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## THE CONVERSATION

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# Clinton finds her voice – but the sexism that greets women's speech endures

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Let the woman talk. EPA/Tannen Maury

After a campaign lasting more than a year and taking in all 50 states, Hillary Rodham Clinton has delivered a speech that will go down in history. As the first woman to secure a major party's nomination for president of the United States, her address to the Democratic National Convention was a milestone for women's leadership in the US and beyond. As she put it: "When any barrier falls in America, for anyone, it clears the way for everyone. When there are no ceilings, the sky's the limit."

Clinton came to the stage under monumental pressure, charged with delivering a historic piece of rhetoric. This was a moment in world history – and it was always destined to be mercilessly dissected.

But as ever, Clinton's popularity (or lack thereof) and the reception of her speech have been coloured by criticism of her speaking style. As the conservative website the Daily Wire **headlined its reaction piece**: “Hillary Accepts Nomination, Immediately Bore Americans Into A Coma Before Startling Them Awake With Her Cackle.”

Ever since she entered the national arena in 1992, media commentators have ripped Clinton's vocal delivery apart. It has been described as loud, shrill, grating and harassing. No aspect of her oratory is beyond derision – her laugh is branded “the Clinton cackle”, and her speech derided as shouting, screaming and shrieking – inartfully substituting volume for expression.

Many may claim that Clinton isn't one of history's greatest orators, but there's something more insidious going on here.

The criticism that greets her is a classic example of what is called “gender congruence bias”. This theory explains that people expect women to act in certain ways – and that if a woman's behaviour isn't congruent with expectations of femininity, people won't like or accept her. The double bind that female politicians face is augmented by the deep sense that leadership is a male domain and politics in general is a domain of power – power that we are not culturally comfortable to have women wield.

Presidential candidates, like other high-profile leaders, are expected to be male and to have traditionally socialised masculine attributes. Women who aspire to be high-profile leaders are automatically judged and criticised against these male-biased criteria.

Assertive and rational women are criticised for being too masculine – Clinton has been accused of being overly ambitious and calculating. A high-profile woman who displays gender-congruent emotions may be labelled over-emotional and Clinton has been repeatedly portrayed in the media as witch-like and crazed. Female politicians who are calm, controlled and detached are not praised for gender-neutrality but attacked for not being feminine enough – Clinton has been deemed “robotic” (something she has lately riffed on to great effect).

The pattern behind these sexist distortions and misrepresentations has borne out in a wide spectrum of research, which has found how female politicians are evaluated quite differently from their male counterparts in terms of their speaking style.

One notable difference is the gender expectation that elocution augments men's power, but harms women's. Men are expected to speak and are readily heard, whereas women are traditionally expected to be quiet. When men raise their voices they come off as rousing and gripping, when women raise theirs, they're said to be screaming and grating.

## **Shouted down**

Clinton is of course not alone among female political figures for being lambasted for supposedly poor oratorical skills.

At the beginning of her career, Margaret Thatcher was also criticised for a shrill voice and received vocal training to correct the tone, pitch and tempo of her voice to achieve a more authoritative speaking style. Later in her career, Thatcher's speech was praised for its crispness, softness and firmness of tone – her voice becoming central to her Iron Lady persona.

Angela Merkel, who the New Yorker hailed as “the quiet German”, has been ridiculed for her lack of oratorical charisma, being described as monotone and soporific and about as rousing as watching paint dry.


Looking back, recordings of Clinton delivering her famous graduation address at Wellesley College in 1969 reveal she was astute, eloquent and articulate, not at all the poor orator she's caricatured as today.

Indeed, a prominent executive speech coaching company has praised Clinton for her speaking ability, noting that there is a lot to be learned from her delivery.

What Clinton has accomplished in her speech and mannerisms is a delicate balance. On the one hand, she has hit on the assertiveness she needs to be taken seriously in debate and negotiation; on the other, she has preserved the caring strength essential to achieve and sustain an emotive connection with an audience.

Now that she actually has a chance at becoming the most powerful person in the world, Clinton has become a threat to the gender expectations of people in power the world over. This sort of subtextual risk is just the sort of fodder that the media loves to dish out for the masses.

It's past time for this to stop. The public should be mindful of making political decisions based on Clinton's vocal style and charisma, and the media must stop silencing Clinton's voice by judging her speech against male-biased criteria. Let's take this opportunity together to collectively create a less sexist, more inclusive vision of gender mutuality for the US and the world – one that Clinton, more than any other individual leader, may soon be empowered to make reality.

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