

Stylistic Innovation and Indexical Obsolescence

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As speakers age, they move away from the sources of social and linguistic innovation, losing access to the situations in which the indexical value of these innovations is constructed. This paper explores the relation between social and stylistic change, through the detailed examination of a style that has emerged recently among a new breed of female radio commentators. I show that this style embodies particular and new trendy personae, and that perceptions of the indexicality of this style differ significantly across age groups.

I focus on the young female reporters on American Public Media's show *Marketplace*, who cover stories of interest to young adult audiences, such as technology and lifestyle. The style is characterized particularly by distinctive uses and interactions of creak, rhythm, and intonation that differ systematically and significantly from styles employed by reporters of more traditional news. The distinctiveness of the *Marketplace* style is tied to, indeed part of, social change. This style embodies a persona that did not exist even a decade ago, because the female commentators, the topics, and the connections among youth, gender, coolness, play, and technology did not exist.

I begin with a close analysis of voice quality, rhythm, and intonation in the speech of Sally Herships, the quintessential inhabitant of this persona. I then show that these patterns occur systematically in the speech of the other female and some male reporters on this show. The relation between this style and the new content is borne out in Herships' own style shifting, as she mutes these patterns when reporting on more traditional news topics, such as police harassment. I will also present experimental results of perceptions of this style. Preliminary results show that there is a significant age difference in perceptions, with older people hearing it as indexing immaturity and triviality, while younger people hear it as unmarked and authoritative.

Recent intense media attention to young women's use of creak, which has been spurred by styles like the one under study, has expanded the list of popularly-disparaged innovations that includes quotative and discourse marker *like* and "uptalk". This focus on the speech of young white women has emerged as a form of gender policing since the Seventies and, I would argue, is a reaction to an increasing assertiveness and sense of entitlement among very young women, both of which are manifested in heightened stylistic activity. This attention to young women's innovations is the popular metapragmatic side of women's lead in sound change, and particularly in the location of innovators as garrulous and flamboyant speakers (Labov 2001). While the segmental changes that sociolinguists usually study commonly escape popular attention, the innovations in prosody and voice quality that attract public notice don't generally enter into studies of variation. Yet the two go together in the more flamboyant styles that set trends and attract public notice.