



**Identity, socialization, and  
gay-sounding voices**

Lal Zimman (zimman@colorado.edu)  
University of Colorado  
2<sup>nd</sup> CLASP Conference, October 4, 2009

**+ Gay-sounding voices**

- The perception of certain voices as "gay-sounding" has received growing attention over the past 15 years (e.g. Gaudio 1994, Linville 1998, Smyth Rogers & Jacobs 2003, Pierrehumbert et al. 2004, Munson 2007, Podesva 2007)
- Questions in this body of work include:
  1. How accurate are listeners at guessing speakers' sexual orientation from voice alone?
  2. Which acoustic characteristics best predict whether a voice will be perceived as belonging to a gay speaker?
  3. Why do some people have gay-sounding voices to begin with?
- My focus is on question #3

**+ Road map**

- Explanations that have been offered thus far by authors writing on this topic have tended to focus either on
  - Sexual orientation as a matter of identity
  - Gender normativity and childhood language socialization.
- Neither of these approaches is sufficient on its own.
- I argue that an integrated view of identity and socialization is vital, as each of these phenomena depends crucially on the other.
- To illustrate this point, I draw on my research on the voices of female-to-male transsexuals.

**+ Gay identity and gay-sounding voices**

- Most of the earliest studies on the perception of men's sexual orientation treated gay-sounding voices as stemming directly from the speaker's sexual orientation.
- For example Gaudio (1994)
  - One of Gaudio's primary goals was to take on the stereotype that gay men sound like (or even imitate) women.
  - Gaudio rejects this idea, which had been prevalent in sociolinguistic literature up to that point despite a lack of empirical evidence (e.g. Lakoff 1975, McConnell-Ginet 1983)
  - He argues that gay men and lesbians acquire styles that index their sexual orientation through exposure to other gay and lesbian speakers (or, more often, stereotypes thereof)
- Linville (1998) suggests that the features that mark voices as gay-sounding are acquired unconsciously by gay men through contact with gay communities.
- From this perspective, people *sound* gay because they *are* gay

**+ Challenges to the identity-based view**

- Since Gaudio and Linville's early publications, some issues have arisen that suggest we need to modify how we view the relationship between sexual orientation and particular phonetic styles.
  - Not everyone who identifies as *gay sounds gay*
    - But we can explain this by appealing to the intense social pressure to conform to heteronormative ideas about masculinity (both inside and outside the gay community)
  - A bigger problem: Not everyone who sounds *gay identifies* as such
    - As Smyth & Rogers (2002) have noted, some children and adolescents seem to sound gay long before taking on a gay identity
    - Straight-identified men can also be perceived as gay-sounding

**+ The role of gender conformity**

- A number of authors (Smyth et al. 2002, 2003; Renn 2002; Avery & Liss 1996; Heffernan 2006) have suggested that gender normativity may be a better predictor of whether a man sounds gay than sexual orientation.
  - This is in line with Zwicky's (1997) suggestion that any man who fails to live up to heteronormative expectations of appropriate masculinity may be perceived as gay, regardless of orientation.
- This makes sense when we consider that most of the phonetic features linked to gay-sounding voices among men have also been shown to differentiate the voices of men and women.

## + Do gay-sounding men talk “like women”?

- Smyth & Rogers (2002) have argued that gay-sounding men “talk like women” because both groups share some differences from straight-sounding men
- To take 2 examples:
  - Women & gay-sounding men have longer sibilant consonants with higher peak frequencies compared to straight-sounding men
  - Women & gay-sounding men produce clearer vowels that are articulated further toward the periphery of the vowel space compared to straight-sounding men
- This is at least in part a product of the features that linguists choose to study
- Even so, the ideological link between femininity and male homosexuality is a salient one for many listeners

## + Can gender normativity win out over identity?

- Renn (2002) makes an especially forceful argument for the influence of gender normativity
  - Undergraduate honors thesis that administered a number of psychological inventories to gay and straight men
  - Found that the gay-sounding men reported being less typically masculine in their gender expression during childhood
  - This was true regardless of whether the speaker identified as gay or straight, or (among gay speakers) how “out” the individual was; orientation was no longer statistically significant once reported childhood gender typicality was taken into account
  - Renn suggests that gendered language socialization during childhood is likely to be a more significant factor than identity; because gay men are more likely to be gender non-conformists (according to Renn), an association develops between gender deviance and gay identity

## + Gendered socialization

- Smyth and his colleagues (2000, 2002, 2003) also take an interest in the acquisition of gendered phonetic styles, suggesting that some children might orient to opposite-gender role-models
- Although these authors’ ideas about early-life socialization remain speculative until investigations are made into how these processes actually play out among children and adolescents, the attention paid to gender normativity is a significant contribution.
- While authors like Gaudio and Linville have also been interested in socialization, their emphasis has been on the special forms of socialization experienced by those who identify as gay rather than the way young speakers experience and orient to the process of learning to talk like a heteronormative woman/man.

## + Gender matters: Why these features?

- Even if gay-sounding voices are acquired through exposure to other gay speakers, we are left with questions surrounding how the enregisterment of gay-sounding styles takes place.
- Why would *these particular features*, which overlap considerably with the features that distinguish women’s voices from men’s, also come to be associated with gay men?
- Leaving gender normativity out of this picture means leaving these questions and the other challenges I’ve mentioned unanswered.

## + Still, there are problems

- There are also problems with taking an approach to gay sounding voices as linked directly to a speaker’s gender normativity
- Munson has argued, with various colleagues (Munson, Jefferson & McDonald 2006; Munson, McDonald, DeBoe & White 2006; Munson 2007), that we cannot treat gay-sounding men as simply talking “like women” the way that Smyth & Rogers (2002) suggest, because gay-sounding men only use a select few of the phonetic features that might distinguish the voices of women and men
  - E.g. overall mean F1 and F2
- Gay-sounding speakers do not model their phonetic styles entirely after cross-gender models, but instead make selective use of only some of the features associated with the other gender.

## + A return to identity

- Based on this line of reasoning, Munson has turned again to an emphasis on gay identity as the root of gay-sounding voices
- However, as strong an argument as Munson makes against the notion that gay men simply “sound like women,” he does not address why gay men’s voices would have anything in common with women’s to begin with.
- Podesva’s (Podesva, Roberts & Campbell-Kibler 2001; Podesva 2007) analyses of falsetto and /t/ among gay professionals focus on how gay speakers make use of certain linguistic resources to take particular stances and thereby construct personae.
- Even so, he does not go into the connection between these stances as taken up by gay men and the enactment of prissiness or divahood by women.

## + Bringing it all together: Trans men

- It's clear that there are valid critiques of both the approaches I've described, but there is also something valuable to be taken from each perspective
- This is demonstrated by my research on the voices of trans men, who are individuals assigned to a female gender role at birth, but who come to identify as men at some later point in life.
- Most trans men make use of testosterone therapy, which produces significant physical masculinization including a marked drop in vocal pitch
- However, many of the phonetic differences between men's and women's voices have nothing to do with testosterone

## + So what do trans men have to do with gay-sounding voices?

- Could trans men's history living in a female gender role and their socialization experiences while being raised as girls influence what kinds of men they are perceived to be?
  - More specifically, do trans men sound gayer than non-trans men?
  - If so, it suggests that gendered language socialization in childhood may have an enduring influence on the way individuals speak in adulthood.
- Following the design of other studies on gay-sounding voices, I compared both the perception of and the acoustic characteristics of the read speech by trans men, non-trans gay-sounding men, and non-trans straight-sounding men.

## + Findings

- Trans speakers were indeed perceived as significantly more gay-sounding than the straight non-trans speakers, even though none of the trans individuals in this phase of my study identified as gay.
- In fact, there was no difference in the average gayness ratings given to the gay-sounding non-trans men and those given to the trans men.
- Even though trans men's voices were *perceptually* equivalent to gay-sounding non-trans men's voices, they were *acoustically* different in a number of significant ways.
  - Gay men had significantly lower F2 for /æ/ & longer vowel duration in certain prosodic contexts
  - Trans men had significantly higher centers of gravity for /s/
  - Both gay and trans men had significantly higher F1 for /ɛ/

## + Multiple styles, multiple sources

- These findings support the claim made by Zwicky that any number of styles that deviate from a homogenous normative masculinity can be lumped together in a single social category like "gay (or gay-sounding) men."
- If there are multiple gay-sounding styles, these styles may arise in various ways.
- It seems that for at least *some* gay-sounding speakers, gender normativity is relevant, and for trans men in particular gendered experiences in early life likely have some real significance on their speech later on.

## + But we need identity, too

- It is also a mistake to emphasize socialization to the point of not recognizing how individuals' identities both shape and are shaped by socialization.
- People are socialized into social roles through the acquisition of particular ways of speaking.
- Furthermore, socialization is far from a passive process.
- This is particularly clear when we consider instances of "failed" socialization, of which trans men are one example.
  - If all socialization "worked", trans men would have voices just like women's, except with lower pitch after taking testosterone, but this is not the case.
  - Overall mean F1 & F2 is useful example here, too, as does F0

## + Conclusions

- Socialization and identity are both crucial elements for understanding why some men's voices are gay-sounding
- By the same token, both gender and sexuality need to be taken into account
- Taking an integrated view of these aspects of the self allow for a far richer understanding of the existing literature
- Furthermore, such a view is necessary if we want to explain why trans men sound gay.

+

Thank you!

+

## References

- Avery, Jack D. & Julie M. Liss (1996). Acoustic characteristics of less-masculine sounding speech. *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* 99(5):3738-3748.
- Caudio, Rudolf P. (1994). Sounding gay: Pitch properties in the speech of gay and straight men. *American Speech* 69(1):30-57.
- Laville, Sue Ellen (1998). Acoustic correlates of perceived versus actual sexual orientation in men's speech. *Acta Phoniatrica et Logopaedica* 50:35-48.
- Heffernan, Kevin (2006). Dynamic and Static Gender Cues: The acquisition and production of gay-sounding voices. Presented at Lavender Languages and Linguistics XIII, February.
- Lakoff, Robin (1975). *Language and Woman's Place*. New York: Harper & Row.
- McConnell-Ginet, Sally (1983). Intonation in a man's world. In Barrie Thorne, Cheris Kramarac & Nancy Henley (eds.), *Language, Gender and Society*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House Publishers. 69-88.
- Munson, Benjamin, Sarah V. Jefferson & Elizabeth C. McDonald (2006). The influence of perceived sexual orientation on trisyllabic identification. *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* 119(4):2428-2437.
- Munson, Benjamin (2007). The acoustic correlates of perceived masculinity, perceived femininity, and perceived sexual orientation. *Language and Speech* 50(1):125-142
- Munson, Benjamin, Elizabeth McDonald, Nancy L. DeBoe & Aubrey R. White. The acoustic and perceptual bases of judgments of women and men's sexual orientation from read speech. *Journal of Phonetics* 34(2):202-240.

+

## References con't.

- Pierrehumbert, Janet B., Tessa Bent, Benjamin Munson, Ann R. Bradlow & J. Michael Bailey (2004). The influence of sexual orientation on vowel production. *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* 116(4):1905-1908
- Podesva, Robert J., Sarah J. Roberts & Kathryn Campbell-Kibler (2001). Sharing resources and indexing meanings in the production of gay styles. In Kathryn Campbell-Kibler, Robert J. Podesva, Sarah J. Roberts & Andrew Wong (eds.), *Language and Sexuality: Contesting Meaning in Theory and Practice*. Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications. 175-188.
- Podesva, Robert J. (2007). Phonation type as a stylistic variable: The use of falsetto in constructing a persona. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 11(4):475-504.
- Renn, Peter (2002). Speech, male sexual orientation, and childhood gender nonconformity. BA Honors Thesis, University of Texas at Austin
- Smyth, Ron & Henry Rogers (2002). Phonetics, gender, and sexual orientation. Proceedings of the 2002 CLA Meeting, 299-311
- Smyth, Ron, Greg Jacobs & Henry Rogers (2003). Male voices and perceived sexual orientation: An experimental and theoretical approach. *Language in Society* 32(3):329-350.