

Cawfee with a Side of Vocal Fry

By Tara Spinelli for Jersey Moms Blog

The New York Times recently reported on linguistic research that says that what might seem like cute slang and vocal habits among girls and young women may actually be powerful relationship tools.

Trends like uptalk (think 80s Valley girls) in which a statement sounds like a question by lilting up at the end; the prolific use of “like;” and something termed vocal fry in which there’s a raspy, croaky sound to the voice (typically at the end of a sentence) originate with girls and make their way across gender and generational lines. (The *Times* article recommends Maya Rudolph playing Maya Angelou on *Saturday Night Live* for a fine—and hilarious, if you ask me—example of vocal fry.)

These vocal styles, linguists theorize, may be used for any number of purposes depending on the speaker and context. On one end of the spectrum, uptalk and “like” can be used to appear friendly and non-threatening, while on the other end, to dominate the listener and exert authority. Likewise, vocal fry may be used for purposes as varied as signaling disinterest to sounding more authoritative. Since vocal fry is lower pitched, linguists think it may be a way for women to sound more like men, and therefore, better compete with them to be heard.

And then there are regional accents—the way we pronounce words—which children tend to learn from their parents initially, but then shift to match their peers as an expression of their group identity. Accents can change based on a change of environment, or be changed consciously and deliberately, including at will in different situations.

Here in my northern New Jersey neck of the woods, “coffee” can trend toward “cawfee,” “talk” to “tawk,” and “dog” to “dawg,” but the degree of this pronunciation runs along a continuum and is not universal at all. My husband grew up in Indiana, and even after decades in NJ, sounds Midwestern. I like to think no one could guess where I’m from, but this may be one of my long-held but grossly inaccurate beliefs (yew know?). I don’t think my kids necessarily sound like they’re from New Jersey (not that there’s anything wrong with that!), but I recognize I’m soaking in it.

I admit I find vocal habits, slang, and accents infectious, and I tend to pick them up both intentionally and unwittingly. Besides the fun and novelty of the new sounds and phrasing, I probably mirror the speech patterns of those around me to fit in, gain acceptance, and communicate that we are alike (sharing is caring!).

So given the power and purpose of the way we speak, and my own inclinations, am I in a position to cringe or complain when my 11-year-old and her friends get to talking? As mentioned, I don't hear so much Jersey of the northern variety, but some of the girl vocal trends are definitely in play (used in potent combination with the eye roll—wonder what encouraging news the experts on facial expressions can give us on that).

Do you have a linguistic Kesha, Kardashian, or Snooki in your house? How do you feel about that? Tawk to me.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/28/science/young-women-often-trendsetters-in-vocal-patterns.html>

<http://www.nbc.com/saturday-night-live/video/maya-angelou-prank-show/1386281>

http://www.nj.com/ledgerlive/index.ssf/2010/08/new_jersey_accents_beyond_ca_w-.html