

Perceived sexual orientation and attitudes toward sounding gay or straight

Gaudio (1994) and Pierrehumbert et al. (2004) gave evidence that hearers can identify the sexual orientation of speakers without the aid of visual cues. Pierrehumbert et al. associated this result with an expanded vowel space for gay men. Smyth et al. (2003) created a scale of sexual orientation identifications (for men) based on listener judgments, noting that homosexual-sounding does not necessarily identify with homosexual. The present study follows Smyth et al. and created a scale of sexual orientation identifications based on listener judgments of the speech of 6 self-identified homosexual and 6 self-identified heterosexual male speakers. The research attempted to determine what cued listeners in judging sexual orientation. Based on the hypothesis that male homosexual-sounding speech might be associated with more careful-sounding speech, the study observes several phonetic factors that are associated with the careful-careless dimension, including vowel duration (as a measure of speech rate), vowel space dispersion, degree of diphthongization, and frequency of stop release. Results included the following: listeners in this study were not particularly accurate in identifying the sexual orientation of speakers. This conclusion goes against the findings of both Gaudio and Pierrehumbert et al., and against the notion of ‘gaydar’ (the supposed ability of gay individuals to correctly identify other gay persons). Listeners did not associate homosexual-sounding speech with more frequent stop release or longer vowel duration (slower speech). Contra Pierrehumbert et al., listeners did not associate homosexual-sounding speech with an expanded vowel space. There is evidence that listeners did associate homosexual-sounding speech with fronting of high vowels and lowering of low vowels.

The study also concentrated on exploring Judith Butler’s (1990) notions of ‘heteronormativity’ and ‘performativity’. Heteronormativity is the idea that heterosexuality is pushed into society as the only positive and natural form of sexuality. Performativity relates to the hypothesis that gender and sexuality are not traits that people have or are born with, but acts that they do. This implies the possibility that individuals refuse to perform the gender or sexuality they are prescribed from birth. North American culture mostly sees homosexuality in a negative light. As such, any person who defies heteronormativity by sounding gay/lesbian (regardless of their sexual orientation) faces possible social consequences. This research utilizes interviews with all the speakers to investigate why some people might choose to defy heteronormativity by sounding homosexual. Preliminary results indicate that homosexual-sounding males who self-identify as heterosexual are clueless about their sounding gay.

References:

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