

De-marginalizing Feminine Speech* in the Classroom

A Guide for Instructors

WHAT IS TRADITIONALLY FEMININE SPEECH?

Verbal Hedges and Disclaimers

- phrases like “if that makes sense,” “I was just going to say,” “if that’s okay with you,” etc.
- words that soften tone like think, believe, hope, seem

Verbal Fillers

- like, uh, um, so

Vocal fry

Verbal Uplifts

- Raised intonation at the end of sentences, making statements sound question-like

WHERE DO THESE PATTERNS ORIGINATE?

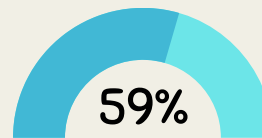
Feminine speech patterns are not universal, but widespread and socially constructed. Theories about female language development differ, but most linguists agree they develop for a practical purpose. For example, many women rely on verbal fillers to avoid being interrupted, and use verbal hedges, disclaimers, and uplifts to express interpersonal warmth or to appear less threatening to their male counterparts or superiors, either to protect personal safety or prevent retaliation.

*A clarifying note on gendered terminology: throughout this resource, the word “feminine” and “female” are used to name common experiences of people socialized as women, but gender identity and expression cannot be limited to a simple binary

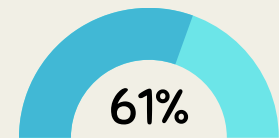
REPRESENTATION WITHOUT INCLUSION

Student populations in higher education are increasingly female dominated

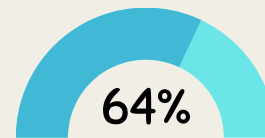
Female students represent...



US Undergraduate enrollment



US post-bachelors enrollment



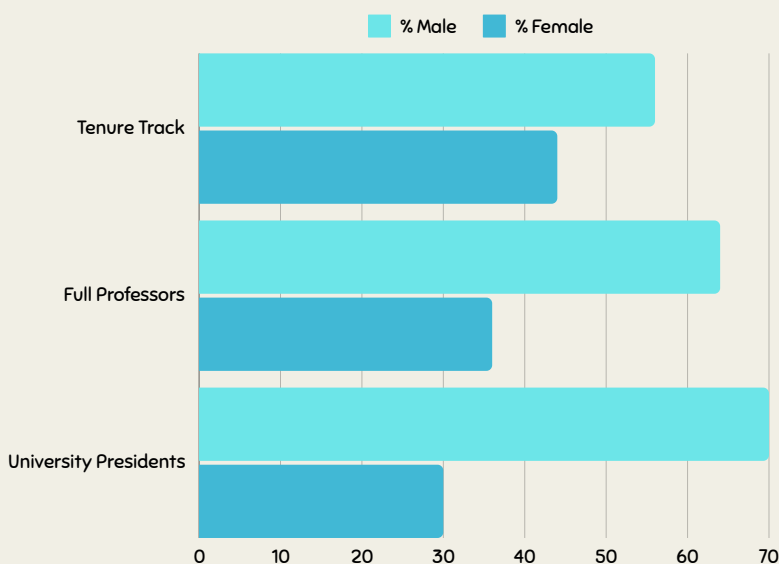
AU Enrollment

THE PROBLEM

In many higher education spaces, traditionally feminine speech patterns are implicitly or explicitly deemed unintelligent, unacademic, and unprofessional. The standard of speech in the classroom falls in line with traditionally male patterns, including assertive tone, frequent interruption, presentation style (rather than collaborative) speech, and few personal or emotional references. This standard is reinforced by professors and peers. This marginalization is compounded for students subject to other facets of linguistic supremacy.

THE CONSEQUENCES

1. Female students are **often overlooked** for research opportunities, leadership roles, etc.
2. Feelings of **imposter syndrome** are reinforced for female students.
3. Female students feel pressured to **alter their speech** to conform to male standards of academic and professional communication.
4. Academic marginalization follows female students into their career fields, **widening gaps** in pay and opportunity.
5. Female students are discouraged from pursuing **careers in academia**. (see below)



ACTION STEPS FOR INSTRUCTORS

1. **Use diverse resources:** Include sources from diverse individuals, and go beyond traditional written word academic sources when designing your course.
2. **Allow for diverse expression:** Give students options to demonstrate learning beyond a formal academic paper. Oral language traditions are extremely undervalued and many students may prefer to express themselves in a less restrictive format.
3. **Avoid over-regulating discussion:** When setting norms for class discussion, acknowledge how gender and other identities impact communication styles. Focus on what students are saying, not how they're saying it.
4. **Check your bias:** When grading, evaluating, etc. consider your preconceived notions about what it means to be successful, academic, or professional. Provide constructive feedback that focuses on the content and ideas rather than the manner of expression.
5. **Promote Self-Advocacy:** Empower your students to advocate for themselves and their ideas, and to "call in" their peers and instructors. Approach the classroom with an asset-focused mindset, and openly acknowledge and repair harm when it occurs.

WHAT AU STUDENTS ARE SAYING

"I feel like I have to change how I write and talk in classes just to be listened to"
– Freshman, SIS

"I struggle with it because I want to be valued in my classes and my field, but to do that I have to change how I speak, and really, who I am. So do I assimilate to be heard or do I risk losing opportunities?" – Senior, SPA

"It sends the message to female students that we are less than, and that has a really big impact academically... It's so discouraging" – Sophomore, SOE

"Obviously the main issue is excluding women, but if you go deeper it's really a rejection of femininity altogether. And that's what really upsets me. These ways of speaking serve a purpose and to write them off as inferior... you're just inviting misogyny into your classroom." – Junior, SOE

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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