

# High Power, Low Volume: The Dynamics of Feminenglish

By Pam Woldow & Doug Richardson



Typical of the way catchy neologisms leap into common currency, there's a hot new compliment making the rounds these days: "So-and-so *speaks truth to power*." The connotations of this high-powered compliment are rich indeed, suggesting *here's a person who is confident, courageous, smart, principled, forceful, truthful, and outspoken*.

The so-and-so receiving this compliment is almost invariably male. That's because it's difficult – and frequently risky – for women in the business and legal world to speak truth to power. And when they do, suddenly it's not praiseworthy behavior. It's...aggressive, confrontive, rebellious, self-aggrandizing and somehow inappropriate. For example, Academy-Award winning actress Jennifer Lawrence (the [world's highest paid actress in 2015](#)) recently wrote:

*A few weeks ago at work, I spoke my mind and gave my opinion in a clear and no-bullshit way; No aggression, just blunt. The man I was working with (actually he was working for me) said, 'Whoa! We're all on the same team here!' As if I were yelling at him. I was so shocked, because nothing that I said was personal, offensive, or, to be honest, wrong. All I hear and see all day are men speaking their opinions, and when I give mine in the same exact manner, you would have thought I said something offensive."*

## Women in a Meeting – and Elsewhere

In the first post in this series, we coined a neologism of our own, describing *Feminenglish* as a distinct intergender communication dialect, "a language of self-defense, of frustrated communication, of lost and stolen ideas ... of stymied career progression." We noted that it is most observable in group meetings.

Feminenglish is a complex, shape-shifting phenomenon, an exercise in constant situational adaptation, of flying below the radar. Men often deny that it exists (or if it does, it's not through their manipulative motives). High-powered women in law and business know it exists, that it represents the omnipresent backbeat in the rhythm of group communication. For women, Feminenglish represents an added layer of discourse, the simultaneous translation of what you want to say into a mode that does not make waves. As Washington Post reporter [Alexandra Petri](#) [puts it](#), "you start with your thought, then you figure out how to say it as though you were offering a groveling apology for an unspecified error."

## Signature Symptoms

Although infinitely nuanced, Feminenglish frequently has a number of common "tells." The first and most frequent is simmering **silence**, a rapid intake of breath through the nose and a forward-leaning shift in posture communicating that we wish to speak...sometimes followed by a silent, discouraged sigh: *Better to sit down and shut up*. Sullen silence often is accompanied by other adjustments in **posture** intended to communicate a sense of "what's the use?": shoulders rolled forward, eyes lowered or averted, hands and arms held close to the chest. Later, when someone else trots out the idea that the frustrated speaker decided not to articulate, we see a pained wince, a rolling of the eyes.

## Sorry I'm So Stupid

Feminenglish also builds on frequently employing a self-effacing **disclaimer or apology**, meant to signal acknowledgement that it is presumptuous and inappropriate to try to break into the flow of conversation:

- I'm sorry, Stan, but if I might venture a thought... "
- I don't mean to speak out of turn, but..."
- "Maybe I'm off-base here, but..."
- "I don't know. This may seem like a dumb idea, but..."
- "Of course I could be wrong, but..."
- "Maybe this would be better brought up later, but I just want to suggest..."
- "Forgive me if this seems out of line, but..."

Note that the classic disclaimer construction always sticks the word "but" after the initial ritual self-flagellation. In common English usage, sticking "but" in the middle of a sentence negates everything that goes before it ("That was a pretty good presentation, Ed, but..."). Not so in Feminenglish, where the use of "but" is intended to open a little teensy-weensy door through which the speaker might presume to push through a smidgin' of substantive content.

## Con Permiso

Closely related to the disclaimer is a respectful request for permission to speak, utter an idea, state an opinion, or ask a clarifying question:

- “Can I possibly raise a concern here?”
- “May I suggest an approach that we might consider?”
- “Could I take a moment to respond?”
- “I’m sorry to break into your train of thought, but could you clarify ...”

Sadly, this conversational gambit frequently fails. All the parental figure who has been asked permission has to do is say, “Maybe we can get to that later,” or “Sue, why don’t you and I discuss that off line,” or even, “Well, let’s move on.” Boom. Total power asymmetry. Big time denial of respect in front of the group. Loss of face. Feminenglish speakers have learned that asking permission is dangerous unless you know you will be accorded attention and consideration – and how often is that?

## Asking a Question?

Uptalk, a lift in inflection at the end of a phrase, is how we ask questions in English. We laugh when millennials and other lower-order life forms default to uptalk for declarative statements (“He’s, like, so awesome?”). Yet Feminenglish contains uptalk all the time, because its speakers have learned that asking a question can serve as an oblique way to state an opinion:

- “Would it make sense to run that idea past the client?”
- “Why don’t we consider using associates in our Houston office for the preliminary discovery?”
- “Does it make sense to explore early settlement, since the client has emphasized real cost constraints?”

## Hiding in the Tall Grass

In an effort to avoid the personal body shots that often come when they presume to speak for themselves or take a personal stand, Feminenglish speakers frequently use the nominative “we” rather than “I” to invoke the spirit of collaboration, consensus and team play. They have learned a basic rule of Feminenglish grammar: *“I behind we, except after thee.”*

Petri suggests, for example, that a Feminenglish translation of:

“I came. I saw. I conquered” would be:

“I don’t want to toot my own horn here at all, but I definitely have been to those places and was just honored to be part of it as our team did such a wonder job of conquering them.”

## Who You Callin’ Passive?

The safest tactic, of course, is to eschew all reference to oneself (as part of a team or not) and hide behind the grammatical anonymity of the passive voice. Thus, “I can’t do that” becomes “It

will be impossible for that brief to be completed by Tuesday.” Similarly, “I think that’s a really stupid approach” can be expressed passively as, “there is a significant likelihood that that approach might not succeed.” The subjunctive voice is helpful too: it’s a lot less confrontive to say, “might” and “could,” than to assert “shall” and “will.”

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