uptalk if two or more of the complete phrases/sentences were spoken with noticeable rising intonation)

Results

% Membership in class compared to % total responses, by gender



% Rising intonation by gender



Conclusions

- Men take the conversational floor during class a **disproportionately higher number of times than women**, which suggests some sort of power difference
- There was **no difference in the frequency of use of rising intonation between men and women, at least in this interactional context**, which could be the product of numerous things or some combination thereof:
 - Rising intonation is a **generational change**, rather than something that differs across gender (Warren 2005, Linnemann 2013, Tyler 2015, Prechtel and Copper 2016), and perhaps the association with the feature with women is a result of women leading this linguistic change (Eckert 1989; Guy, Horvath, Vonwiller, Daisley, and Rogers 1986)
 - **Pragmatic** functions (Ching 1982, House 2006, McLemore 1991)
 - May be a way secure the conversational floor by indicating continuance (McLemore 1991, Schegoff 1982)
 - Reflecting **inexperience and lack of expertise** (McLemore 1991, O’Barr and Atkins 1980)
 - Men **indexing their masculinity in a less competitive way** in a situation where women are the majority (Linneman 2013)
 - Women **avoiding the feature because of the amount of criticism** directed toward young women for using this feature (Cameron 2012) or in fear of appearing “weak” (McLemore 1991)
- Complex performance of gender and the social construction of dominance and meaning through speech, **not as simple as “male and female speech”** (Eckert 1989, Gal 1995)

Limitations & Further Research

- The anonymity of the study means that **gender and linguistic habits in the classroom could not be studied and contextualized on an individual basis**
- **Data was not recorded for playback** and was dependent entirely on one person’s judgement, and time actually spent speaking was not measured but rather # of times the conversational floor was taken
- The only feature of so-called “women’s speech” that was analyzed is rising intonation, but several others such as hedges and tag questions serve similar purposes, those features could be studied in similar contexts for a more comprehensive overview of how “women’s speech” actually works
- The only extralinguistic factor considered was gender, but race, class, and topical considerations could also be variables
- Data was **only collected in one specific class**, similar studies might be done in classrooms with different gender distributions, different sizes, and different subject matters (STEM, arts, different social sciences)
- **Further perceptual studies** could be done to determine exactly what this variable means to young speakers

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