Language investigation: Creaky voice

In 2015, Naomi Wolf, the American feminist and author, wrote an article in *The Guardian* newspaper entitled "Young women, give up the vocal fry and reclaim your strong female voice". The "vocal fry" that Wolf refers to in her title is a type of what linguists call a "voice quality" – a way of shaping the overall sound of your voice so that it either sounds more "harsh" and "hoarse" or more "breathy".

Vocal fry – which linguists call *creak* or *creaky voice* – is a voice quality that has been getting a lot of attention lately. This is mostly negative attention, with commentators like Wolf saying that it sounds "annoying", "incompetent", and "unintelligent". But is vocal fry (or creaky voice) really all of these things? Is it something that only young women do (as most commentators assume)? And (as commentators also assume) is it something that they do for no reason (other than to be annoying)? In this language investigation, you will look at who uses creaky voice and how and why they use it.

Creaky Voice

So that you understand what creaky voice is, it's useful to think about how our bodies produce sound in the first place. When we speak, we push air from our lungs and up our neck, where it passes through the vocal folds in the larynx (voice box) before moving into the mouth and being turned into speech. The vocal folds are two pieces of bodily tissue that are connected to each side of the larynx. They are attached on the sides, but unattached in the centre – similar to shutters over a window that are attached to both sides of the window frame but not in the middle. As air passes through the larynx, we can adjust the position of the vocal folds either to pull them apart (so that the air just passes through with no obstruction) or to push them together (so that the air hits the vocal folds as it passes through and makes them vibrate). You can feel the difference by placing your hand lightly on your voice box, and then saying the sound "sss" followed by "zzz". What you're doing when changing between "sss" and "zzz" is either pulling the vocal folds apart (for "sss") or pushing them together (for "zzz"). This is why you can feel a small vibration when you say "zzz" – those are your vocal folds vibrating!

Creaky voice happens when we push the vocal folds very tightly together, letting almost no air through. When we do this, the vocal folds cannot vibrate regularly, and instead you just get these slow, small vibrations. Try saying the sound "aaa". Start off with your regular speaking voice, but as you say "aaa" make your voice lower and lower and lower – until you get to as low as you can go. You should hear that the vibrations in your voice slowed down, and your voice started to sound something like a hinge that needs to be oiled. That is creaky voice, and you produced it by pushing your vocal folds very tightly together.

How to gather data about creaky voice

To figure out **who** uses creaky voice and **when** and **why** they use it, you need to collect some data! You can do this either by just listening to some people speak, but you may have

to listen for a while (and even make recordings of their speech) since creaky voice isn't very common and it can be hard to spot when you're just listening to people talk.

It may be easier to get your data from a television programme. The Channel 4 show *Made in Chelsea* features characters that tend to use a lot of creaky voice. You can watch 3 or 4 episodes either on TV or online, and keep track of who's using creaky voice and when they're using it. You'll then have to analyse the data you collect to come up with an interpretation of what they're using it for.

Keeping track of creaky voice

In order to keep track of what you hear, the best idea is to create a table for your observations. You'll want to keep track of lots of information about the uses of creaky voice, so your table could look something like this:

What they said	Speakers	Where in sentence	Who are they talking to	What are they talking about

Each time you hear someone using creaky voice, enter the information as a row in your table. For each row, you would enter

- What was said when creaky voice was being used
- Who said it (the speaker)
- Where in the sentence the creaky voice appeared (beginning, middle, end)
- Who they were talking to (interlocutor)
- What they were talking about (topic)

In order to come up with reliable results, you want to have a pretty big number of observations. If you can get to 100, you can potentially have really reliable findings. 100 might be too many, though – it depends how often people are using creaky voice. But try to get as close to 100 as possible.

Analysing your data

Once you've filled in your table with all of your observations, you want to try and interpret the results. Can you identify any patterns in the table? Does creaky voice appear more in the speech of some speakers but not others? Does creaky voice appear more on certain topics, or in certain places in a sentence?

Once you've identified some patterns, think about what these patterns could mean. If, for example, creaky voice often appears at the beginning of a sentence, why would it appear there? Is there something that normally happens at the beginning of sentences that creaky voice could be a part of? Likewise, if certain speakers tend to use creaky voice and others do not, can you come up with an explanation for why that may be? Make sure that any

interpretations you come up with are supported by the observations you collect and what you know about how language works.

What do you think?

After having come up with your interpretations, you'll be ready to go back to the questions we started this language investigation with? Is creaky voice annoying, incompetent and unintelligent? Is it something that only young women do? Is it something they have no control over?

If not (HINT: it's not!), why do you think that so many commentators talk about it in this way? Can you think of other language practices that are similarly discussed in the media? If so, you could try doing some language investigations about them too, and see if your results are similar to those for creaky voice.