

Apologetic Speech Patterns in Women

There is this idea, this occurrence in society, that women will unintentionally undermine themselves through their word choice and speech patterns in an effort to be more liked, to be better perceived by their peers and audience, to avoid being seen as aggressive and rude. Women who use the same assertive and dominant speech techniques and behaviors as men are viewed much more negatively than their male counterparts. In fact, there is research to suggest that women in historically male positions will be perceived negatively for no other reason than that they are a woman in a man's job. They are perceived as masculine, frigid, unfeminine, unkind, bossy, etc.

To lessen this effect, women utilize apologetic speech patterns, which have been taught to them since they were children, in order to appear meeker and thus, more feminine and kinder. They will undermine themselves, weaken themselves and their arguments, in an effort to avoid backlash and negative perceptions. They will utilize words and phrases like "just" and "does that make sense?" in an effort to make their points smaller, less harsh, causing them to come across as less competent and confident. They will apologize more for less serious offenses. They will do it so much so that now, in 2020, Gmail will release a plug-in titled "Just Not Sorry" which will underline these undermining words in emails and is specifically targeted towards women in authoritative positions.

Despite all of these occurrences and examples, little research has been done over the direct topic of apologetic speech patterns in women. Apologetic speech patterns can be defined as the way in which individuals undermine themselves using words and phrases, making themselves appear less confident and competent. We know that women are the demographic

most likely to use these techniques, but the question remains of why? Why is this learned behavior so prominent in women? Despite their awareness of its effect, why are they still doing it? When and how did they learn this habit?

This question can be answered utilizing an array of studies regarding 1) how children develop their speech patterns, 2) how the different genders apologize, 3) how women argue, and 4) how women are perceived by their peers when in authoritative positions. A total of five articles will be reviewed, one in each section in order to prove 1) that this behavior is real, 2) why it occurs, and 3) how it is perceived by others.

Speech Patterns Developed at a Young Age

“The Development of Sex-Specific Speech Patterns in Young Children” by Andrea Meditch (1975) is a study which determined whether sex-specific speech patterns were biological or learned, cultural behaviors. The study determined that gendered “role expectations influence children’s development of sex-specific speech patterns more than biology,” (Meditch, 1975). The study determined that there are no physiological differences between the vocal apparatuses of boys and girls ages three to five, thus their differences are not biological but instead a learned behavior reinforced by society. The study found that gender specific speech patterns were crafted and well-formed enough by the ages of three to five for adults to accurately identify a child’s gender just from their voice. Both boys and girls learn speech patterns associated with their gender through cultural experiences.

Sex-specific speech patterns are learned and learned early on. This is further supported in the vocal output of post-pubescent males and females. It was found that males tend to talk “bigger” and females “smaller” than would be naturally suggested by their larynx sizes. It is believed that this tendency is due to “ideal models” of what males and females should sound

like, (Meditch, 1975). These sex-specific speech patterns are believed to be grounded in the gendered roles enforced and reinforced by this culture; that is, they reinforce each other.

From this study, it can be concluded that differentiated speech patterns based in gender are not biological, but rather learned and reinforced by society. It can also be concluded that, by post-pubescence, females are speaking in a way that can be considered “smaller” or “softer” than their male counterparts. It is possible that this can be considered the beginning feature of apologetic speech patterns.

Males and Females Apologize Differently

“Are Men More Apologetic Than Women?” by Syamimi Turiman, Amelia Leong, and Fauziah Hassan (2013) discusses a study which sought to determine if one gender apologized more than the other, as well as the different strategies each gender used when apologizing. The study determined that women apologize more than men and that women have “a lower threshold of what constitutes offensive behavior,” (Turiman, Leong & Hassan, 2013). This idea can be seen clearly in society as women have a tendency to apologize “just for taking up space,” as expert on women’s leadership and author, Tara Mohr, puts it (“About - TARA MOHR”, 2020).

The study found that “women tend to assign responsibility to themselves, and then offer compensation to the offended more than men did,” (Turiman, Leong & Hassan, 2013). Women also tend to use a larger variety of apologetic strategies than men did, express regret about the situation, and tend to justify themselves in an attempt to “ensure the offended’s understanding of the situation,” (Bataineh and Bataineh, 2006). The study integrated the findings of multiple other studies and professionals, finding that, “according to Schumann and Ross (2010), women are more concerned with others’ emotions and maintaining harmony among speakers,” (Turiman, Leong & Hassan, 2013). Women also tend to apologize more to women than men. Previous

studies (Engel, 2001), argued that men have difficulty admitting when they are wrong. In the current study; however, this occurrence was only seen when a man was apologizing to another man.

From this study, we can conclude that women apologize more than men, with a larger variety of apologetic strategies, in an effort to avoid conflict and maintain harmony. This conclusion further supports the existence of apologetic speech patterns in women and overall, a desire to be understood and liked.

Perceptions of Successful Women

The article “Penalties for Success: Reactions to Women Who Succeed at Male Gender-Typed Tasks” by Madeline E. Heilman, Aaron S. Wallen, Daniella Fuchs, and Melinda M. Tamkins (2004) discusses a study which sought to determine the perception of successful women in comparison to their male counterparts in traditionally male-oriented positions. The study found that women are less liked when acknowledged to have been successful and that these negative reacts only occur when the position is “distinctly male in character.” The study found that women were perceived to be significantly less competent, less liked, and more hostile when she clearly successful. In fact, “comparisons indicated that the female target was rated as significantly less hostile than the male target in the unclear performance outcome condition but was rated as significantly more hostile than the male target when she had been clearly successful,” (Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs & Tamkins, 2004). Meaning that, when the outcome could possibly be unsuccessful, women were perceived more positively than when they were clearly successful.

Various literature, according to the article, found that competent women were depicted to be “cold” and “undesirable” when compared with competent men. Successful female managers

have been described as bitter, quarrelsome, selfish, deceitful, and devious as compared to successful male managers (Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs & Tamkins, 2004). This idea is perpetuated by gender roles and behaviors associated with each gender as women are demonized for having what are usually considered to be male characteristics, such as being self-assertive, “tough,” achievement-oriented, etc. (Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs & Tamkins, 2004).

The article “Perceptions of Women Managers and their Communicator Competencies” by Virginia Eman Wheelless and Cynthia Berryman-Fink (1985) discusses a study conducted to determine attitudes towards women in general and women as managers. The study found that women had a more positive reaction than men did to women managers and found them to have better communication skills. The study remarked on previous research which found that women were perceived as “lacking the skills of decision-making,” being “too emotional,” and “lacking dependability for managerial positions,” (Wheeles & Berryman-Fink, 1985). These types of thoughts both perpetuate and are informed by the presence of apologetic speech patterns in women.

These two studies produce two different types of thinking, both which are present in society in a very clear way. Women, in short, are demonized; demonized for being too assertive, demonized for not being assertive enough. It would appear that nothing will please society, leaving women in a tug-of-war match with themselves in a world that will dislike them no matter how they act. Be too assertive and they will call you a b*tch. Be too meek and they will call you incompetent and weak. This leads women down the road of apologies and qualifiers; perpetuating the idea that, if you want your argument to be heard, you can't be too harsh about it.

Negotiating Tactics of Women

The article “Negotiating Gender Roles: Gender Differences in Assertive Negotiating Are Mediated by Women’s Fear of Backlash and Attenuated When Negotiating on Behalf of Others” by Emily T. Amanatullah and Michael W. Morris (2010) discusses a study which sought to determine the ways in which women change their speech patterns during negotiations in order to avoid backlash, and also how they change when negotiated for themselves versus for others. Their research found that women who are advocating for themselves receive worse repercussions, of both a social and financial nature, than women who are advocating for others. This is thought to be because women gender roles are centered around the idea that women are communal, nurturing, helping, etc.; thus, advocating for others adheres to their expected gender roles. Advocating for themselves, however, is perceived as noncommunal and selfish and thus receives backlash, poor treatment, and even negative evaluations at work.

It is thought that women consciously adjust their level of assertiveness in certain situations to avoid backlash and will utilize protective strategies such as hedging and apologies. Due to cultural experiences and social cues and sanctions, women now feel less entitled than men, causing them to be less motivated in their own self-interest (Callahan-Levy & Messe, 1979). This specifically has an impact on women’s salaries and could help explain the wage gap. An earlier study revealed that women who negotiated for higher salaries on behalf of others were able to obtain better results, whereas when negotiating on behalf of themselves, were not as successful. This context, however, did not matter for men, who obtained equally successful results when negotiating for themselves and others (Amanatullah & Morris, 2010). This is due to both the perceivers expectations that women, who should be communal and caring, should not want things for themselves, and to women’s tendency to hedge and apologize when they know

they are being more assertive in order to avoid backlash. As most of the behaviors necessary to obtain power and resources are perceived to be noncommunal, women are at a great loss for advancing themselves without negative social repercussions.

Summary & Conclusion

There are no biological differences to explain the different ways in which men and women speak. Our speech patterns are learned behavior, enforced and reinforced by societal expectations and cultural and social experiences. Women, from a very young age, are taught to be small, gentle, to not ask for too much. These teachings are then reinforced by a society that views the assertive and successful woman as a threat, or as crude or annoying or hostile. Women are forced into boxes of gender roles and expectations and punished for stepping out of them. It is a paradox which they have been asked to navigate. Women must talk small, must hedge their arguments, must apologize for having opinions, must end a critique with “does that make sense,” lest they come across as aggressive and rude and unfeminine, undesirable; but in doing so, perceivers will see women as less confident and competent. Which brings us back to the questions: why do it?

It would appear that women are left with little to no choice. They have been placed between a rock and a hard place. You can either be successful or you can be liked, it would seem; what kind of option is that? All of these ideas are reinforced by sexist cultural conditioning and perceived gender roles that most common individuals are not even aware of. Most women will remain unaware of the ways they utilize apologetic speech patterns to undermine themselves. Though little research has been done on the actual topic of apologetic speech patterns, these earlier studies can lay a clear outline of the ways in which societal oppression and discrimination has shaped and altered women’s speech patterns in negative ways.

References

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