

Idiot or Bitch: A Woman's "Would You Rather"

There was a girl at my high school who was inexplicably popular, and I wanted to be her friend more than anything in the world. Let's call her Katie. I didn't know Katie too well, so I had to try to figure her out just in the small moments in which we interacted throughout the day. Katie was blonde, but so were her other friends, and they were not worshipped by the boys the way she was. It wasn't until we were given a lunch period together that I could really figure it out. The appeal was all in the way she spoke; she had adopted the Kardashian way of speaking and taken it to a whole new level. This "way" of speaking is characterized by Tadeusz Lewandowski in his essay "Uptalk, Vocal Fry and, Like, Totally Slang: Assessing Stylistic Trends in American Speech." Vocal fry, or "*the injection of creaky, glottal vibrations at the end of words*" (471), uptalk, or "*speaking statements with a rising note at the end, as in a question*" (471) and overuse of the word "like" are staples in Kardashian communication. A classic phrase from Kourtney Kardashian, "Kim, you are literally being, like, so rude right now," (with a hitch up in tone on "now") exemplifies all of these aspects in one swift go. Unnecessary use of filler words "like" and "literally" are common in their speech, as well as the dragging out of words—in this example it was "so rude." I think that people took a lot of comfort in Katie speaking like this because nothing she said came off too strong, making her easily approachable. In fact, many people just laughed when she spoke and said things like "that was such a Katie response!" to dismiss any point she may have tried to make. Her speech characterized her personality; she spoke like a Kardashian so she must act like one, too. The Kardashians gained the majority of their fame from being a conventionally attractive, sexually explicit group of women. Additionally, their reality show highlights this while showing us all of their questionable choices, "ditsy" moments, and superficial/material concerns. Thus, tying this type of personality to a

sexual appeal. It's important to note here that society's reaction to the Kardashians, calling them "slutty", "trashy" and deeming them "poor role models," represents the policing of women's bodies and women's language. Deborah Cameron notes how similar the issues surrounding women's bodies and women's language are in her piece "Just Don't Do It." (442) Much like the girls Katie surrounded herself with, I began speaking like this around her. By October of my freshman year, I was being included in the "group Halloween costume." We were some teenage girl iteration of The Ninja Turtles.

My mother, a former journalist and news anchor, had explained to me a while ago how women specifically should speak in order to be heard. Because of this, I was told by adults from a very young age how articulate I was, and how confident I was in expressing my opinions. I have a naturally lower register voice, and I was trained out of the word "like" early on by having to pay my dad a quarter each time I used it. I had previously made a point to be clear and concise with my speech, and to never make statements sound like questions. For example, saying, "We should leave soon," instead of "I think we should leave soon?" However, the attitude toward my speech changed once I hit high school. I was frequently being called "aggressive" and some boys went as far as to say they didn't like me because I was "just bitchy." This was confusing to me because I spoke to them exactly how I spoke to my girlfriends, who often referred to me as "confident." After I began using this uptalk and vocal fry for the sake of being able to snag a date for Homecoming, I was being approached by a lot more boys; it seemed the threatening aspect of my personality had been removed. It wasn't until the boy I really liked said to me, "Damn, I never would have thought that you'd be in advanced classes!" that I realized what was happening. Lewandowski points out the reasoning for this as well: "If women do something like uptalk or vocal fry, it's immediately imbued with immaturity and even idiocy." (Seaton 2001,

473) I had always thought Katie was dumb and so did those boys, and now they assumed that I was an airhead, too. The fact that Katie wasn't willing to express any strong opinions and was incredibly agreeable was what made her so popular. She was fun and easy to be around because she would never articulate anything that would spark conflict, and the boys liked how she reflected their own perspectives on everything. To this day I'm not really sure if Katie was actually dumb, but she was clearly okay with being perceived as such. I was not; I'd rather be a bitch than an idiot.

My question is, why are these the only two options for me as a woman? As Deborah Cameron explores in her essay, "Just Don't Do It," the policing of women's speech has created a lose-lose scenario for women in this society. By policing, I am referring to how Business Insider reported on an interview with linguist Robin Lakoff: "The problem isn't that women use this kind of language more than men... She says the issue is we listen much more closely to what women say and are consequently far more critical, which has devastating effects." (Gillet) "Listen much more closely to what women say," does not refer to the content and ideas that women have, but rather their word choices and tone, lying in wait for a mistake or sign of weakness. Cameron's thoughts seem to align with those of Lakoff, and she notes that the research done thus far on the topic has not led to a helpful conclusion for women who want to be taken seriously when they speak. She summarizes the takeaway from a survey she did of advice literature aimed at 'career women': "Men are more successful in the workplace, so if women want to emulate their success, the trick is to mimic their behavior." (Cameron, 442) This is actually a non-starter, because men are not more successful than women solely because of their speech. Any woman knows that men are more successful than women simply because of inherent biases in the workplace that see men as more fit to be in any position of power. "It's a bit like saying that if only African Americans

would stop speaking African-American English the police would be less likely to shoot them. It misses the point that negative attitudes to the language of subordinate groups are just manifestations of a more general prejudice against the groups themselves.” (Cameron) This has never been about women being “less-qualified,” but solely about the deep-rooted sexism that exists in our country.

I think of Hillary Clinton a lot when discussing how society views women in positions of authority. The 2016 election was one of the worst days of my life, but even before Clinton’s loss, I felt overwhelming despair about how this country views and values women. Hillary was one of the most experienced people to ever run for the President of the United States because of her background in politics, which began over forty years ago. President Obama said during his endorsement of Clinton, “I don't think that there's ever been someone so qualified to hold this office.” (Bump) For many, this was still not enough to put her on the same playing field as other male candidates. Even the simple fact that she was called “Hillary” throughout her campaign, rather than “Clinton,” is a type of microaggression toward women that has been used for decades. “Feminists have noted that it always seems to be appropriate for men to treat women as if they were intimates or subordinates. Women—like children—tend to be called by their first name where men would not be...” (Cameron, 105) Donald Trump, on the other hand, was perhaps the least qualified person to ever run, according to a letter signed by fifty former national security officials that detailed all the ways in which he was unqualified. “Most fundamentally, Mr. Trump lacks the character, values and experience to be president,” the letter reads. “He weakens U.S. moral authority as the leader of the free world.” (Kelsey) However, it was clear that this fact did not deter many voters. Not only did these voters disregard the importance of being qualified for the office, but they embraced the use of negative stereotypes regarding

women as leaders. The opposing campaign took issue with Clinton's clothing and the way she presented herself. "I just don't think she has a presidential look. And you need a presidential look. You have to get the job done." (Trump, NPR) I thought she was incredibly presidential. However, I could not ignore the words that many people chose to describe Clinton throughout the campaign: cold, rigid, boring, aggressive, trying too hard, too masculine, "nasty woman", and that wonderful word again: bitch. (Keith) I thought about how many times I had heard those words in association with myself, and as a woman hoping to go into politics, I felt at a loss. I think that a woman's place is in The White House, but in 2016 many people stood by "the logic of patriarchy, which says 'a women's place is in the wrong.'" (Cameron, 444) How am I supposed to succeed in anything if people cannot look past my gender to appreciate the quality of my work?

The actor Jennifer Lawrence posed a similar question in *Lenny*, Lena Dunham's feminist newsletter. In her piece entitled "Why Do I Make Less Than My Male Co-Stars?" Lawrence describes how she felt when she realized she was being paid less than fellow actors Christian Bale and Bradley Cooper. I would like to point out here that Lawrence has one Academy award, as does Bale, and Cooper has zero. Therefore, this has nothing to do with credentials. Lawrence hesitated to speak up for herself for fear of sounding "difficult" or "spoiled," but came to the conclusion that if her male coworkers didn't have the same qualms then neither should she. "A few weeks ago at work, I spoke my mind and gave my opinion in a clear and no-bullshit way; no aggression, just blunt. The man I was working with (actually, he was working for me) said, "Whoa! We're all on the same team here!" As if I was yelling at him. I was so shocked because nothing that I said was personal, offensive, or, to be honest, wrong. All I hear and see all day are men speaking their opinions, and I give mine in the same exact manner, and you would have

thought I had said something offensive.” (Lawrence) When women speak clearly, men often take it as aggression or as a threat to their masculinity, which ultimately means a challenge to their power. I have a sneaking suspicion that this kind of gaslighting reaction may be why the perception is that women apologize more than men. “Although women are often stereotyped as the more apologetic sex, there is little empirical evidence to back this assumption” (Cameron, 442) Despite the lack of evidence, this is still a common assumption. Men who have been offended by women’s confrontational language may have felt like they were owed an apology, when really, they were owed no such thing.

Lawrence is surely not the first woman to be scrutinized for speaking her mind, and many have sought to understand why the policing of women’s expressed opinions is still happening. Research conducted by New York University psychology professor Madeline Heilman sought to define how and why women's career advancements are often impeded by two kinds of gender stereotypes, using terms quite prevalent in linguistic studies: “**Descriptive stereotypes** attribute certain characteristics to women, like "caring," "warm," "modest," and "emotional." This creates problems, Heilman says, when there's a disconnect between what women are perceived to be like and what attributes are necessary to successfully perform in male gender-typed roles.” (Gillet) Hillary Clinton was subject to the descriptivist side of this issue, as she was attempting to assume a position that has thus far only been held by men. Lawrence falls into the same stereotype, as she described in her essay. “**Prescriptive gender stereotypes** designate what women and men *should* be like. With this kind of stereotyping, women are disapproved of and punished socially when they directly or seemingly violate the prescribed ways they should act.” (Gillet). This prescriptive view is incredibly common as well and is a large reason that gay men and women’s desires were so difficult for heterosexual people to understand and accept for so

long. Gender roles are so deeply ingrained in this society that everything is judged against a heteronormative baseline. “The assumption was that desire itself was heterosexual. This assumption made it inconceivable that males might desire other males *as* males, or that females might desire other females *as* females.” (Cameron and Kulick, 81) If you look at the issue of how women should express themselves through this outdated lens, being a “boss” is something for men, so a woman being “bossy” is therefore unattractive because it is a male trait. Lawrence worried about being liked by her coworkers and co-stars and therefore chose to refrain from speaking up for herself. Clinton didn’t cater her campaign to appeal to gender norms and was then criticized for it, possibly contributing to her loss of the election. As I said before, lose-lose, bitch or idiot.

So, what can be done about all this? How can we combat this issue that has been around for so long? I think that it all depends on how desperate people are to put someone else in a box for the sake of their own comfort. The adaptation of word choice and intonation in order not to threaten the white heterosexual male has been one solution—one that is eerily similar to making sure your dress isn’t too short on a night out. The sexism in language all ties back to those views of English language in regard to Edwin Battistella’s defined terms. The “standard” that women are being criticized against is the old prescriptivist emphasis on “conserving traditional distinctions,” (Battistella, 10) but the educated mainstream has changed significantly since all these “rules” were defined. Those who created these contrived notions of how people “should” and “shouldn’t” speak are traditionalist—reminiscent of an age with very little diversity and incredibly elitist ideals. It is easier said than done to claim that the solution to all of this would be a collective move towards relativism, “All usage is relative” (Battistella, 11) and progressivism, “sees access to standards of language and culture as a prerequisite for meaningful social

participation and which sees the influence of nonstandard language and mass culture as potential impediments to participation.” (Battistella,16) but a good start would be to be emphasize these ideals in language education starting at a young age. That, and the importance of just minding your business.

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