

Limit Disfluencies **Disfluencies** are utterances that add no meaning to a statement. Interjections like “umm,” “you know,” and “like” can make a smart idea sound less persuasive. Prospective senatorial candidate Caroline Kennedy’s disfluency habit may have helped sabotage her credibility. One critic reported counting more than 200 “you know’s” in a single interview.²⁶ Another filler word often viewed negatively, especially by older generations, is “like.” In fact, personal branding strategist Sylwia Dziedzic names “like” as one of the top filler words that can get in your way of getting hired.²⁷ Nobody expects colloquial speech to be flawless. In fact, perfect utterances would sound artificial and strange. But practice can help keep the number of disfluencies under control.

Feminine and Masculine Language Use

Chapter 2 described how culture affects communication. Some social scientists have suggested that conversation between men and women is a kind of cross-cultural communication in which members of each sex are not speaking different dialects but “genderlects.”²⁸ They have argued that these different approaches affect the way men and women interact with one another in ways that are powerful but usually unnoticed.

As you read about differences in male and female speech, understand that the descriptions don’t characterize all men and women. The relationship between gender and language is like the one between gender and height: Men are generally taller than women, but some women are taller than some men. In fact, the difference between the tallest man and the shortest man (or the tallest woman and the shortest woman) is greater than the difference between the average man and the average woman. For this reason, the words “masculine” and “feminine” are actually better adjectives to describe language differences since they refer to traits characteristically linked to each gender and not to biological sex. Remember also that gender isn’t the only factor that influences conversational style. Cultural, geographical, and occupational influences also play a role. Finally, understand that the differences outlined in this section reflect past communication patterns. As the roles of men and women in society evolve, speech styles may change as well.

Feminine Language Use From childhood, females learn to use speech for what some researchers refer to as **rapport talk**: talk used to create connections, establish goodwill, show support, and build community.

For many women an important part of building rapport is using language as an *expressive tool*: to articulate emotions (“I’m worried about finishing those reports today”; “I’m glad everybody had a chance to speak”) and clarify relationships (“We don’t seem to be working well together”).

Characteristically feminine speech often goes beyond just expressing emotions; it also is *supportive*. Women are most likely to listen and respond to spoken and unspoken conversational clues about the other person’s feelings. A characteristically feminine reply to a description of difficulties at work is, “I know what that’s like. Last year I had so much



“Sorry, Chief, but of course I didn’t mean ‘bimbo’ in the pejorative sense.”

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