

Steve L. Johnson III  
Michigan State University

### Why Women Lead: Factors Influencing Advancement in the NCS

Many studies have shown that women lead sound change (cf. Eckert, 1989, Labov 1990, Wolfram & Schilling-Estes 1998), though occasionally men play this role (e.g. Conn 2005). In many of these studies, however, gender has been examined as a binary variable, which conflicts directly with current theories of socially constructed gender, leaving a need for studies that investigate the interaction between sex and gender. An additional problem arises while trying to quantitatively examine differences within sex groupings to account for situations in which *some* women are leaders of linguistic changes, while others lag behind or pattern more similarly to men. One reason why gender has been difficult to quantify, as Eckert (2000) points out, is because gender identity is intertwined with other aspects of social identity and “no variable correlates simply with gender or social category.”

The current study aims at a quantitative means of explaining variation within a sex group. The pilot study showed that men and women scored variably, with men generally scoring higher on “male” traits and women higher on “female” traits on a personality inventory designed to assess gender identity. That study also showed that those with some higher scores on “female” traits, regardless of sex, were more advanced in the Northern Cities Shift.

This study focuses on female respondents exclusively to investigate which factors specifically contribute to some women leading sound changes while others falling behind. This study investigates the correlation between how speakers from Southeastern Michigan self-evaluate on 20 personality traits and their progress (or lack thereof) in the Northern Cities Shift.

As in the earlier research involving men and women, these results indicate that certain individual personality traits (that tend to show a sex-based distribution that can account for gender variation) also play an important role in predicting advancement in the Northern Cities Shift. The results show that women who self-identify as cheerful, warm, and affectionate are those who are the most progressed in the Northern Cities Shift. These traits are also those which have been traditionally viewed as more desirable for woman to possess than men, which indicates that women in the speech community that ascribe to more traditional gender roles are those that will lead this sound change.

This finding would seem to support interpretations of female leadership in linguistic change that focus on conservative notions of female identity rather than on those that highlight a socially embedded interpretation of local power among some female members of a speech community.

References:

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