

## One of these things is not like the others: Why power matters for studies of gay-sounding voices

Lal Zimman, zimman@colorado.edu  
University of Colorado, Boulder  
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## Sociophonetics of sexual orientation

- Growing numbers of linguists have taken an interest in whether and how sexual orientation is conveyed through phonetics
  - (Gaudio 1994; Crist 1997; Linville 1998; Jacobs, Rogers & Smyth 2000, Smyth & Rogers 2002, Smyth, Jacobs & Rogers 2003; Podesva, Roberts & Campbell-Kibler 2001; Waksler 2001; Pierrehumbert, Bent, Munson, Bradlow & Bailey 2004; Levon 2006, 2007; Munson, Jefferson & McDonald 2006; Munson, McDonald, DeBoe & White 2006; Munson 2007; Podesva 2007; Gordon 2008)

## Goals of this paper

- To draw on theoretical insights of scholars of language and gender to explain apparently contradictory results in these studies
- To argue for a focus on straight-sounding men as holders of social power; two pieces of evidence:
  - Gay-sounding voices are best understood as heterogeneous deviations from a relatively homogenous straight-sounding style
  - Helps to provide an account for some of the more puzzling findings on gay-sounding voices.

## Gaudio (1994)

- Compared the pitch properties of gay and straight speakers.
- Sociolinguistically, Gaudio called for linguists to challenge the stereotype that gay men talk “like women”
- Despite this call, a number of scholars following Gaudio (e.g. Avery & Liss 1996; Crist 1997; Linville 1998; Jacobs, Rogers & Smyth 2000; Smyth & Rogers 2002; Renn 2002; Smyth Jacobs & Rogers 2003) have framed gay-sounding speakers as engaging in cross-gender behavior

## Cross-gender socialization?

- Smyth, Rogers & Jacobs have argued that gay-sounding styles among men are probably acquired in childhood when boys model their speech after women
- Renn's thesis in psychology argues that self-reported childhood gender normativity was a stronger predictor of gay-sounding voices than sexual orientation

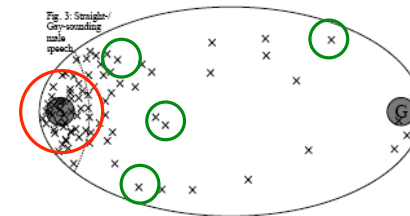
## Or identity markers?

- Munson et al. (2006a, 2006b, 2007) are quick to point out that gay-sounding speakers do not adopt all of the cross-gender phonetic features available to them
- For these authors, the more plausible explanation is that the features marking a voice as gay-/lesbian-sounding are acquired as markers of gay or lesbian identity.
- But why these features?

## How many gay styles?

- Zwicky (1997) suggested that what characterizes gay men's speech is likely not to be a homogenous gay style but rather set of deviations from a hegemonic masculine norm.
- Gordon's (2008) experimental work supports this idea
  - Found more variation in "gay" readings than "straight" readings

- Gordon suggests that rather than being concentrated around two opposing styles, speakers cluster around a straight-sounding style.



- Any number of deviations from this straight-sounding style can then be perceptually lumped together as gay-sounding.

Image from Gordon (2008)

## Trans men & gay-sounding voices

- Inspired by research that suggests childhood language socialization plays a role in determining whether a man sounds gay or straight in adulthood, I conducted a study with a new speaker group: female-to-male transsexuals.
- Female-to-male transsexuals (or trans men) are assigned a female gender at birth and raised as girls, but in adulthood identify as men and use medical technology to masculinize their bodies.

## Why trans men?

- One of the most popular medical interventions in this group is testosterone therapy, which produces a drop in vocal pitch.
- Despite the fact that trans men's voices are generally perceived as male, members of this group are raised as girls and may acquire some of the phonetic features associated with women's voices (aside from pitch).

## Research questions

1. Are trans men's voices be perceived as gay-sounding?
2. If trans men's voices are perceived like gay-sounding men's voices, are they as similar acoustically as they are perceptually?

## Study design

- Compared the acoustic properties of read speech across 3 straight (non-trans) men, 2 gay (non-trans) men, and 3 trans men
- Listeners rated speakers' voices as gay vs. straight sounding

## Findings

- Trans men were perceived like gay men.
  - Gay men and trans men were both rated as significantly more gay than straight men ( $p < .05$ ).
  - There was no significant difference in the ratings given to the gay group and trans group
- Acoustically, gay and trans men were less similar.
- Measurements taken:
  - Duration, peak frequency & center of gravity for /s/ and /ʃ/
  - Duration, mean F0, F0 range, F1, F2 across stressed vowels
  - Values for individual tokens of /æ/ and /ɛ/

## Findings, con't.

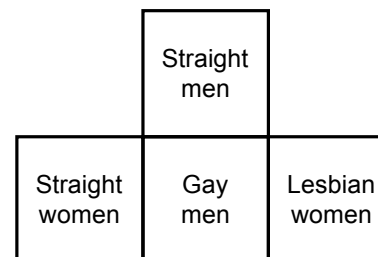
- Gay men:
  - Had significantly lower F2 for /æ/
  - Longer duration for vowels in certain prosodic contexts
- Trans men:
  - Had significantly higher center of gravity for /s/
- Both gay and trans men:
  - Had significantly higher F1 for /ɛ/

## Focus on hegemonic masculinity

- Voices perceived as gay-sounding seem to be less homogenous than those heard as straight-sounding.
- There is a new set of insights to be gained by shifting the goal toward an explanation of what makes a man's voice straight-sounding.
- Hegemonic forms of masculinity play a huge role in gender- and sexuality-based power dynamics, structuring relationships not only between women and men but also between different kinds of men.

## Straight men & power

- Men who embody hegemonic masculinity occupy a special place in the power hierarchy.



## Gay- and lesbian-sounding speakers

- Most studies of gay-sounding voices have focused exclusively on gay-sounding men.
- Puzzlingly, Pierrehumbert et al. (2004) found that lesbian-sounding women, like gay-sounding men, had an overall expanded vowel space, while Munson et al. (2006a, 2006b, 2007) found the opposite.
- Do lesbian-sounding women talk like men?

## Lesbian-sounding women

- Are lesbian-sounding speakers more or less clear than straight-sounding women?
  - Possibly both.
- Why would lesbian-sounding women and gay-sounding men both use clearer vowels?

## Power

- Eckert (1989) provides an account for gender differences between men's and women's speech that refers to women's place in gendered hierarchies.
- Women's relative lack of access to real, tangible forms of power means that they're likely to shore up symbolic forms of capital or social worth instead (through, e.g., the use of socially-valued linguistic variants).
- Clear speech also means taking on more of the communicative burden

## The role of gender normativity

- Gender and power are intimately bound together
- Regardless of sexual orientation, gender normativity is socially valued and non-normativity is stigmatized
- As this analysis has only begun to show, the relationship between power, gender, and sexuality is a crucial piece to the puzzle of gay-sounding voices.

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