National Discord: Language Style and the Politics of Sexuality in Israel

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Even though Israeli gays and lesbians enjoy many more rights than they did 20 years ago, they remain as a group largely excluded from full participation in society. This exclusion can be traced to the fact that gay or lesbian identity is seen as incompatible with standard definitions of Israeli identity, whose cornerstone is the traditional family structure (Berkovitch 1997; Biale 1997; Shafir & Peled 2002). In this paper, I describe how lesbian and gay Israelis use prosodic variation to create identities that take these national ideologies into account. Unlike previous socio-phonetic work on gay and lesbian language, this paper introduces the importance of the politics of language in our analyses.

I provide a sociolinguistic analysis of 36 speakers in the cities of Tel Aviv, Haifa and Jerusalem. These speakers are all members of different Israeli gay and lesbian associations, including everything from a centrist political lobby to a queer anarchist group. Examinations of variation in terms of topic (e.g., Bell 1984, 2001; Coupland 2001) demonstrate that mean pitch is a salient index of lesbian and gay identities in Israeli Hebrew. Across the board, men have significantly higher mean pitches and women have significantly lower mean pitches when speaking on gay-affiliated topics than when speaking on non-gay-affiliated ones. This finding is consistent with Israeli sociolinguistic gender norms, whereby stereotypically masculine speech (i.e., lower mean pitch) is associated with lesbians, and stereotypically feminine speech (i.e., higher mean pitch) is associated with gay men. This topic effect, however, does not operate alone, and is conditioned by a significant interaction with speakers' group memberships. Upon closer examination, systematic differences in the use of mean pitch emerge between the groups – differences that correspond to the groups' diverse positions within Israeli politics more generally.

These results are meaningful because they underscore the heterogeneity of the linguistic construction of lesbian and gay identities in Israel. I argue that observed differences between speakers reflect an intrinsic link between Israelis' understandings of their sexualities and their understandings of the nation, and thus highlight the inextricability of the linguistic construction of sexuality from the linguistic constructions of an individual's other social and cultural identifications (cf. Cameron & Kulick 2003; Eckert 2002).