

A shriek by any other name

The Toronto Star

February 11, 1995, Saturday, FINAL EDITION

Copyright 1995 Toronto Star Newspapers, Ltd.

Section: INSIGHT; Pg. B5

Length: 519 words

Byline: BY SANDY HILL SPECIAL TO THE STAR (KNIGHT-RIDDER TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE)

Body

A FRIEND TOLD me someone had tied him up chattering on the phone

"It was a woman, right?" I said.

"How did you know?" he asked.

Simple. The word "chattering."

When it comes to words describing speech, we seem to have two separate, often-loaded vocabularies for men and women. And they tell us a lot.

Let's see, for women, there are words like chattering, gossiping, chitchatting, giggling, tittering, cackling, prattling, screaming, screeching, babbling, jabbering, shrieking, squealing, whining, nagging, shrill, strident (this last usually applied to feminists). And don't forget gabfest or hen party. Most are pejorative or critical.

For men, there are words like roaring, bellowing, grunting, guffawing. Not exactly words that permit men tenderness or sensitivity.

There are, of course, neutral words like shouting, drawling, yelling, whispering.

The examples are everywhere.

A review in a newspaper describes a group of people as clawing and gossiping. Hmmm, which sex would that be?

In karate class, a man refers to a cat fight. Women, right? What would it be between men? A slugfest? There's a different image there.

A man refers to his wife's conversation as yakking, a word used mostly for women.

We use hysterical mainly for upset women. No matter how upset a man may be, it's unlikely we would label him hysterical.

These words for women's speech developed partly because some of the things women talk about - basics like child care and food preparation - tended traditionally to interest men less and capture the world's attention less.

Woven through the words is the idea that women's speech is less important. The words serve to mock it.

But wait, maybe we have all those negative words for women talking because women talk all the time. No, that can't be it. Numerous studies have shown that men talk more than women.

A shriek by any other name

Restrictive language hurts both women and men. The words we use for either sex reflect what we think is appropriate and limit our use of the full range of human emotions.

Take the word "roaring," usually used for men, and "shrieking," usually used for women. The one for men implies a low voice and one for women a high voice. But the value we put on them is not neutral. Roaring, while perhaps not desirable, clearly is more powerful and effective than shrieking.

Or consider the words "sissy" and "tomboy." It's bad for a man to be a sissy, because he is using what are considered female traits. It says two things: Be careful about exhibiting nurturing behavior, and female is a way to be made fun of. "Tomboy" suggests to girls that it is not good to show too many "male" traits such as aggressiveness. But tomboy isn't all bad since it is more acceptable to try to be like men than like women.

I'm not suggesting we give up all these words. The English language is a rich and wonderful instrument.

Instead, we can consider whether we sometimes want to mix up the words. Men giggling and gossiping. Women roaring and guffawing. Not too hard to imagine.

Sandy Hill is deputy features editor of The Charlotte (N.C.) Observer.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: WOMEN (90%); FEMINISM & WOMEN'S RIGHTS (73%); MARTIAL ARTS (67%)

Load-Date: February 13, 1995