That's, like, super cooool

March 16 2012, By Jason Kornwitz

Heather Littlefield, the head adviser for the linguistics program the College of Science, explains why young women have become know as bellwethers for vocal trends and popular slang. Credit: Mike Mazzanti.

A study published in December in the *Journal of Voice* found that female college students have popularized a linguistic fad called "vocal fry," which has been described as a "guttural fluttering of the vocal chords" with a "lazy, drawn-out effect." Northeastern University news office asked Heather Littlefield, the head adviser for the linguistics program in the College of Science, to explain why young women have become known as bellwethers for vocal trends and popular slang.

Pop singer Britney Spears, reality TV star Kim Kardashian and New York Times executive editor Jill Abramson are all famous for frying their words. Why

have women in general — and young women in particular — become known as linguistic innovators?

This is an interesting question and the answer is quite complex. In fact, we're still working on understanding this. But one main reason is undoubtedly related to women's general social status relative to men. Women need to use the currency that is available to them to obtain social status. So while physical strength, political power and money may not be as accessible to women to shape and affect their world to the same degree as men, language is. So they use this tool to their best advantage. Then, because it is an effective tool, others begin to adopt it.

But we should keep in mind two things. First, that there seem to be contexts in which women are more linguistically conservative. For example, when women marry and begin to have families, there is a trend that they uphold the "standard" forms for the language more than men. (For most of us, it was our mothers who corrected our grammar and made sure we didn't swear).

Second, that while these tools can be very useful, they are still seen in a negative light by most speakers of the language. Take, for example, the use of "like," which has several different meanings. These new ways of using "like" are very useful, and in fact these patterns of use have spread to other languages. But everyone makes fun of it and denigrates it, even if we all use it.

The Valley Girls of the 1980s popularized uptalk, a speech pattern in which statements are pronounced like questions. But 20 years later, both grandparents and American presidents alike began adopting the vocal pattern. What can you learn about an individual or a group of people by studying vocal trends?

We can see that language is really a tool to be manipulated by its speakers. When we study a speaker or group of speakers, we can examine their language patterns to try to see what's important to them. Because the use of language is largely subconscious, it reflects what speakers really believe and want, which can sometimes be different from what they say they believe and want. Linguistic patterns can be very useful for this type of study, but again, it can be very challenging to fully work out such complex patterns and why they occur.

How have text messaging and social networking sites such as Twitter influenced language trends and styles?

This is a new field of study, and we are just beginning to identify some of the trends and styles. For instance, it seems like young children have a better sense of phonics because they often type things phonetically rather than with the standard orthography (writing "LOL" instead of "laugh out loud"). And of course, some new lexical items come from these domains, so people can now say "LOL," and we have new verbs, such as "to friend" and "to text." But overall, it looks like these technologies use a combination of the features of oral and written discourse; it seems unlikely that they will have a deep impact on changing the language. These technologies are really just tools for using language.

Think about the advent of the printing press or the telephone or TV; these were all new tools for the spread of language, but the core structures of the language didn't change because of them. There were, of course, introductions of new words to talk about the technologies, but there wasn't any deep structural change to the [language](#) itself because of these new tools.