

'Jeopardy!' offers professor insight into gender and speech

November 29 2012, by Graham Bryant



(Phys.org)—I'll take "Gender and Speech" for \$200, Alex. He didn't provide an answer in question format, but William & Mary's Thomas Linneman nonetheless addressed this topic in a recent study titled "Gender in Jeopardy! Intonation Variation on a Television Game Show," currently forthcoming in the journal *Gender & Society*.

Specifically, the associate professor of sociology sought to analyze the use of "uptalk" among contestants in the popular game show "[Jeopardy!](#)" to demonstrate how it contributes to notions of gender.

His study found that contestants' use of uptalk related to both their gender and confidence in their responses.

According to Linneman's article, "Uptalk is the use of a rising, questioning intonation when making a statement, which has become quite prevalent in contemporary American speech."

Uptalk makes people sound uncertain, the professor noted. As such, increasing use of uptalk among his students—especially his female students—was a spark for Linneman's research.

"More projects than people want to admit are borne out of pet peeves," he said. "It was definitely the case with this. It was something that I'll admit bothered me...especially given the gendered nature of it. It became a side interest of mine."

Why use "Jeopardy!" as the means for exploring uptalk's implications for gender?

Linneman, who comes from a long line of "Jeopardy!" lovers, began to notice that, although contestants are asked to phrase their response in the form of a question, sometimes contestants used uptalk, but more often, they did not.

This observation led to his research question: "If I systematically study the responses, would any patterns emerge that would generate insight into the relationship between gender and speech?"

Using the technique of content analysis, Linneman identified variables affecting contestants' use of uptalk and began a long-term study of 149 episodes of the show.

"I sat there with my DVR and my TV and my laptop, and it kind of

became an oddly pleasing daily ritual," he said. "It did feel weird sometimes."

Linneman, however, saw his research as typical in his line of work: "Social research comes in a lot of different forms, and as a sociologist, one of our jobs is to notice patterns in the mundane."

Linneman's study involves issues deeper than how game show contestants talk—specifically, the implications uptalk has for gender identities. According to his article, "The primary sociological controversy surrounding uptalk concerns the fact that women use uptalk more often than men do, and some interpret this as a signal of uncertainty and subordination."

Linneman found that both gender and uncertainty played a role: "On average, women used uptalk nearly twice as often as men. However, if men responded incorrectly, their intonation betrayed their uncertainty: their use of uptalk shot up dramatically."

The use of uptalk is not merely an academic concern, as Linneman discovered with one of his results.

"One of the most interesting findings coming out of the project is that success has an opposite effect on men and women on the show...The more successful a man is on the show, uptalk decreases. The opposite is true for women...I think that says something really interesting about the relationship between success and gender in our society, and other research has found this too: successful women in a variety of ways get penalized."

Uptalk's sometimes-negative connotations bring up the subject of how women speak, a provocative issue.

"I have presented this research in my classes and it always sparks really intense conversations about how women talk and the gender differences in speech," he said.

Linneman hopes his article will spark similar discussions in classrooms across the county, and he believes having the study published in *Gender & Society* will make that more likely to happen.

"I really wanted it to end up in this journal because it not only has a really good reputation, but it's widely read," he said.

"Gender in Jeopardy! Intonation Variation on a Television [Game Show](#)" is set for publication in the April 2013 issue of [Gender & Society](#). The [online version](#) was published on Oct. 30.

Provided by The College of William & Mary

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