

# Elocution Lessons: Yet Another Tool of the Patriarchy?

“Like, omigod! People are so, like, rude and sexist.”

Is it sexism that makes me want to stick a knitting needle down my ear canal every time I find myself at school pickup standing within earshot of the Lululemon-wearing mom who speaks with the rising intonation and vocal fry of a teenager? Perhaps my urge to scream “SHUT UP!” is rude. Maybe sexism drives me to scan through my Groupon app to see if there’s an elocution lessons package I can purchase for her.

Am I being sexist? Do I prefer women who talk more like men?

Writing for *New York Magazine*’s [The Cut](#), Danya Evans examines this question and wonders if women are being held back in the workplace because of the way they talk. Speech coach Lynda Spillane certainly thinks so:

*Spillane argues that young women need to exhibit more confidence. And if altering our voices to speak more authoritatively, trimming out the “likes,” smoothing our vocal fry gives us more confidence? If it allows us to communicate better with people who are predetermined to judge us? If we turn down the upspeak to convince others of our certainty? Well, why wouldn’t we do it?*

Indeed, why wouldn’t a woman be interested in improving herself? Yet, as Evans explains, many people don’t see changing one’s speech patterns as improvement. They see it as yet more evidence that women are victims of the patriarchy. According to writer Jessica Grose, who was interviewed by Evans, “Women are held to a much higher standard than men—in

all areas of life but specifically in speech. If these men can't deign to hear a woman just because of the timbre of her voice, they're the ones to blame. We'll talk however we want, sorry, please, and thank you."

In a day and age where standards don't exist anymore, Grose's statement makes sense. To Grose, middle-aged women who talk like teenagers aren't morons—they're another protected class, worthy of respect and recognition. Speaking like an idiot is an identity now. "Hey, my vocal fry is a part of me. I refuse to, like, change to satisfy some sort of social norm."

Elocution lessons didn't used to be so controversial. Despite her raw brilliance and Oxford education, Margaret Thatcher understood that her voice could sound unpleasant—too high pitched and sharp. In a *Telegraph* piece about her journey "[From 'shrill' housewife to Downing Street](#)," voice expert Dee Forrest remarked that Thatcher's changing speech patterns made her more self-assured: "We hear her confidence really bedding itself in. The voice has even more depth of tone and we hear the steely quality of those more strident bright tones lending her greater command. The voice has a winning vocal recipe of strength, calmness and determination."

It's clear that early in her political career, Thatcher understood that she would one day be talking to world leaders and would be more effective if she had an authoritative tone. She must have sensed that when discussing disarmament with the Russians, it would be useful to sound commanding, confident and in charge.

More recently, Americans had a chance to vote for their own female political leader. Former Vice Presidential nominee Sarah Palin was at first welcomed as a breath of fresh air—her folksy way of talking was thought to give her an advantage over smooth talking career politicians. But soon, people began to tire of her harsh northern accent. She was easily caricatured and made fun of. *Saturday Night Live* made bank for

months mimicking her gaffes and speech patterns.

Would she have benefitted from some Thatcher-like elocution lessons? Probably. It certainly would have made writer Jessica Grose happy. Even though Grose thinks we “should talk however we want,” she wasn’t defending Sarah Palin’s style of talking during Palin’s bid for VP. In fact, Grose felt “violent, nay, murderous, *rage*” at hearing Palin talk, and suggested in a 2008 [Jezebel article](#) that Palin mask her ambition “behind her PTA placard and ‘folksy’ talk.” Grose then went on to make fun of Palin for dropping her gs. Apparently, for Grose, folksy talk is A-okay, but only when she agrees with the content of the statement.

Women in the workplace understand they need to carry themselves with authority. Ambitious women know they must rise above their teenage speech patterns. That doesn’t make them victims of the patriarchy. It means they understand how the world works and that standards still count in certain sectors of society. That’s, like, you know, common sense.

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