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**Gender in ‘Jeopardy!’: Uptalk isn’t just for Valley Girls?**

**[PRINTABLE VERSION HERE (PDF)](https://socwomen.org/press-releases/uptalk/images/stories/Feb.pdf)**

He didn’t provide an answer in question format, but The College of William & Mary’s [Thomas Linneman](http://www.wm.edu/as/sociology/directory/linneman_t.php) told us how women and men both use uptalk in his new study, [“Gender in Jeopardy! Intonation Variation on a Television Game Show,”](http://gas.sagepub.com/content/early/2012/10/29/0891243212464905.abstract) in the February issue of the journal [*Gender & Society*](http://gas.sagepub.com/).

“Uptalk is the use of a rising, questioning intonation when making a statement, which has become quite prevalent in contemporary American speech,” explains Linneman. Uptalk in the U.S. is reported to have emerged in the 1980s among adolescent women in California, aka “Valley Girls,” and it has become more widely used by men and women since then. In his study, Linneman found that, although women do use uptalk more frequently, men use it as well. For men, however, uptalk signals something completely different.

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| Because uptalk has been associated with a way of talking that makes women sound less confident, Jeopardy! was a useful setting for observing how women and men use the speech pattern. The associate professor of sociology analyzed the use of uptalk by carefully coding 5,500 responses from 300 contestants in 100 episodes of the popular game show. He looked at what happened to speech patterns when contestants – from a variety of backgrounds – gave their answers to host Alex Trebek. Although the contestants were asked to phrase their response in the form of a question, they used uptalk just over a third of the time. Explaining this variation in uptalk was Linneman’s primary goal.  *How do men use uptalk?* Linneman found that men use uptalk as a way to signal uncertainty. Linneman explained, “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.” On average, men who answered correctly used uptalk only 27 percent of the time. Among incorrect responses, men used uptalk 57 percent of the time. In contrast, a woman who answered correctly used uptalk 48 percent of the time, nearly as often as an incorrect man.  Men’s uptalk increased when they were less confident, and also when they were correcting women—but not men. When a man corrected another man—that is, following a man’s incorrect answer with a correct one—he used uptalk 22 percent of the time. When a man corrected another woman, though, he used uptalk 53 percent of the time. Linneman speculates that men are engaging in a kind of chivalry: men can be blunt with another man in public, but feel obliged to use a softer edge with a woman.  *How do women use uptalk?* As Linneman explains, “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.” Linneman measured success in two ways: He compared challengers to returning champions, and he tracked how far ahead or behind contestants were when they responded. Linneman found that, “The more successful a man is on the show, the *less* he uses uptalk. The opposite is true for women…the more successful a woman is on the show, the *more* she uses uptalk.” Linneman suspects that this is “because women continue to feel they must apologize for their success.”  As University of Massachusetts sociologist [Joya Misra](http://people.umass.edu/misra/Joya_Misra/Index.html), editor of *Gender & Society*, puts it, “While many people recognize that uptalk exists, this study does a great job of showing how our speech reflects and reinforces gender inequality. Men use uptalk when they are uncertain while women use uptalk when they are more successful; this insight gives us important clues about how both men and women are responding to gendered expectations.    **Article**: Tom Linneman, [“Gender in Jeopardy! Intonation Variation on a Television Game Show,”](http://gas.sagepub.com/content/early/2012/10/29/0891243212464905.full.pdf) *Gender & Society* 27(1): 82-105.  +++  [*Gender & Society*](http://gas.sagepub.com/)is a peer-reviewed journal, focused on the study of gender. It is the official journal of Sociologists for Women in Society, and was founded in 1987 as an outlet for feminist social science. Currently, it is a top-ranked journal in both sociology and women’s studies. *Gender & Society*, a journal of Sage Publications, publishes less than 10 percent of all papers submitted to it. For more information, contact *Gender & Society* editor Joya Misra, Professor of Sociology and Public Policy at the University of Massachusetts. Misra is also affiliated with Women, Gender, Sexuality Studies and Labor Studies. Her research and teaching focus primarily on inequality. She can be reached at gendsoced@soc.umass.edu.  [Sociologists for Women in Society](http://www.socwomen.org/) (SWS), currently headquartered at Southern Connecticut State University, works to improve women’s lives through advancing and supporting feminist sociological research, activism and scholars. Founded in 1969, SWS is a nonprofit, scientific and educational organization with more than 1,000 members in the United States and overseas. For more information, contact Dr. Shirley A. Jackson, Professor of Sociology at Southern Connecticut State University and SWS Executive Officer, at swseo@socwomen.org.  The [Council on Contemporary Families](http://www.contemporaryfamilies.org/) is a non-profit, non-partisan organization of family researchers, mental health and social practitioners, and clinicians, dedicated to providing the press and public with the latest research and best practice findings about American families. For more information on CCF researchers, contact Stephanie Coontz, Director of Research and Public Education, coontzs@msn.com.  **AUTHOR CONTACT/BIO:**  published by Routledge. He can be contacted at tjlinn@wm.edu or 804-822-2282.  **MORE STORY IDEAS ON GENDER AND COMMUNICATION**  **Also in *Gender & Society* this month:** In the journal’s lead article, University of Oregon sociologist Jocelyn Hollander discusses how to find ways to change gender dynamics that appear in routine, every day interaction (like Linneman’s uptalk case). Hollander uses cases from her research on women’s self-defense training and sexual violence.  See Hollander, Jocelyn. 2013. [“‘I Demand More of People’: Accountability, Interaction, and Gender Change,”](http://gas.sagepub.com/content/early/2012/10/29/0891243212464301.full.pdf) *Gender & Society* 27(1):5-29. Professor Hollander can be reached at jocelynh@uoregon.edu.  38: 269-85. Professor Brownlow is a psychologist at Catawba College and can be reached at sbrownlo@catawba.edu. |