

Dear Ms. Gross,

I am writing to express my dismay at your interview with Susan Sankin today. As a linguist specializing in phonetics, I was very disappointed to hear her perpetuate myths about some common phonetic characteristics of speech. A lot of ink has been spilled about "vocal fry", or creakiness, and I know that many people have strong negative feelings about it. I'll return to the typically ageist and misogynist tenor of that issue below, but first I'd like to address a particularly ill-informed comment of Ms. Sankin's: "I think if [vocal fry] is a repetitive habit that you use over a long term that the vocal cords will show some sort of fatigue. There will be some sort of implication vocally." Considering that there are languages in the world which use creak as a linguistic feature (such as creaky vowels, as in Burmese or Mazatec languages of Mexico), it is highly unlikely that prolonged use will lead to chronic vocal fold damage. Ms. Sankin seems like someone who is becoming increasingly intolerant of the phonetic characteristics of speech in younger speakers, but this is not an excuse for irresponsibly suggesting that they are causing themselves damage.

As for her claim that "[vocal fry] sounds like you don't have the energy to back up what you're saying...It's creating a somewhat hesitant or unsure sort of message to your listener", I will point you and your listeners to a laudable recent segment about vocal fry on *This American Life* (#545). A clip of the interview between Ira Glass and Penny Eckert, a linguist from Stanford, illustrates all that needs to be said about this issue:

IRA GLASS: So [Eckert] did a little study-- a preliminary study. She played clips of a Marketplace reporter named Sally Herships for 584 people, and she asked them to rate how authoritative the reporter sounded. The results, people under 40 heard it very differently than people over 40.

PENNY ECKERT: The younger people found that quite authoritative, and the older people did not.

IRA GLASS: So if people are having a problem with these reporters on the radio, what it means is they're old.

PENNY ECKERT: Yeah, I think old people tend to get cranky about this stuff anyway. But the media are just all over it. I mean, I'm constantly getting requests from media. And they want to talk about the crazy ways that young women are speaking. And the first thing they do is attribute it to young women, even though young men are doing it too. So it's a policing of young people, but I think most particularly young women.

IRA GLASS: She says the same thing happened with upspeak and with the word like. Reporters would call her about these things. They'd point to them as a problem with young women when young men do all that also. She says people get worked up about this stuff, but it's just part of life. As we age, we fall out of touch with how younger people speak. Her advice to everybody, including herself-- get over it.

As a linguist, I try to embrace changing language styles without being too judgmental or prescriptive. Rather than criticize younger speakers for deviating from the standards that are subjectively appealing to their forebears, we'll all be better off if we accept that language often changes as generations try to distinguish themselves from the one that came before.

Best,

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