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 (Lakof 1973; Fishman 1978; O’Barr and Atkins 1980). 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 (Lakof 1973; McConnell-Ginet 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, Vonwiler, Daisley and Rogers 1986; Warren 2005; Linneman 2013; Tyler 2013; Prechel 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, Vonwiler, Daisley and Rogers 1986, House 2006, McMenemy 1991). This study examines the relationship of students using class discussion in a 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 23% 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 a woman’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.

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 sociolinguistic 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Membership in class</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>% Total responses</td>
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% Rising intonation by gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Rising intonation</th>
<th>No rising intonation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
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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 as being a feature of women’s speech (Lakof 1973; McConnell-Ginet 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 1993)

• More recent sociolinguistic research shows that youth rather than gender is the main extralinguistic variable predicting “uptalk” use & perceived by speakers (Warren zoom; Linneman 2013; Tyler 2013; Prechel and Copper 2016), it may also be used for particular pragmatic functions, particularly indicating continuation, interactivity, or inconclusiveness/non-finality, connecting turns between speakers, eliciting agreement, or holding the conversational floor for longer (Ching 1982, House 2006, McMenemy 1991, Schagoff 1982)

• This feature is prevalent in some regionally-defined varieties of English such as Ontario English and Australian English (Guy, Horvath, Vonwiler, 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, Linneman 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 (Guy, Horvath, Vonwiler, Daisley and Rogers 1986)

• Changes in progress (which are lead by women) can often be resisted by men because they come to be associated with women, powerless, and power even though the change is there for all speakers, true especially of working-class men (Eckert 1989; Guy, Horvath, Vonwiler, Daisley, and Rogers 1986)

Conclusions

• Men take the conversational floor during class a disproportionately higher number of times than women, which suggests some sort of power imbalance

• There was no difference in the frequency of use of rising intonation between men and women, at least in this instructional 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; Linneman 2013; Tyler 2013; Prechel 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, McMenemy 1991)

• May be a way secure the conversational floor by indicating continuation (Cameron 2012)

• Reflecting inexperience and lack of expertise (McMenemy 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” (McMenemy 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 1993)

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 is actually working

• 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 younger speakers

References