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An Examination of Vocal Fry as a Feminine Identity Marker

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Introduction

Vocal fry, also commonly referred to as “pulse register,” “glottal fry,” or “creaky voice,” is described by Hollien, Moore, Wendahl, and Michel (1966) as “a phonational register occurring at frequencies below those of the modal register.” It is marked by exceptionally slow vibrations of the anterior end of the vocal chords, which produce a distinctly creaky quality in the vocal tone (Shaw & Crocker, 2015). Originally, the vocal fry was seen as a speech disorder called “dicrotic dysphonia,” but as more research was conducted it became apparent that it is, in fact, a vocal register that occurs naturally in speakers worldwide of various ages and across genders – the low-tone equivalent of falsetto voice (Hollien, Moore, Wendahl, & Michel, 1966). In fact, it appears as a linguistically contrastive element in languages such as Hausa, a language spoken primarily in Nigeria, which has contrastive creaky and modal sounds /b/, /d/, and /j/ (Shaw & Crocker, 2015).

As the vocal fry began to be seen as a speech register as opposed to a disorder, the specific social implications of its use came into light. Early on, it was seen as a harsh or rough way of speaking with strong connotations of power, authority, and masculinity (Wolk, Abdelli-Beruh, & Slavin, 2012; Yuasa, 2010). However, in recent years that perception has shifted in the United States; now the vocal fry occurs most commonly in the speech of young women and carries a social implication of education, urbanization, and professionalism (Yuasa, 2010). However, this view is not definitive; other research suggests that, as opposed to the intended positive connotation, it can be received negatively and is widely looked down upon, particularly in the professional world as a result of its common association with youth and lack of experience (Anderson, Klofstad, Mayew, and Venkatachalam, 2014).
The vocal fry phenomenon is of particular significance within the field of sociolinguistics because this one phonetic aspect of speech has changed in terms of its social implication in accordance with the larger societal changes of the time. It demonstrates the power of language to change in reaction to social pressures and changing aspects of cultural identity. It is a means of expressing one’s inner sense of self not only in terms of gender, but also in terms of nationality, perceived power, education, and social mobility. In addition, it reflects the influence of larger social agreement on the establishment of preferred forms in language and the processes by which the social implications of a particular speech pattern can change over time.

**Literature Review**

It is widely agreed that, in modern American society, the vocal fry is a typically feminine production. While it still occurs in men’s speech, it is most commonly observed in the speech patterns of women and is socially associated as a feminine marker (Shaw & Crocker, 2015; Wolk et al., 2012; Yuasa, 2010). In spite of this perceived unanimity, the current literature in the field of sociolinguistics is divided as to the drive behind this truth. It is possible that women adopted the use of the vocal fry around the turn of the 20th Century, as it was previously a masculine form and women adopted it as a linguistic means of establishing their power as they emerged into the American workforce. It has also become accepted as a marker of the contemporary young American woman, and so a desire to portray that identity also has the potential to drive the spread of its use (Shaw & Crocker, 2015). Not only that, but Yuasa (2010) reported that 122 of the participants in Cash, Ancis, and Strachan’s (1997) study of educated American women who did adopt some traditionally male characteristics (potentially in response to heightened social competition) also maintained conformity with traditional views of feminine beauty. These contradictions demonstrate the potential for an interplay of factors within the construction of
speaker identity. Even outside of a business environment, the United States of America is, and historically has been, a dominantly patriarchal society, and so it is possible that women have adopted lower vocal registers and, indeed, the vocal fry, as a way to counteract the weakness and lack of efficacy that have traditionally been associated with a feminine identity and the higher vocal pitch associated thereto. Some argue that its use can be a marker for an authoritative persona in order to give more emphasis and power to particular utterances (Yuasa, 2010). It has also been argued that, rather than consciously using the vocal fry as a power play, young American women have been exposed to its use through the media, and have adopted it into their own speech patterns, consciously or unconsciously, as a means of emulating what appears to be a popular trend (Wolk et al., 2012). In this way, the use of vocal fry establishes itself as a way of demonstrating in-group identity with an abstract social label, and so is strengthened in its position as a distinct linguistic marker of identity.

In addition to these social influences, the use of vocal fry has also been examined as a structural component of language. Creaky productions can be identified by the trained ear with relative ease, but are also clearly documented with spectrograms and waveforms (Yuasa, 2010). Since it was originally examined through a pathological lens, studies of vocal fry included taking note of the vocal tone of the people under examination as they performed sustained vowel sounds to see if there was any instance of the creak. However, in an analysis of more casual speech production, it was found that vocal fry occurs much more often even from the same speaker in natural conversation or reading tasks than arbitrary vowel pronunciation. It can also be used as a discourse marker at the sentence or paragraph level, and so there are functional influences on its production in addition to the social implications of its use.
Not only are there differing views on the driving force behind the shift in perception of vocal fry, but researchers have also proposed a number of somewhat contradictory expansions on the social meaning itself, even within the United States. In some instances it is associated with social mobility, urban focus, or a contemporary female identity (Shaw & Crocker, 2015; Yuasa, 2010). In other cases, it is associated with seductiveness, or seen as a highly negative construction (Shaw & Crocker, 2015).

Expanding on the view of vocal fry as a less desirable characteristic of modern speech, Anderson, Klofstad, Mayew, and Venkatachalam (2014) examined the use of vocal fry on a national level in light of its use in power dynamics in the business world. It was found that vocal fry has strong negative social correlations, regardless of the sex of the speaker, the sex of the listener, or the age of either party. In addition, they found that some people find vocal fry to be a marker of an uneducated and/or unattractive speaker, which can be damaging to one’s prospects in the business world (Anderson et al., 2014). However, as noted by Shaw and Crocker (2015), it is possible that both of these phenomena exist at the same time in the same environment. They argue that “there is a disparity between perception of those with high levels of creak in their speech and the identity that the creakers themselves aim to construct” (Shaw & Crocker, 2015). In this particular instance, the speaker’s language use could be a distinct, intentional effort to perform a specific marker of identity, but its reception could be incongruous with their intent, which demonstrates the multifaceted nature of sociolinguistic methods of establishing identity; the performance of identity relies not only on the decision of the performer, but the perceptions and opinions of their audience.

Since the adoption of vocal fry in modern speech patterns, there has been a good deal of public backlash against female speakers who demonstrate it, particularly those who are highly
visible in the world of media. In an interview with National Public Radio, Jessica Grose discussed the use of vocal fry with Dr. Penny Eckert, a professor of linguistics at Stanford University, and Susan Sankin, a speech pathologist. Over the course of the interview, they examined the rise of vocal fry in relation to a close cousin: upspeak (the tendency to raise vocal pitch at the end of a sentence, typically associated with “valley girl” talk). Grose explained that there was one point at which she decided to change her vocal quality in response to a slew of negative feedback from listeners. However, it became apparent that changing her voice meant that she had to give up a part of her sense of self. She went on to explain, “There was something lost when I wasn't being myself, whatever that is. ... I have started thinking of voice almost as the way I think about outfits. If I'm going for a job interview I'm going to wear a different outfit than when I'm out with my friends” (P. Eckert & S. Sankin, 2015). This particular example demonstrates the power that negative reactions hold over how people choose to use language, but also how language use is tied to the demonstration of one’s identity. This same interview also explored the variability of perceptions of vocal fry. An example of a speaker using vocal fry from the same production was played for a group of high school students, who were asked what they thought of her on the basis of her speech alone. They concluded that the speaker sounded “good, authoritative” (P. Eckert & S. Sankin, 2015). This disparity appears to be potentially linked with the age of the audience, but Anderson et al. found little to no correlation between age and acceptance of vocal fry (Anderson et al., 2014). As such, it is possible that speakers construct their identities not only in terms of how they expect to be perceived, but also in response to the expectations of a given social environment.

One common theme throughout the literature is that the use of vocal fry is mediated by nationality and culture. Shaw and Crocker (2015) examined instances of vocal fry as produced
by the actress Scarlett Johansson in various films and found that instances of the vocal fry were significantly more frequent in films where Johansson portrayed an American character than British ones. Whether this was a conscious or unconscious choice on her part is impossible to tell but, regardless of intentionality, this distinction demonstrates the shift in social perception of the vocal fry between cultures. Similarly, Yuasa (2010) studied speakers in California for the use of vocal fry. In addition to examining gender differences, Yuasa compared American speakers with Japanese speakers for frequency of the use of creaky voice. Americans were found to produce significantly more frequent instances of vocal fry in their pronunciations, which supports the data presented by Shaw and Crocker that the use of vocal fry is culturally bound within nationalities. In addition, as mentioned previously, there are languages that use vocal fry as a distinct phonetic feature, in which case its use would not carry the same social implication that it does in the United States, but rather would be present across speakers as an inherent aspect of the language (Shaw & Crocker, 2015).

Results

The current research on vocal fry indicates that, while it is difficult to determine one catch-all definition of the social use of vocal fry, it has distinctive social implications that vary among cultures and identities (Shaw & Crocker, 2015; Wolk et al., 2012; Yuasa, 2010). Its variability acts as an indicator of the complex and changeable nature of human identity, as this one subtle phonetic marker can add so many different features of social information to an utterance, depending on the context in which it is used. The most common trend in the data is that creaky voice is currently being used in America by young, educated, urban females, either as a linguistic marker that they are equal to men and able to compete with them in social status,
and/or as a method of establishing in-group identity as a young woman in the United States of America (Shaw & Crocker, 2015; Yuasa, 2010).

One thing that can be definitively stated from the data is that, in general, the perception of vocal fry has shifted from a pathology to a socially and/or linguistically meaningful phonetic form. The fact that it can be produced by speakers without a speech disorder and its comparable structure to the use of falsetto establish it as a vocal register in its own right (Hollien et al., 1966; Wolk et al., 2012). Of course, if an individual speaks exclusively in vocal fry that could be indicative of a problem (Hollien et al., 1966), but its habitual use among young women today is more effectively examined through the lens of sociolinguistics than speech pathology. Indeed, Shaw and Crocker (2015) posit that the use of vocal fry is in accordance with the “Speaker Design” theory (Schilling – Estes, 2008), which states that individual speakers choose their words and ways of speaking with an intent to create and portray a specific social identity within a given context (Shaw & Crocker, 2015).

In spite of these significant findings regarding the use of vocal fry, first as a phonetic feature, then as a sociolinguistic structure, it is apparent that there is still a general lack of consensus regarding its specific nature. The present research is sparse, and methodology has varied widely among the few researchers who have examined vocal fry through the lens its tremendously wide array of potential social implications. In light of this, and the tremendous complexity surrounding the topic on domestic and international levels, more research is advisable regarding the sociolinguistic aspects of the use of vocal fry in the modern world. The vocal fry is just one of many significant constructions in women’s speech, and further research into the subject would allow for a more thorough examination of the impact of gender roles and the perceptions thereof on language use in the United States today.
Conclusion

In spite of an unstable history and the recent, often negative, media exposure of the “creaky voice phenomenon” (Shaw & Crocker, 2015), the vocal fry is persistently maintaining its position as a marker of speech for the contemporary young woman in the United States. There are still proficient speakers of English in America that perceive the use of vocal fry as a feminine expression of power and authority, while others view it as a young, inexperienced manner of speaking, and generally condemn its use (Anderson et al., 2014; Yausa, 2010). Its variable perception among modern speakers of American English is testament to the cooperative aspect of human communication, and indicates that one’s intended message is not always what is perceived by an audience. As a subject of sociolinguistic research, vocal fry is significant to the field, as it demonstrates the intersectionality of identity and the ways in which context can influence not only what linguistic forms are used, but how they are perceived. By studying its use in media, as well as among native speakers, sociolinguists can examine and track changes in what it means to be a woman in America today. Given the coincidence of the rise of vocal fry among young women in the United States with the increase in numbers of women in Universities and in the professional world, the possibility that its use is a method of demonstrating the power and authority typically associated with a masculine persona while still maintaining one’s feminine expression is quite powerful. Over time, continued research on the use of vocal fry and its social implications can lead to a more thorough understanding of the complex process of portraying one’s identity in terms of the multitude of social influences on linguistic behavior.
References


