

/-s/ Deletion in gay speech in São Paulo, Brazil

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The analysis I present in this paper is part of a research project at the University of São Paulo, in which a group of sociolinguists are attempting to answer two major questions: (1) what are the relations between linguistic practices and the construction of gender/sexual identity in the city of São Paulo? and (2) what are the relations between the linguistic perception of sexual identity and the social expression of intolerance in the city?

Here I address the first of the above questions. In a preliminary study (Mendes, 2006), following previous work pursued in English (Gaudio 1994; Kulick 2000; Cameron & Kulick 2003; among others), I showed that the perception of what it means to “sound gay” in the city of São Paulo seems to be very homogeneous: 50 people were at first unable to spontaneously produce linguistic examples of what they believed it means to sound gay, but when they were presented with samples of speech, they were able to specify particular features that they perceived as “gay”. Aside from pitch dynamism – a feature that has been studied in English (Smyth and Rogers 2001, among others) – they said that “gay men seem to speak a ‘better Portuguese’, pronouncing words more carefully, especially with less deletion of the plural /-s/ at the end of words”. In this paper, I report the results of a quantitative analysis of the variable ‘plural marking’ in noun phrases like “as coisas” – *‘the things’* (article + noun), in the speech of 18 informants, stratified by their sex, sexual orientation, age and level of education. In spoken Brazilian Portuguese, marking plural in the noun is optional (“as coisas / as coisa”), but the /-s/ deletion tends to be negatively evaluated, especially among highly educated Brazilians (Naro & Scherre 1998, 2003) – so it is not frequent in the speech of any well-schooled informant, gay or straight. However, by comparing the speech of gay men and that of straight men and women, I will show that the general impression reported in the earlier work referenced above can be quantitatively validated. While the deletion of final plural /-s/ is favored among straight men, both gay men and straight women avoid the practice of deleting plural /-s/ from nouns, thus adhering more closely to the standard.

In addition, the deletion of final plural /-s/ is slightly less frequent among gay men than straight women.

The quantitative results I present here open the discussion of whether these similarities in the speech of gay men and straight women in São Paulo are the result of gender/sexuality or level of education. The numbers indicate a gender/sex issue, but are the social roles of gay men similar to the women's, in the speech community under scrutiny? Aside from that question, these results not only contribute to the growing literature investigating the linguistic correlates of "sounding gay", but also expand this literature into a more international perspective.

References

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