

The Future of Creaky Voice: Listener Attitudes

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This article asks why creaky voice is used and how it affects listeners' opinions of speakers using creaky voice. It discusses the motives that cause young women to speak with this vocal feature. It The author creates a survey and asks participants to listen to audio clips of different speakers and rate the female voices that they hear. The results show that non-creaky voice speakers' voices were rated as only slightly more positive than were creaky voice speakers. This suggests a general trend towards creaky voice as more and more standard.

Introduction

Creaky voice is a form of phonation, characterized by distinct sound in the lower register of the vocal cords. In sociolinguistics, creaky voice has been classified often as a female speech trait for mimicking masculine or authoritative tones. Creaky voice, with its low tones and exaggerated features, has been attributed to less competent, less educated, and less trustworthy individuals by many professionals in business settings (Anderson et al. 2014). In another study, however, Yuasa (2010) has attributed creaky voice solely to women in their early teens to adulthood with positive implications in social circumstances; it was attributed to educated, nonaggressive, urban-oriented females. Creaky voice has become a prominent feature of female speech.

This study will examine peer-listener attitudes toward creaky voice in social settings. Many researchers have dived into how creaky voice affects women in the workplace and academic settings, but not with the question in mind of how listeners react to it in simple, everyday speech and social situations. How do listeners categorize and judge female speakers of their same age group? What age do listeners classify them as? What states or areas of the United States are labeled as creaky voice centers? What overall opinion of creaky voice is there among these peer-listeners who hear and experience creaky voice almost daily? This study focuses on these questions.

Literature Review

Motivations for Use

A new trend in speech is taking over America in popularity among female speakers. Wolk, Abdelli-Beruh, and Slavin (2012) found that two-thirds of the American population is using creaky voice, occurring most often at the end of sentences.

Creaky voice can be used for many different reasons, but one reason might be due to natural speech patterns rather than

conscious thought. Drugman et al. (2013) sought to analyze contextual factors in relation to use of creaky voice. A few contextual factors, such as silence or pause, can determine whether creaky voice will be used by a speaker. The researchers found that creaky voice plays a crucial syntactic role, which can affect how we view creaky voice and its usage.

In female peer groups all around the country, lower tones in voice are used as a social identifier. Tillotson (2012) says that females, especially college-aged, are incorporating this practice into their speech as a symbol; women want to feel valued, and creaky voice helps them accomplish that.

General Attitudes

By surveying natural conversations, we find how people really feel about creaky voice. Yuasa (2010) gave audio samples of creaky-voice users to Northern California and Eastern Iowa residents. In a matched-guise perception survey, these participants described the speakers as “hesitant, nonaggressive, and informal but also educated, urban-oriented, and upwardly mobile.” These responses prove that many listeners react positively to the use of creaky voice. What may have seemed masculine or authoritative is now seen as a new type of female voice. The lower register is a way for speakers to suggest equality. The study suggests that creaky voice has become an unconscious (linguistic) performance. Because of these attributes, listeners are tolerant of creaky voice and may even prefer it.

Effects on Listeners

Listeners are affected by the voice qualities of the speakers. Gobl and Chasaide (2003) observed that creaky voice was associated with bored, relaxed, intimate, and content feelings. This study also suggested that creaky voice tends to be associated with a cluster of attributes and not just a single idea. The low tones of creaky voice cause a reaction in the listener—a reaction that

can either be positive or negative, depending on the listener's preferences.

Effects on Speakers

Creaky voice can have adverse side effects. Although it has been seen as the “new female voice,” it also can have negative consequences for the speakers in their labor market opportunities. For example, Anderson et al. (2014) found that a large national sample views the vocal attribute's usage negatively. The study shows that creaky voice is viewed as less competent, less educated, and less trustworthy. The sample even brought to the forefront that creaky voice speakers are less hireable. These results only affect women. If males incorporate creaky voice, it is not seen negatively or even noticed (due to the low nature of the sound produced). Anderson et al. (2014), along with many blog posts and news stories, suggest that American females should not use creaky voice, “in order to maximize labor opportunities.”

Male and female speech can differ dramatically, and creaky voice, most recently, is one of those distinctions. It seems that female speakers have adopted creaky voice as another unique feature of speech delivery.

Thesis

Studies are lacking a less business-oriented verdict on the usage of creaky voice. Professional opinion is important, but not always telling of how standard language will continue on since professional fields have their own registers that speakers employ to succeed in that setting. In social settings, there are typically fewer rules speakers feel they must follow when speaking, so their language becomes very expressive.

This study will focus on how the peers of creaky voice users feel about its use in social settings. By knowing the attitudes of peers toward creaky voice users, we can make predictions about female speech trends for the future in general. I believe the

creaky voice trend will eventually die off as a feature of female speech.

Methodology

This study contains a mixture of basic methodology—I will call it “experimental field studies pertaining to a survey with audio clips.” In order to record unbiased attitudes, the survey needed to be free from anything that might skew the results. To avoid stereotypes and other preconceived notions, the survey was introduced as a simple analysis of speaker voices. I refrained from mentioning linguistics in my invitation to survey participants in order to avoid hypercorrection.

The survey was created and administered using a basic Qualtrics online survey. It consisted of four audio samples of four different speakers: two spoke with creaky voice and two spoke without it. Each clip was taken from an interview where the speakers were candid in their responses. Participants were asked to listen to each sample and answer four corresponding questions regarding each speaker. The survey questions were as follows:

1. How old would you say the speaker is?
2. Where do you think the speaker is from?
3. Describe this speaker (e.g. intelligent, unkind, negative, outgoing, etc.)
4. Rate your opinion of the speaker’s voice (The range was labeled Extremely Bothersome to Extremely Pleasant. The scale was from 1–10.)

These open-ended questions were used in order to gain organic responses from the participants. They were able to insert their own answers so there was no bias on what type of answer they could use. The only automated response was the fourth question since it was a scale that the participants had to use to rate the speakers.

The creaky voice and non-creaky voice clips used were found online from interviews. Speaker 1 was an unknown woman

discussing an adage with creaky voice characteristics. Speaker 2 was Laura Veirs, a musician who did not use creaky voice. Speaker 3 was a girl who participated in an accent tag on YouTube with no characteristics of creaky voice. Speaker 4 was the musician Ke\$ha speaking with creaky voice. All the speakers were Caucasian female Americans living in America. Though their dialects differ, the differences did not seem to affect the outcome of the responses; this should be taken into consideration, however. All the clips were simply audio, reminiscent of a matched-guise test, so participants could not see who was speaking in the sample; they could only hear the voice.

The participants of the survey were young adults, ages 19 to 26 from North America. They were from the following states or countries: Arizona, California, Canada, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, Texas, and Utah. Most participants were in the process of completing Bachelor degrees in universities around the United States or have recently graduated and were working in full-time jobs.

Data analysis of the responses from participants is incorporating several approaches: Age and Dialect Accommodation Theory, Female Deficit Approach, and Dominance Approach. Since creaky voice is a relatively new phenomenon, many approaches were used in this study to understand the listeners' attitudes toward its usage.

Age and Dialect Accommodation Theory

This theory focuses on how speakers willingly or subconsciously change the way they speak. When speakers choose to sound like people they admire, it is called convergence. When speakers seek to sound different than people they dislike or do not admire, it is called divergence. In this study, the age and dialect accommodation theory was used in conjunction with analysis of results since creaky voice is not typically a natural way people speak. This change could be a result of either convergence or divergence for some speakers, depending on their intent for using creaky voice. Some may do so to differentiate themselves from older

generations (age) or to blend in with a social class they admire (Social Network Theory). The speakers that were evaluated by participants were between the ages of eighteen to thirty. These ages, currently, are the ones making a majority of the most influential changes to language. By choosing these samples, the study allowed for the data to yield results regarding those who are participating in this theory and accommodating for any number of reasons.

Female Deficit Approach

Much of female speech is looked down upon and perceived as inferior. The Female Deficit Approach assists in explaining the data of this study by showing how women create a manner of speech to set themselves apart from men; one way is using creaky voice. This feature is a new way female speech users are attempting to be less stereotyped as negative and to be seen as more authoritative.

Dominance Approach

This approach to gendered speech suggests that male speech is dominant and typical female speech is subjective—this is not to say males are dominant in speech. This is regarding the type of speech used: not gender specific, but dominance specific. The features of male speech have been classified as dominant for years. Therefore, there is a sense of repression among female speech. This approach provides the data with an understanding of why creaky voice could be used by women in order to rise above repressed forms.

Results

General Attitude

The survey participants were asked to rate the voice they listened to on a scale of 1–10 (1 = extremely bothersome and 10 = extremely

pleasant). The results did not vary much for all the voices, but the fundamental difference was that the creaky voices (Speaker 1 and Speaker 4) were rated at slightly lower levels on the scale than the non-creaky voices. It seems that the participants did not find any voice to be particularly pleasant regardless of the usage of creaky voice. The Dominance Approach seems to be applicable in this portion of the data analysis. The survey participants were both males and females and yet they did not label any particular voice as overtly pleasant. This may be in part due to the fact that female speech has been repressed and seen as inferior or unpleasant, so it caused the participants to score the voices lowly in terms of likableness. On the other hand, this data might refute my belief that creaky voice would die off. If listeners are not openly opposed to it (it seems that they are in ranked opinion even among non-creaky female voices), creaky voice could become a standard sound females create; therefore, creaky voice could rise in usage and even popularity.

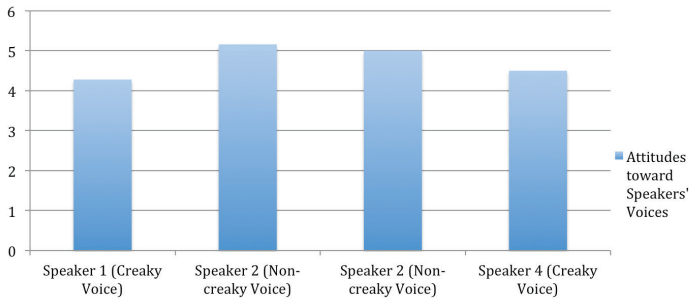


Figure 1. General attitude.

Age

Oddly, survey participants were not proficient at determining the ages of the speakers even when it came to those who used creaky voice and those who did not. The participants' responses were across the board, ranging from 18 to 35. (The averages are shown in Figure 2.) A standout piece of data was the selected ages for Speakers 2 and 4. Speaker 2 did not use creaky voice but Speaker 4 did. Both speakers are musicians. Even with this difference in

creaky voice usage, the survey participants ranked their ages very differently. Speaker 2 is over 30 years old and was ranked close to that age. Speaker 4 is 27 years old but was ranked at around 23 years old. The survey participants labeled a creaky voice speaker as younger than she actually is. The other creaky voice user, Speaker 1, was also ranked as 23 years old.

Creaky voice, as mentioned in other studies, implicates youth. This is one reason why the business world looks down upon its usage: professionals wish to sound mature, not like teenagers. It seems if this is the case, then my thesis is correct. Even in social settings, creaky voice will begin to fade away due to the nature of how it is perceived according to age. Most social groups want to seem older, mature, and accepted. If creaky voice is associated with being “too young,” then users will stop incorporating the low vocal feature.

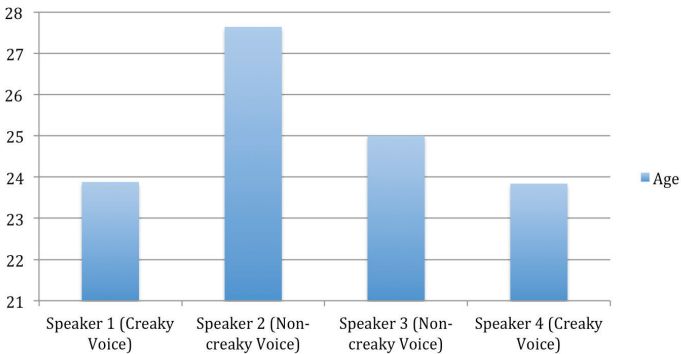


Figure 2. Attitude according to age.

Region

Creaky voice is typically labeled as an American female speech trait, and several commonalities are associated with creaky voice users (see Figure 3). As expected, the creaky voice speakers were labeled as voices from the coasts of America; the West and East Coasts are known for being the center of American culture and excitement (New York and Los Angeles being pop culture

capitals). Even more specific for the West Coast, the stereotype for female speech deriving from California is still prominent. California has been known socially for the “Valley girl” speech associated with unintelligent speakers. Some participants singled out Utah as a location for the creaky voice users. Since most of the survey participants were members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, it seems that there is a belief or stereotype that Utah female speakers, presumably LDS members, use creaky voice. Since these locations were chosen as the origins for this vocal feature, they point to a deeper feeling and attitude toward creaky voice users; they run close to stereotypical feelings associated with coastal locations and California, which are typically negative.

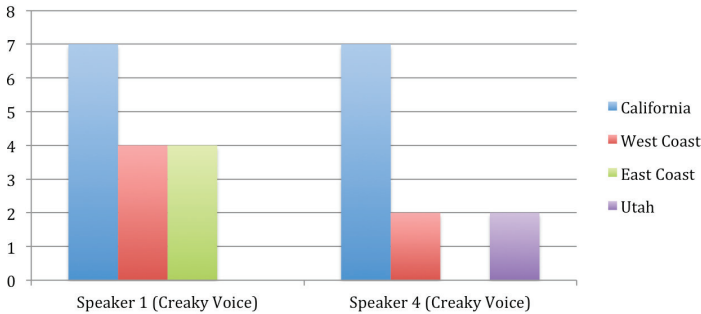


Figure 3. Attitudes sorted by region.

Age and Dialect Accommodation Theory might answer why these locations are considered creaky voice centers. If speakers from these areas are using creaky voice, other speakers around them might seek to converge to the norms of speech in order to fit in better or due to admiration of locals they live by. The Social Network Theory may also play a role in this instance. Female speakers may wish to sound like those around them or even celebrities who have been documented to speak with creaky voice. This desire to move up in social standing has caused some female speech users to either choose, or subconsciously implement, aspects of others’ speech—one aspect being creaky voice. Since

this desire to be “in the club” continues to be desirable, female speech users will continue to change their speech in order to fit in and converge to those they admire and want to be like. This data refutes my thesis. Even though it may be a negative speech trait according to some, for others—more specifically those that are using it—creaky voice is seen as a positive trait that shows social standing. With these implications of creaky voice, the trend of usage will most likely continue to rise.

Descriptions

The adjectives survey participants used to describe the speakers were categorized into three categories—positive, negative, and neutral. Speakers 1 and 4, creaky voice users, were not singled out as purely negative or purely positive, although they were labeled the most positive in this study. The voice labeled with the most positive adjectives was Speaker 3, a non-creaky voice user. The voice labeled with the most negative adjectives was Speaker 4, a creaky voice user. This creaky voice user was the most extreme in her usage (occurring most often and at the end of words, not just sentences) so this must have contributed to the negative feelings survey participants conveyed. Creaky voice, if overused, begins to bother listeners enough that listeners mention it when describing a speaker’s personality traits. However, other creaky voice users do not tend to bother listeners as much, but overall, they bother

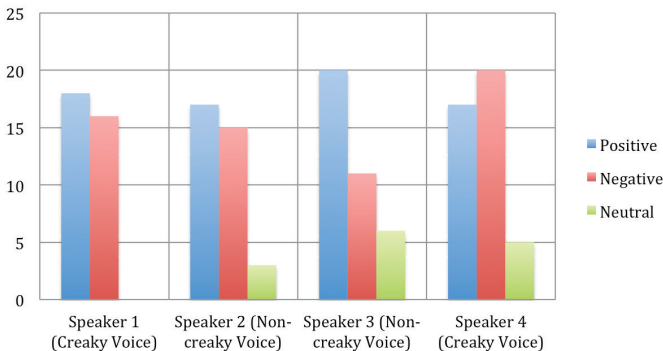


Figure 4. Comments for each speaker.

the listeners more than a non-creaky voice user. This shows that, although creaky voice may not die out as quickly as I thought, it will still not reach the point of how Speaker 4 spoke. Creaky voice will become a more subtle speech feature but it will still remain intact.

Conclusion

Creaky voice is on the rise and continues to grow in popularity on both of the coasts of the United States. The attitude toward creaky voice users (in social settings) is not such that it is overtly bothersome or negative. In fact, creaky voice, when used averagely, goes either unnoticed or tolerated by listeners, and in some instances even enjoyed.

This study, however, is not the opinion of America as a whole. The attitude toward creaky voice could be different in other areas of the United States. But even this study can help us predict female speech trends for the future (if even in just coastal areas). The trends are not what I expected them to be. I thought that since creaky voice is typically looked down on, it would slowly die off since some negative feelings are associated with it. This negative attitude is fading in social settings. Listeners are less aware of creaky voice in general and seem to either tolerate it, or find the usage normal. I predict that creaky voice will become a new voice—a standard female speech voice. This, however, will be subject to how creaky voice is used. If used in extremes, listeners become annoyed by it. Less exaggerated creaky voice appears to be here to stay.

Many linguists believe that females are the instigators of language. If this is the case, then with creaky voice, English could be facing a new wave of speakers who dip into the lower registers of their vocal cords to produce speech. This might affect how female speakers are viewed if this “new voice” becomes a standard. Maybe it will bring equality among speakers since males and females will start to speak with equal tonal levels of sound. The future of creaky voice will thrive.

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