

## Speech Therapy for Transsexuals

## Teaching a Man to Sound Female

By Blake Green

If you are one of those people who thinks that women should talk more like men — be more positive and straightforward, less frivolous and euphemistic — then you'll probably take a dim view of anything that has to do with learning to speak like a woman.

"The basic characteristics of woman's speech are whining, helpless, questioning," Maureen O'Connor says — with a wince.

O'Connor, a 30-year-old speech and language pathologist at the Stanford Speech and Language Clinic, is in an unusual position. While she admits that she is "actively trying to remove some of these things (that typify women's speech) from my own communication style," she has been helping others to adopt the traditional "woman's language."

Her "pupils" are transsexual males in the process of physically and mentally becoming women, and the way they speak is one factor determining whether or not they will be able to comfortably blend into their new lives as members of the opposite sex.

"Hormones, electrolysis and cosmetic surgery can change the appearance," O'Connor said, but not the vocal cord structure. "A male's is thicker, heavier, more massive, and this produces the lower pitch. So a person can be visibly quite female in appearance and then suddenly talk to you in THIS BOOMING VOICE."

But the pitch of a person's voice is extremely difficult to change. "In adopting a habitually higher pitch, there is always the danger that . . . instead of an acceptable female or borderline pitch . . . the person will overshoot and adopt such a high pitch that it is in the falsetto range and sounds thin, tinny, unnatural." O'Connor's voice climbed higher to demonstrate. "It is also very hard (once an acceptable pitch is found) to keep on talking without letting it slip down."

To counterbalance this problem and to help lend credibility, O'Connor feels that the transsexual "presenting as a woman" would benefit from group therapy and practice in feminine speech characteristics. Late last year she conducted the clinic's first (and, she believes, one of the country's first) speech therapy program for transsexuals.

All sorts of things other than pitch that "we do as women in our speech . . . are seen as feminine. We use very different intonation and inflection patterns than men, much of our vocabulary, sentence structure and syntax are different, and there are different nonverbal aspects of communication."

But adopting these "aren't easy, either," O'Connor says. "I've tried to break myself of some of these habits and it's really hard." All of the original participants in



## The Way Women Talk

"How the language is used about women" is the basis for much of the information available about women and linguistics, according to speech therapist Maureen O'Connor of the Stanford Speech and Language Clinic.

But O'Connor is more interested in "how women use the language" than she is in whether masculine pronouns, prefixes and suffixes can be used to refer to a woman.

From language studies that have included speech and non-verbal communication patterns of the sexes, O'Connor has assembled what she stresses are "generalities" about the way a woman speaks (other than voice pitch) that differentiates her from a man.

- **Prosody, or the rhythm of the language:** "Women's voices are more animated — our highs are higher, our lows, lower. We are more soft-spoken, more breathy. Men effectively use three intonation pitches, women four or five." Women frequently make the sentence rise at its end, as if the speaker were asking a question.

- **Vocabulary, sentence structure and syntax:** "Women tend to be more hyper-correct" in pronunciation. It is less correct for a woman to say 'shoppin', I wanna, I'm gonna.' Women traditionally use fewer swear words (female expletives are more likely to be "oh, gosh," or "oh, my goodness," according to studies) and less slang than men, although this is becoming less of a difference.

"Tag questions are often added at the end of (women's) utterances," O'Connor continued. "So a woman will make a statement and then add a

the program "were at least 30 years old, so the male speaking pattern" was deeply engrained.

"We met for six sessions, once a week," O'Connor explained, "and I wouldn't doubt that these patients are still working on it." Of the six, "four had pitches that would easily identify them as male." (Pitch, she said, is best worked on in individual therapy, but because of the enormous cost of the gender-change procedure — sometimes as high as \$10,000 — many cannot afford the extra expense of speech training.)

For the first group session, "we arbitrarily charged \$90," O'Connor said. Some of the patients had been referred by the Gender Dysphoria Program at Stanford and some by private physicians. Only one member of the group had gone through the surgical part of the change process, but all had taken hormones and were "presenting as women."

Applicants to the program so far have all been male transsexuals, O'Connor said. When the sex change



Maureen O'Connor conducted the first speech therapy programs for transsexuals at the Stanford Speech and Language Clinic

is in the other direction (female to male), the consensus is that there is less problem with speech.

"I really don't know why women are more readily able to emulate man's communicative style, to drop the frills, politisms and other things associated with our speech."

But it is, the pathologist pointed out, "more acceptable in everyday life for a woman to use speech patterns of both genders than it is for a man to adopt feminisms." For this reason, O'Connor says she warns men who are not yet "presenting as woman" but have expressed an interest in the speech program that "feminine speech mannerisms would be very discrepant at this point — there would be a lot of negative feedback.

Males and females begin using different speech patterns "well before kindergarten," O'Connor says. "Parents talk differently to babies (depending on their sex) right from the beginning. They tend to lower their voice and be a little more authoritarian with boys and to use a more sing-songy, high voice with girls. Perhaps this is where the intonation and inflection differences start out."

There is also some evidence that both sexes speak "woman's language" when they are very young and the mother is the dominant force. Boys then switch to "men's language" when the father becomes the role model.

The importance of this role model to one's speech patterns is why O'Connor says she urges the transsexuals "to choose someone in their lives, some woman they work with, live with or near, as a model — with the warning not to choose someone like a news commentator, like Barbara Walters, who uses very matter-of-fact, factual style."

This is also why, when the sex change is from male

to female, a woman should be the teacher. "I also have a bit of a natural advantage, O'Connor says, "because I sign and intepret for the deaf, so I tend to be very expressive with my hands."

O'Connor's interest in male-female language differences developed through her "feminist readings, assertiveness training and that kind of thing." Then, transsexuals began to ask whether such a speech therapy program existed at Stanford, and "I knew that someone would have to do it."

To those who question the wisdom of the clinic's pioneering such a program, and of diverting O'Connor's expertise from perhaps more serious — and certainly more traditional — communication disorders, she answers that the "classic definition of a speech disorder is that it interferes with communication, calls attention to itself or causes the speaker concern." Speech and language inappropriate to sex would obviously fall into this category," O'Connor believes. (The next series of therapy sessions will begin when there are six male transsexuals enrolled in the program. O'Connor says that if enough female transsexuals express an interest, "we would also be willing to work with them.")

"I have some real ambivalent feelings about teaching some of these things," O'Connor admitted, "especially those I'm trying to remove from my own communication style. But I've tried not to make judgments. I've repeatedly told them, 'Understand, you don't have to adopt all of these things.' And I would never suggest that they adopt anything they felt was artificial or uncomfortable.

"Maybe Gloria Steinem would kill me if she heard about this program," O'Connor said with a smile. On the other hand, she has the reinforcement of grateful patients, one of whom answered her expressed trepidations with "Listen, lady, I need all the help I can get."

question: "Is she such a pretty girl, isn't she? It's expensive; don't you think?" This could be a politism, or a way of seeking feedback or approval," much like the question intonation. "When I read about this, I asked someone to monitor me and I was doing it all the time, totally unaware," she admitted.

"Women almost exclusively use intensifiers (such, so — as in 'such a nice day, so cold outside') and qualifiers (rather, about — as in 'rather windy, about 4 o'clock')."

Women are more prone to use "psychological state verbs" dealing with emotion: "I hope, I wish, I think." And certain words, O'Connor said, are almost exclusively used as adjectives by females: "darling, precious, sweet." Women are much more descriptive in areas such as colors.

• **Specialized vocabularies:** "Women tend to develop theirs in areas like cooking, sewing, clothes, child care. Men's are business-related or about sports, auto mechanics." (Some studies have shown that men with a knowledge of women's subjects are often taken to be professional practitioners — chefs, hairdressers or tailors.)

"There have been some indications that professional women are 'bilingual,'" O'Connor said. "That on the job they will use fairly direct, straightforward, more competent-sounding language, but in social situations will revert to feminisms." Women are often taken more seriously when they use "male language" — their traditional personal, emotional language pattern taken as proof they are incapable of holding power.

• **Nonverbal communication:** "Women more often touch and are touched by others in conversation and are approached more closely than men. Women tend to look at other conversationalists more consistently, maintain eye contact, provide on-going feedback — head nodding, puzzled looks, injections such as 'm-hmm' or 'umm.'"

"We have very characteristic hand gestures," she explained, "palm up, fingers spread, smooth, round movements." (Men are more likely to use the "closed hand or fist and a stabbing, pointing finger.")

"In cross-sex conversations (between a man and a woman)," O'Connor said, "men speak at greater length, interrupt and overlap more often. Now that certainly breaks all the stereotypes, doesn't it?"

If there is such a thing as a "neuter language," it would be the male manner of speaking. O'Connor has found that "as the education level of the woman rises, the speech pattern differences are less obvious." But, while some feminists have somewhat ironically embraced "maleisms" in their communication patterns, and O'Connor herself believes there is much that is "ineffectual" in woman's language, she and many linguists believe that many aspects of the way women talk are worth preserving.

"There is a place in the language for politeness and subtlety," O'Connor said. Women, studies have shown, are more descriptive, more relative, more receptive and less inclined to assert one idea in their conversation.

Besides, as O'Connor said, "a 'neuter language' would be awfully dull." Notice she didn't add "wouldn't it?"

are necessities

