

Can a Woman's Voice Ever Be Right?

From the Roman Forum to the 2016 campaign trail, anxiety over what women sound like is part of our cultural DNA.

By JORDAN KISNER

In ancient Rome, women were forbidden from speaking in the forum, but during the civil wars and political tumult of the late republic, the rules about public oration loosened a bit, which is why we know of Caia Afrania, a Roman from the first-century BC who insisted on speaking for herself when she came before the court. She evidently enjoyed pleading cases, so much so that she acted as a lawyer for others, which was common among men but unheard of for women. The hostility she suffered for this perceived impudence was tremendous. They turned her into a noun: An “Afrania” became slang for an unpleasant woman. Rome passed a law — in which she was referred to as *improbissima fema*, the infamous woman — forbidding women to plead cases other than their own. The rancor was directed not just at the fact of her speech but at the sound of her voice. The first-century writer Valerius Maximus called it an “unnatural yapping,” a “bark,” a “constant harassment of the magistrate.” Detractors pronounced her shameless for exposing her voice before so many. We know only her death date (48 AD) because, as Maximus wrote, “with unnatural freaks like this it’s more important to record when they died than when they were born.”

Afrania was probably not the first outspoken woman whose voice was said to grate, and she certainly would not be the last. Elizabeth I was frequently

judged to be unwomanly in her speech (“She says the most extraordinary things,” complained the Spanish ambassador regarding marriage negotiations she refused). As was Margaret Thatcher, whose biographer noted that she contracted a speech coach (“The hectoring tones of the housewife gave way to softer notes”). More recently, **the women of NPR** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XDvPjm1oCMo>) have been harangued for sounding unauthoritative (“like high-school girls”), and the voice of Jill Abramson, former editor of the New York *Times*, was described in **The New Yorker** (<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/10/24/changing-times-ken-auletta>) as “the equivalent of a nasal car honk.”

And then, of course, there is Hillary Clinton, whose voice has been called “excruciating,” “shrill,” “bitter,” “decidedly grating,” and compared to that of a “nagging wife” and a “landlady yelling up the stairs” by both her opponents and political analysts. During Clinton’s first presidential campaign, Glenn Beck, then a CNN news host, did a **segment** (<http://thinkprogress.org/media/2007/03/30/11509/beck-clinton-voice/>) on how her voice “sticks in your ear like an ice pick” and “makes angels cry.” This election cycle, Donald Trump gave a mocking impression of her “robot voice” at a rally in Connecticut. The criticism has been so rampant that **The New Republic** (<https://newrepublic.com/article/121643/why-do-so-many-people-hate-sound-hillary-clintons-voice>) felt compelled to run a feature called “Why Do So Many People Hate the Sound of Hillary Clinton’s Voice?,” and the New York **Times** (http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/13/us/politics/two-times-reporters-analyze-hillary-clintons-2016-presidential-announcement-video.html?_r=0)’ analysis of Clinton’s presidential campaign video noted with approval that Hillary had used her “quieter-but-confident speaking voice” rather than “the VOICE.” All the critiques imply something Beck declared outright: Clinton sounds like (so therefore *must be*) “a stereotypical bitch.”

The public sniping at women’s voices reflects a deeper cultural anxiety about whether they have a right to speak at all. Classicist Mary Beard points out that this anxiety is historic, written into our cultural DNA. She **writes** (<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n06/mary-beard/the-public-voice-of-women>), “Public speaking and oratory were not merely things that ancient women didn’t do: they were exclusive practices and skills that defined masculinity as a gender ... the tone and timbre of women’s speech always threatened to subvert not just the voice of the male orator, but also the social and political stability, the health, of the whole state.” This is our cultural inheritance, and its patterns play out on Twitter and the floor of the House of Representatives alike: “Women, even when they are not silenced, still have to pay a very high price for being heard.”

There is a sense among women that if only we could figure out the “right” voice, we could more easily unlock opportunities, open the forum, even lead a nation (hence Thatcher’s vocal coach and Clinton’s conscientious modulation). Perhaps this is why the pitch of women’s voices in the U.S. dropped precipitously in the second half of the last century as more women entered the workforce. When I was younger, I wanted to be an actor and spent many hours in vocal-training classes. My fellow students and I would plant our feet on the ground, squat as if we were about to birth a baby, and

give great, guttural shouts of “*Haaaaaaaaa!*” while focusing on the expansion and contraction of our lower backs. Or we would stand before the rest of the class, one hand on our bellies and one on our throats, while the instructor stood nearby and asked us to “place” our voice in different locations on our bodies. “Move the resonance from your throat up to your forehead,” the instructor would say. “Say ‘ahhh’ as if your voice is coming from your anus.”

Several times I saw instructors (both male and female) stand behind a young woman and push hard against her diaphragm or use two fingers to pinch her trachea and jiggle it from side to side while she phonated. These were always girls whose regular speaking voices had been identified as “too high” or “too breathy” or “too gravelly.” These qualities were seen as something between affectation and affliction, imposed by a combination of bad physical habits and social norms, and they needed to be eliminated. The instructor would manipulate the girl’s body as she spoke, pushing and pulling and squeezing parts of her, and you could hear the sound change, like an instrument being played. Unfailingly, after a magic combination of modifications, the girl’s voice would suddenly, like an end-stage origami creation, fold into something clear and strong, more resonant, richer.

“There,” the instructor would say. “That’s your real voice.”

The goal of these classes was partly to prepare us for the physical toll stage acting can have on the voice because of the strain required to be audible in a large house. The second, more sophisticated goal was to give us access to our voices’ versatility — to show us how to make a voice that sounded “neutral,” absent any remarkable qualities, or absolutely un-neutral: older, younger, happier, stupider, hipper, kinder, sicklier, and so forth.

Often, we struggled hardest to manage “neutral” voices — getting rid of lisps, hard *T*’s, natural inflection patterns. The goal was to sound like a well-educated, upper-middle-class, possibly coastal-dwelling adult white woman. Vera Farmiga, maybe, or Angelina Jolie. (The male neutral voice sounded something like Justin Theroux.) The notion that we all have a “real” voice that stands in opposition to a “neutral” voice was at once self-evident and confusing — it’s difficult to discern the idiosyncratic qualities in your “real” voice, which parts of your words deviate from the unimpeachable neutral. Eliminating these idiosyncracies represented an ultimate form of self-control. If we could sound like no one, we could be anyone. None of the students in the class ever asked the obvious question: Who got to decide what was neutral?

For every wrong-voiced woman, the nominal problem is excess. The voice is *too* something — too loud, nasal, breathy, honking, squeaky, matronly, whispered. It reveals too much of some identity, it overflows its bounds. The excess in turn points to what’s lacking: softness, power, humor, intellect, sexiness, seriousness, coolness, warmth. The fact that these adjectives come in relatively inverse pairs isn’t a coincidence. We have some measure of control over the way we sound, but for women — and minorities — the margin of error can be vanishingly thin. It’s almost impossible to get it “right.”

Critiques of women's voices are inextricably tied up with race and class. Consider Fran Drescher of *The Nanny* and the character Janice Goralnik on *Friends*, two women whose hypernasal voices and wide vowels coded them as too Jewish and too "New York." Consider pioneering female entertainers like Rosanne Barr or Joan Rivers, who, like Drescher and Goralnik, also frequently make the "worst women's voices of all time" list. Audie Cornish, host of NPR's "All Things Considered," is frequently accused of "code-switching" to sound more white for public-radio audiences, even though she points out that her speaking voice is the same on and off the radio. And Michelle Obama has spoken about being taunted for "talking like a white girl" as a young woman and then dismissed as "too loud, or too angry, or too emasculating" during her husband's first presidential campaign. Jazmine Hughes confessed last year in **the Hairpin** (<https://thehairpin.com/who-should-we-listen-to-50b7cd5746a5#.oarasdxhx>) that her confusion about her own voice comes from confusion about what kind of identity or authority she feels compelled to project into the world: "As much as I hate to admit it, unconsciously, white voices do sound somewhat more authoritative to me, because white people are always the ones in command," she wrote.

Being "in command" is always the issue, and conversations about the excesses or insufficiencies of voices tend to rest on assumptions about authority. How can you sound "too black" or "too Southern" or "too blue collar" or "too girly" to be credible in broadcast journalism unless those are qualities that make you unfit for reading the news? When women are told they undermine their own authority in the workplace by sounding too sexy or too shrill, this supposes that femininity is anathema to competence.

The tic that revealed women's supposed lack of leadership skills in the '80s and '90s was "uptalk," a high lilt at the end of the sentence that makes even statements sound like questions. Today, it's vocal fry, a gravelly effect that happens when you falsely lower **your voice** (<http://nymag.com/scienceofus/2016/05/what-creaking-at-your-own-dumb-voice-reveals-about-you.html>) to the extent that the vocal cords fail to catch and "fry." It's that creaky, guttural, drawn-out sound at the end of a word. For an example, search for clips of Kim Kardashian, whose voice has inspired full-throated moral panic. In the last year, the New York *Times*, the Washington *Post*, the *Atlantic*, and *Time* cited Kardashian as an icon of vocal fry. Bob Garfield at **Slate**

(http://www.slate.com/articles/podcasts/lexicon_valley/2013/01/lexicon_valley_on_creaky_voice_or_vocal_fry.html) called it "vulgar," "annoying," and "repulsive." The **Huffington Post** (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/10/31/vocal-fry_n_6082220.html) recently blamed her for making thousands of women "less hireable." Writing for **the Guardian** (<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jul/24/vocal-fry-strong-female-voice>), Naomi Wolf pleaded with young women not to imitate the vocal affect, claiming it was a subtle plot of the patriarchy to undermine the authority of "the most empowered generation of young women ever." But why should a certain way of speaking disempower them?

"Somebody said I sounded like a stoner 13-year-old," producer Stephanie Foo reported on a **This American Life** (<http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/545/transcript>) segment about the hate mail the show receives regarding its female producers' vocal fry. "Somebody said my voice sounds like driving over

gravel. Somebody said they want to kill themselves listening to my voice.” On the same segment, Ira Glass, the show’s host, said these complaints about female producers’ voices were among the angriest the show has ever gotten. He read one male listener’s letter aloud:

“Listen, I know there’s pressure to hire females, in particular young females just out of college. And besides, they’re likely to work for less money. But do you have to choose the most irritating voices in the English-speaking world? I mean, are you forced to? Or maybe, as I imagine, NPR runs national contests looking for them.”

The real — if not explicitly stated — objection in these complaints is that these young women don’t deserve to be on the radio, telling listeners stories about the world. Glass noted that the show has never received a letter about his own robust vocal fry.

Ironically, vocal fry is an overcorrection for another female problem: a voice that’s too high. The first women I ever heard speaking with the telltale gravel weren’t reality TV stars like Kardashian but women in business. I noticed it while eavesdropping on a *Lean In* reading group meeting in a bookstore in Soho in 2011; every woman who spoke seemed to try to lower her voice farther than the last to sound more authoritative (read: more masculine). They sounded like a convention of jet engines. When I took a job in publishing, I heard the same affectation in conference rooms — voices lowered until they broke and dragged out, frazzled like a disaffected teenager’s. As I navigated my first sexist workplace, I occasionally dropped my own voice, hoping to sound less girlish and more worthy of serious consideration. I took care to find a timbre that suggested gravitas without veering into fry. It was the most practical application of my vocal training yet: playing a young woman someone might take seriously.

The comi-tragedy of this tactic is that after a point it backfires and makes you sound like an idiot. Critics of vocal fry often point to a **study by Duke University’s business school** (<http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0097506>) indicating that vocal fry undermines the success of young women in the labor market. While an earlier study concluded that millennials associated fried voices with upward mobility and sophistication even though older adults found them “less competent, less educated, less trustworthy, less attractive, and less hireable,” the Duke study found that vocal fry was perceived negatively by everyone regardless of age. The demographic most irritated by vocal fry in younger women in their study, they added, was older women.

As the Duke study suggests, the act of policing women’s voices is often carried out by women themselves. It’s hard to avoid the fear that every prominent woman who sounds like a ditz (or a harpy, or a slut, or a matron, or a stoned 13-year-old) makes it easier for the world to write the rest of us off.

After receiving letters about her vocal fry, *This American Life* producer Chana Joffe-Walt began to hate the way she sounded, too. “I’m noticing every single time I do it,” she told Ira Glass, “but trying not to do it is impossible

because it's the way I talk, that's my actual voice." She also began resenting other women whose voices sounded like hers: "If I hear other people do it — other women especially — I become like a woman who hates women. It taps into some deep part of people's selves where they don't want to hear young women, including me. It taps into that in me."

The only voice people are quicker to reject than the outsider's is the one that might be mistaken for theirs. I am a woman but not like *those* women. The "neutral" voice is a subjective category that shifts by individual and by culture, and so every voice can be a deviant to someone's neutral — and everyone has an imagined standard to defend. Even Kim Kardashian: In the documentary *I Am Cait*, there's **a scene**

(<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/video/tvshowbiz/video-1203068/Caitlyn-Jenner-attempts-female-voice-NEW-I-Am-Cait-clip.html>) of Kardashian sitting at a table with Caitlyn Jenner, who describes how, even after her gender-reassignment surgeries, she still feels that her voice pegs her as male. She confesses she'd practiced on hotel concierges: "I'd think, *Okay, I'm going to try to get my best feminine voice and call down so they say 'Yes, ma'am.'* I could never do it." Kardashian proposes Jenner try with her.

"Front desk!" intones Kardashian. "This is room service. How can I help you?"

Jenner's eyes travel to the ceiling. "Um." She swallows. "Okay, yes, actually, you can help me ..."

"You sound *no* different!" Kardashian giggles, rolling her eyes. "Sir! Sir! Sir! What would you like, sir?"

The comfort and danger of having a voice is that others can know you by it — and not just in the sense that they might pick you out of a lineup with their eyes closed but that, through the sound of your voice alone, they can learn something essential about who you are. Hannah Arendt, writing in *The Human Condition* (<https://www.amazon.com/Human-Condition-2nd-Hannah-Arendt/dp/0226025985>), argues that the most essential function of speech isn't the words spoken but the way that "in acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world." The feminist theorist Adriana Cavarero puts it slightly differently: "Every voice is obviously a sound, an acoustic vibration among others ... but it is only as human that the voice comes to be perceived as unique," she writes. "No matter what you say, I know that the voice is yours." The tone, timbre, inflection, and sonority of your voice is the most direct means you have to tell someone who you are — and in a way, it communicates far more than what you say.

It's natural, then, to want your voice and the voices of people like you to be taken seriously, no matter what they sound like. "I just want to know what I have to do," a young woman told me the other day, "what I have to do to not be written off the moment I open my mouth." It's a question most women face eventually, more so if they hold other identities that make them vulnerable to bigotry — like women of color, trans women, queer women, poor women. For these women especially, making their voices heard can invite rhetorical (or literal) violence. "There's a cost for me emotionally when I speak up about things," Laverne Cox **said** (<http://www.nylon.com/articles/life-advice-laverne-cox/page-2>) in an

interview last year when she was asked about being a high-profile black trans woman. "I have to get ready for the bullets." Still Cox, like other women throughout history who have dared to throw their voices into the forum, echoes Adrienne Rich's sentiment that silence itself "is oppression, is violence." There's no secret, their legacies suggest: Just speak anyway.

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