

## SIG 10

## Letter to the Editor

# A Critique and Call for Action, in Response to Sexist Commentary About Vocal Fry

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** This letter to the editor discusses recommendations and publicity from a recent article by Gallena and Pinto (2021) that appeared in *Perspectives of the ASHA Special Interest Groups*. We contextualize the recommendations made by Gallena and Pinto that young women actively suppress their use of vocal fry, a normal part of linguistic and sociolinguistic variation, to make themselves more marketable to employers who discriminate on the basis of vocal fry use. By reviewing research on vocal fry, social evaluation, and linguistic discrimination, we show how this recommendation is fundamentally flawed and how it perpetuates sexist tropes about language use. We argue that this is particularly dismaying when publicized by a journal of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, which aims to promote the universal use of language, in all its forms, as a human right.

**Conclusions:** People stigmatize linguistic differences to devalue those who have less power. Vocal fry is not a problem; the problem is absurd sexist judgments against those who use vocal fry. The recommendations made in Gallena and Pinto (2021) and *Perspectives'* publicity about those recommendations both contribute to sexist linguistic discrimination. Rather than recommending that victims of sexism change their behavior to suit the biased views of others, we should use our energy to eradicate the underlying sexism.

“How Graduate Students With Vocal Fry Are Perceived by Speech-Language Pathologists” was published by Gallena and Pinto (2021) in *Perspectives of the ASHA Special Interest Groups* (henceforth: *Perspectives*), Special Interest Group 10: Issues in Higher Education. This article unfortunately reinforced toxic sexist tropes that cannot go unchallenged. Here, we summarize the main point of the article and highlight the potential negative impact of this work. The main takeaway messages are that detection of vocal fry (VF) in colloquial speech has no place in the evaluation of a student’s capacity to be a professional speech-language pathologist (SLP), and when listener perceptions reflect toxic stereotypes, we should work to eradicate the sexism rather than provide a legitimate platform for stigmatizing the behavior that is being unfairly judged.

Gallena and Pinto (2021) explored the impact of VF (also known as *creaky voice*) on perception of a student talker’s voice, toward insight on what might affect their ability to be hired into the profession. Professional SLPs listened to recordings of speech-language pathology students and answered questions regarding their impressions of these voices. Talkers with VF were judged to be less pleasant, less competent, less hireable, less educated, and less professional. Results were consistent with previous findings (Ligon et al., 2019; Parker & Borrie, 2018; Venkatraman & Sivisankar, 2018), which observed listener perception of VF as indicating talker vanity, apathy, and boredom. On the basis of these findings, Gallena and Pinto advised students to “avoid using VF in order to maximize career opportunities” (p. 1561); noted that “young women generally, and SLPs specifically, would be wise to know how and under what conditions to speak without VF” (p. 1561); and summarized that “[b]ased upon these findings, CSD programs should consider offering training to students to address their awareness and use of VF” (p. 1562).

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Gallena and Pinto (2021) concluded that “[s]peech-language pathology graduate students should be cognizant of VF use, as they seek to secure competitive externships and jobs” (p. 1554). The ASHA SIG Perspectives (2021) Twitter account promoted and commented on this study, saying:

#SIG10 study found that vocal fry (VF) - a low-pitched, grating voice quality trending among young women - negatively impacts how a speaker is perceived. SLP grad students should be cognizant of VF use as they seek competitive externships & jobs. <https://on.asha.org/3bRWuD9> #slpeeps

The responses to this Tweet were immediate and critical (<https://asha.altmetric.com/details/116464832/twitter>). While some of these criticisms addressed the statistical analyses of the data, the majority of comments focused on the blatantly sexist recommendations.

To be clear, there is nothing wrong with Gallena and Pinto (2021)—and, by association, *Perspectives* and ASHA itself—shining a light on sexist tendencies. We need to identify those tendencies in order to bring about the necessary change. The problem is the tacit approval of those tendencies by omitting necessary interpretation. Here, we contextualize the broad conclusions given by Gallena and Pinto (2021) with respect to five points: (a) the normal sociolinguistic use of VF must be clearly distinguished from VF occurring as a result of vocal pathologies—VF itself does not itself indicate presence of or risk of disorder; (b) the perceived impact of linguistic behaviors cannot be separated from attitudes toward social groups; (c) assessing the impact of VF on effective clinical and professional interaction requires a direct examination of clinical skills and outcomes, not assumptions based on colloquial speech; (d) the recommendations made by Gallena and Pinto constitute the promotion of linguistic stigmatization; and (e) ASHA as an organization has a responsibility to not only refrain from abusing their institutional power, but to actively oppose the stigmatization of speech differences, including the use of VF.

## VF Is Overwhelmingly Linguistic and Sociolinguistic Rather Than Pathological

Sometimes VF arises as a consequence of voice pathology, but pathological voice is not the subject of the inquiry and criticism offered by Gallena and Pinto (2021). VF is a very common practice among speakers of English (Gibson, 2017). Although the use of VF can sometimes be identified as pursuant to pathology and identified as a valid target for remediation—for example, in the case of contact granuloma (Ylitalo & Hammarberg, 2000)—overwhelmingly,

the use of VF is held to be harmless and an integral part of communication for many people. For example, there are languages that incorporate creaky voice as an essential component of the phonetic system (e.g., Northern Vietnamese, Danish, Korean, Jalapa Mazatec), and we have found no studies that show an increased prevalence of vocal fold damage. VF has long been understood to systematically occur as part of many talkers’ repertoires, to mark phrasal boundaries, to signify social rapport with a listener, and to mark the difference between new and old information in a sentence (for a review, see Davidson, 2021; Dallaston & Docherty, 2020). So, why would a speech behavior used in so many different useful ways be judged so negatively? The answer is that VF serves a *social indexing* function, linguistically marking its users as socially distinctive. The linguistic behavior then serves as a proxy to enable criticism of a group of people while hiding the appearance of direct discrimination. Criticism directed at linguistic behaviors such as VF can be interpreted as criticism of the *people* who habitually deploy these speech styles.

## Judgments of VF Described by Gallena and Pinto (2021) Reflect Sexist Attitudes

Investigation of attitudes toward speech must be mindful of the potential of the results to be leveraged in undermining the expressive agency and authority of people by prioritizing criticism of their speech style over consideration of their intellect or skills, especially regarding professional opportunities. In this case, the recommendation made in Gallena and Pinto (2021) to avoid using VF constitutes a recommendation to avoid a linguistic behavior associated with young women, because it is a linguistic behavior associated with young women.

The perceived impact of VF in any way—including *psycholinguistic*—cannot be separated from one’s attitude toward the idea of social performances such as femininity or masculinity (Tripp & Munson, 2021). To assess the hirability of young women, Gallena and Pinto (2021) asked SLP participants to answer the question, “Based upon the speaker’s voice, would you have reservations about hiring or supervising this person as an SLP?” (p. 1560). The responses to this question reflect the willingness of these SLPs to engage in discriminatory hiring practices. The measured behavior is an example of responding to the style of speech without engaging with the substance of what is being said—what Chao and Bursten (2021) call a *noncontent-based response*. Although investigations of noncontent-based responses illuminate how listeners make judgments on speech quality, it is important to acknowledge that in social contexts, these responses can function as a form of silencing.

Myriad other findings suggest that linguistic, cultural, and physiological differences can negatively impact

the perception of job candidates. Race/ethnicity (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Zhao & Biernat, 2017), body size (Rudolph et al., 2009), geographical origin and accent (Timming, 2017), age (Rupp et al., 2006; Zaniboni et al., 2019), and disability (Louvet, 2007) have all been shown to produce negative judgments with respect to professional competence. Notably, many of these effects are interconnected (e.g., Busetta et al., 2020; Dryden & Dovchin, 2021; Ramjattan, 2019), and many are reported to have more pronounced effects on judgments of women compared to those of men.

## Sexism Masquerading as Professional Evaluation

Judgments of a talker's VF behavior may be couched in a concern that individuals' voice qualities reflect a limited ability to perform an essential function of a job, such as modeling vocal behaviors. Such an explanation excuses discriminatory behavior seemingly based on concern for clients, but this is easily rebutted: If potential employers were interested in one's ability to model a range of voice qualities, as might be needed in gender-affirming voice and speech services, then the employers should measure that skill, rather than infer it from someone's voice quality when speaking colloquially to colleagues. Such a judgment would likely require a different experimental design than what was conducted by Gallena and Pinto (2021).

## Calling Out Rhetoric That Misallocates the Responsibility for Harm

The discussion section in the article by Gallena and Pinto (2021) and the Tweet from the official *Perspectives* account are examples of harmfully reversing the agency between oppressor and oppressed. It's not that "VF negatively impacts how a speaker is perceived" because the cause of the negative perception is not VF—it is the person rendering the judgment. Recommendations to avoid VF legitimize the harmful stigmatization by placing the responsibility for change on the person being judged.

While the article by Gallena and Pinto (2021) does its due diligence to summarize some important facts about VF, it conspicuously ignores others from the past decade and earlier, including discussions of how patterns of language use that are associated with women, including VF, are disparaged. Prior to Hollien et al. (1966), VF was widely regarded as abnormal, rather than as a normal, phonational register. Following the publication of Wolk et al.'s (2012) paper on VF, there was a national conversation on the "policing" of variation in women's speech that was reviewed by Davidson (2021). The public discussion

of linguistic discrimination emerging from these conversations are summarized comprehensively by Reynolds (2015), who situated the discussion of VF in a broader context of linguistic justice and linguistic discrimination. The enduring controversy over VF is also visible in the titling and content of a popular podcast on linguistic discrimination, *The Vocal Fries* (Gillon & Figueroa, 2021).

The judgment of VF that emerges from the articles by Gallena and Pinto (2021) and others has the shroud of sincerity ("We want you to be competitive for a job"), disguising the true impact ("Your normal speech is unacceptable, and you must change it to uphold the expectations of those who are in power"). It is especially concerning that this message was amplified through ASHA's official channels, as though the mission of ASHA were to suppress normal social variation in speech. Professionals look to ASHA for guidance and clarity on matters relating to voice and communication. It is ironic and embarrassing that ASHA would imply that harmful stereotypes should be considered reasons to consider an SLP less qualified for a job. Furthermore, the problem of sexism is compounded here by the problem of a largely homogenous group (ASHA, which is largely composed of white women) treating its own speech as a *default* against which any deviation may be seen as pathological. As speech and language scientists and clinical professionals, we work to identify the distinction between disorder and difference, and to educate the public.

History shows us that we must not abuse institutional power to endorse bigotry toward speech behaviors on the basis that they don't conform to the preferred speaking styles of the current SLP professional cohort. For example, teachers frequently hold unfairly negative impressions of children who stutter (Yeakle & Cooper, 1986), with implications for the children's educational development and personal relationships with their role models (Jenkins, 2010; Lass et al., 1992). A recurring theme in the literature is that better education should lead to a reduction in harmful discriminatory behavior (Daniels et al., 2011; Flynn & St. Louis, 2011). SLPs recognize the injustice imposed upon people who stutter as they face unfair characterizations of their capabilities. So too must we recognize that listening for VF has no place in the evaluation of a student's intellect and professional capacity to serve in the field.

## Call for Action

Education and change are hard work. We will be met with resistance and cynicism from those who are invested in suppressing the agency and power of young women. Resistance will also come from those who are not invested in oppression but who are so inured to cultural norms that they think such oppressive behavior is

justified simply because it is normal. But, we must do better. ASHA has a choice to either tell young women to cater to sexist judgments or to educate the public and fight against the toxic and damaging behavior brought to light by the papers by Gallena and Pinto (2021), Ligon et al. (2019), and others. The solution to sexist judgment of VF is not to suppress VF, but to suppress sexism. VF was never the problem. The problem is that people use linguistic differences to devalue others, and people with the institutional power to condemn this sexist behavior have instead condoned it.

Journal publications have responsibility in reducing linguistic discrimination by bringing it to light and making people explicitly aware of it, so that they can work to mitigate their own linguistic biases. Moving forward, it is vitally important that data on linguistic discrimination must be properly contextualized. Sometimes that conversation is vitalized by linguistics experts communicating directly to the public, as on the podcast *The Vocal Fries*. Education is also available in other media such as blogs and interviews (Reynolds, 2015) and recorded talks, (Cameron, 2022) as well as radio segments (BBC News World Service, 2017). Within official publications, an important tool for promoting this change would be the incorporation of equity impact analysis (EIA). Components of an EIA for a given policy include attending to how the purpose of the policy relates to institutional goals, what stakeholders are included in the conversation, and how its implementation might create unintended negative consequences differentially affecting members of different demographics. As reviewed by Yu et al. (2021), EIA is praxis that was devised to ensure that policies and recommendations are enacted only after their impact on different groups—especially marginalized and minoritized groups—is considered.

## Conclusion

Vocal fry (VF) is a natural speech behavior that is part of many talkers' repertoires and is not in itself a sign of any pathology. Frequently, criticism of VF is veiled criticism of the talkers who use VF and a means of silencing or oppressing those who do not conform to the vocal style of the majority. Occasionally, sexist judgments are wrapped in a façade of concern for vocal health or for the talker's ability to model vocal behaviors. Listening for VF has no place in the evaluation of a student's professional capacity to serve in the field. It is ironic and embarrassing that ASHA would perpetuate harmful sexist stereotypes and imply that those stereotypes should be considered valid reasons to judge job candidates and to suppress normal variation in vocal behavior. Rather than encouraging people to change their vocal habits to suit those who

would discriminate, we should instead discourage discriminatory and sexist behavior.

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