The Gay Way to Say: A Review of Sociolinguistic Research on Gay Speech

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Abstract

The elusive concept of "gay voice" has intrigued researchers for decades, prompting investigations into the intricate relationship between language, sexuality, and identity. This paper synthesizes findings from five seminal studies and a meta-analysis to shed light on the production and perception of gay speech. Beginning with Rudolf Gaudio's seminal study on pitch properties in gay and straight speech, we then turn to Erez Levon's exploration of prosodic variables, Robert Podesva's examination of phonetic features, and Drew Rendall's biosocial hypothesis on gay speech, and concluding with Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick's elucidation of gay language's sociolinguistic evolution. This synthesis underscores the multifaceted nature of gay speech, influenced by sociocultural, biological, and contextual factors. It prompts a re-evaluation of assumptions regarding the gay community and calls for a nuanced understanding of identity construction through language. As society's understanding of gender and sexuality evolves, future research may explore the interplay between gay speech and popular culture, particularly in the digital realm, offering fresh insights into this rich sociolinguistic phenomenon.

1 Introduction

The gay community has doubtlessly long been subjected to the ever-changing, and often oppressive attitudes and notions imposed by the outside population, but one particular question has remained unchanging across the decades: why do gay men speak the way they do? Researchers from backgrounds in sociology, physiology, linguistics, and psychology have taken a stab at understanding which factors might account for the phenomenon often referred to as "gay voice" and have always come up short. Sociolinguists have attempted time and again to unite a knowledge of social structures and processes with an understanding of language production and perception in order to explain this sociolect of sorts, but to little avail. The following discussion of five previous papers (four studies and one meta-analysis), aims to identify the specific features which account for the production and perception of sexual

orientation through language use. Furthermore, we will explore gay men's speech in association to women's speech and I will offer my own ideas about this rich and nuanced topic.

2 Review of Previous Research

A brief look at American cultural anthropologist Rudolf Gaudio's 1994 study, "Sounding Gay: Pitch Properties in the Speech of Gay and Straight Men," from *American Speech* will serve as a starting point for the journey to understand "gay voice". This paper, which Gaudio describes as an "initial attempt toward the study of gay male speech" (43), involves a study of the speech of eight American graduate students—half of whom are gay men, half of whom are straight men—as judged by thirteen other student participants. This study seeks to understand "the normative process whereby certain types of speech become identified as more masculine or feminine" (32) in relation to sexual orientation. Gaudio was particularly interested in pitch dynamism (pitch variation) as a possible contributor to the perception of a male speaker as gay. Gaudio criticises the lack of perception-based studies dealing with effeminateness, and illuminates the effects of listener judgements on somebody's own view of themselves as effeminate or masculine in his own research. This study is centred around four polar adjective scales typically related to the contrast in speech patterns between hetero- and homosexuals, particularly among men. The adjective scales, as assessed by the thirteen listeners, rated each speaker on how straight/gay, effeminate/masculine, reserved/emotional, and affected/ordinary their speech sounded.

The main finding of Gaudio's study was that listeners were able to correctly identify the sexual orientation of a speaker seven out of eight times. This serves as strong evidence that listeners have very accurate judgements on the sexual orientation of gay men from their speech alone. It does not, however, answer the all-important question of "why?" Although we can conclude from this study that the concept of a "gaydar" might be real, pitch variability, which is noted in female speech, cannot in isolation convince a listener of a speaker's sexual orientation. And so the search for speech qualities strong enough to affect this judgement in an experimental context continues.

Staying within the realm of perception-centred research, there is Erez Levon's 2006 study from the same academic journal, titled "Hearing 'gay': Prosody, interpretation, and the affective judgments of men's speech." Here, Levon provides an overview of four previous perception studies and their drawbacks, then sets out to conduct a new study using a completely different methodology wherein one male speaker's speech is manipulated in various ways (using Praat), and then each recording (four in total) is played for a large group of listeners. This study examines two prosodic variables—pitch range and sibilant duration—often associated with gay speech. Despite the deliberate design of his study and the extensive care he took to obtain clear and effective results, Levon failed to provide any notable findings in

the perception of sexual orientation from speech. The manipulation of the speaker's pitch range and sibilant duration had no significant effect on listeners' perception of the speaker's sexuality. This study did, however, unveil significant correlations between speaker homosexuality and listeners' associations with the more positive qualities on the polar adjective scales. For example, perceived gayness was found to be strongly correlated to neatness and friendliness. Although the results of Levon's study showed no novel discoveries about the relationship between sexuality and language, his methodology is worth noting. Levon's approach to examining the perception of homosexuality from manipulated speech recordings established a promising starting point for the studies that followed.

Next, we have studies concerned with the production, rather than perception, of gay-sounding speech, with "Sharing resources and indexing meanings in the production of gay styles," by Robert J. Podesva, Sarah J. Roberts, and Kathryn Campbell-Kibler, published in 2002. This paper examines the speech of a gay, American lawyer's segment on a radio show in which he converses with a straight man about whether private organizations should be allowed to exclude gay people from membership. The study examined five phonetic variables and found that the most notable was the releasing of word-final stops, which occurred more frequently in the speech of the gay "Speaker A" than in that of his straight counterpart, "Speaker B." The authors of the paper urge readers not to jump to the assumption that releasing word-final stops is thus a characteristic of gay speech, but instead to see this variable in a wider context, explaining how this feature has also been linked to "geek girls," as well as Orthodox Jews. This phonetic quality possesses a "culture-wide relation to education or precision," (186) which may well have been a subconscious motive for Speaker A's use of it in the context of a radio debate. In this way, this paper reveals the need to study gay speech not only as compared to straight speech, but also—and perhaps more importantly—within the gay community, among its various intersectional members.

This study is valuable not only for its investigation into gay voice, but also in a wider sociolinguistic context, as it offers a unique approach to the notion of style. This study heavily emphasises the idea of identity as constructed by language, and suggests that the study of gay speech should consider the various subcommunities of gay men and with which goals its members use language. The speaker studied in this paper is a man who belongs to various social groups, and so his particular phonetic qualities cannot simply be attributed to his belonging to only one of these groups. Although Speaker A is a gay man, he is also a lawyer and an activist. In the particular context in which he is studied, his goals are most likely to come across as those of an intellectual with vast knowledge of the topic at hand, rather than simply as a gay man. The phonetic qualities identified in Speaker A's speech should therefore be further studied in different contexts, and among a more varied range of gay speakers to reflect the actual diversity of the community.

The second production-based study of interest is that of Drew Rendall, Paul Vasey, and Jared McKenzie from 2008, titled "The Queen's English: An alternative, biosocial hypothesis for the distinctive features of 'gay speech'." This study examines the speech of roughly sixty gay speakers and sixty straight speakers (both men and women) from universities in Alberta. It looks at vowel formants from twenty-three vowel tokens, and also takes body size into account, a detail which sets this study apart. The introduction reviews three hypotheses for why homosexuals develop a way of speaking that is distinct from heterosexuals. This study is unique not only for providing findings on gay men and women's speech as opposed to their respective straight counterparts, but also for drawing a comparison between men and women overall, which may be key in understanding the production and perception of "gay voice". Gay men were found to have vowels that are slightly higher and shifted right in the acoustic space (i.e. higher F1 and F2 values) compared to those of straight men. This is a more modest version of the same difference observed between men and women's speech overall, and may therefore help us gain a better understanding of the stereotype that gay men speak like women–a notion clearly rooted in misogyny and implicit bias–but perhaps also a way of signalling belonging, solidarity, and allyship within and across the communities of women and gay men.

A complementary pattern was observed in gay women, who tended to have vowels that were farther down and left than straight women, which could contribute to a more masculine perception of their voices. Though the differences related to sexual orientation this study revealed were relatively small, they did nonetheless provide some clear answers to questions about the production of gay and lesbian speech. The "Queen's English" study thus stands apart from many of its perception-based counterparts, which fail to identify any notable differences between the speech of gay and straight people. This study also reaffirms what a few previous ones had discovered: namely, that a higher pitch, despite often being thought of as a "gay voice" quality, is not significantly correlated with homosexuality. In fact, the speakers with the deepest voices happened to be gay men.

This paper also offers the hypothesis that the same hormones that have been attributed to the development of sexual orientation might be responsible for the ways in which gay speech is distinct from straight speech. The degree of lip protrusion and retraction while speaking as well as the facial gestures and expressions that might co-occur with speech are potential causes of the difference in vowel-space position between gay and straight men and women. These attributes shorten or lengthen the vocal tract and thus create a difference in formant height. The authors touch on the correlation between lower frequency voices and "assertive behaviour," observed among humans and other species, in both the physical and social sense. They go on to cite a number of previous studies on body size, formant frequency, and assertive demeanors to form the basis of their biosocial hypothesis on gay speech: Gay

men may speak with less lip protrusion and higher frequencies which in turn reflects their less assertive demeanors and causes the formant value variation discussed earlier.

A final dive into research on this rich subject brings us to Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick's "Sexuality as identity: gay and lesbian language," a chapter from their book *Language and Sexuality*, published in 2003. This chapter provides a brief history of sociolinguistic research on gay language spanning from the 1940s to the end of the 1990s. With a focus on lexicon and surface structures, Cameron and Kulick examined the ways in which conscious word-choice, as opposed to phonetic features, can serve to construct gay identities.

Beginning in 1941 with Gershon Legman's lexicon from the back of a medical text on homosexuality, people have sought to understand what is often regarded as a sort of "secret language of identification" (Read 1980: 11) among gay men. By the 1980s, a large shift had taken place and a newer generation of gay people—and thus notion of gayness—emerged. This newer gay generation had no use for the older vocabulary Legman had documented in the 1940s, and often rejected users of this sort of gay slang because of the setback they threatened to the gay liberation movement. The language used by gay men in the 1980s was centred on "assertion, not concealment" (Cameron & Kulick 2003), and language was thus used openly to distinguish members of various emerging gay subcultures. The more modern idea of gay language was courtesy of Keith Harvey's establishment of a grammar for what he calls "camp talk," wherein speakers use "paradox, inversion, ludicrism, and parody" (99) to present a gay identity. The subversion and juxtaposition of language among many gay speakers show how far the gay vernacular has managed to come in the short period between Legman's time and that of the 1980s gay liberationists, indicating just how dynamic this community is. This chapter also provides insight into the absence of research on lesbian speech and the unfortunate fact that only the easily identified "Gayspeak" has been able to capture the interest of most sexuality-based sociolinguistic research. Pairing sociolinguistic research with Foucauldian insight into sexuality and identity, Cameron and Kulick contextualise the fascination with gay speech while providing various insightful perspectives on gender and sexuality in relation to language.

3 Discussion

In reading these five pieces of research, as well as having a look at Bruce Rodgers' *The Queen's Vernacular: A Gay Lexicon*, I find myself increasingly interested in today's gay slang, which I hypothesise may be salient in non-gay social contexts now more than ever. Thanks to popular reality TV shows centred around gay men, such as *RuPaul's Drag Race* and various fashion competition shows, and

language-diffusing platforms such as TikTok, the queer community, especially when dominated by men, seems to me to be a presiding source of slang words among young people (primarily women, who play a large role in language diffusion). This is unsurprising due to the long-standing cultural influence of queer communities such as the African-American and Latino underground ballroom scene which no-doubt shaped much of our modern popular culture. On social media, young women often employ slang terms like “slay,” “purr,” “boots,” “queen,” and a range of other gay slang terms comfortably and frequently. It seems these terms have become solidarity markers for a broader online community, sometimes referred to as “the girls and the gays” (young women and the younger queer community). This emerging community, whether it be real or merely aspirational, serves to unite its members, perhaps over a shared sense of oppression that sets both groups apart from the dreaded cisgender, straight, white male. Although it is harder to notice a convergence of non-lexical speech qualities among “the girls and the gays”, I do feel that the Kardashian-esque, “valley girl” way of speaking comprises qualities which have come up frequently in my research on gay speech. Whether it be lengthened sibilants (associated with lisping), higher fundamental frequency, or greater pitch variation (“swoopy voice”), many phonetic features are characterised as effeminate, and are shared by women and gay men. Rejecting the assumption that gay men and straight women simply imitate each other, I subscribe to Gaudio’s understanding that gay men “have particular ways of speaking which challenge conventional notions of what constitutes proper male and female behaviour” (Gaudio 1994: 32) and further extend it to the speech of young women, who also have much to gain by their intentional use of language.

I believe all five aforementioned pieces of gay speech research to be fundamental in the study of sexual orientation, gender, and identity, which are all constructed— as well as influenced—by language. I adopt a bi-directional view of the influence linking language and identity, since anything less open than this might exclude some vital component in the uncovering of how language and identity work both discretely and in tandem. Though Cameron and Kulick (2003) reject the identity-based approach to this field of study, stating that it “compels us to circumscribe inquiry,” I feel that sexual identity does not exclude but rather encompasses the “fantasy, repression, pleasure, fear and the unconscious” (105) that are of great concern to Cameron and Kulick. I am also in agreement with the perspective of Podesva, Roberts, and Campbell-Kibler (2002) that identity is intrinsically linked to style and that “the individual negotiates identity across situations” (187), leading to a rich and diverse inventory of possible gay speech styles, such as that of the gay lawyer and activist whose speech they studied. Their new definition of style as “the linguistic means through which identity is produced in discourse” (179) is, in many ways, more valuable to the field of sociolinguistics than the historical understanding of style as speakers’ formality level. Furthermore, the idea that “identity and style are co-constructed” (179) deserves attention in

sociolinguistic research of all sorts, especially in relation to the "processes through which power accomplishes [the] production [of identities]" (Cameron & Kulick 2003: 78).

The studies that stood out the most were those that recognised the importance of abandoning any notion of a homogenous community of gay speakers. Since gay sociolinguistics is a relatively young field of study, it might be undergoing a process similar to that which shaped sociolinguistics in the 1960s. Much in the same way as Chomsky assumed a general homogenous speech community in the early days of sociolinguistic research, gay sociolinguistic research seems to have often relied on an archaic idea of a static and homogenous gay community. These assumptions are lazy and accomplish nothing, and so must be abandoned, as many of these papers suggest. Podesva, Roberts, and Campbell-Kibbler (2002) provide a solid starting point for re-evaluating sociolinguistics as a whole in order to attain more valuable results in the studies of speech communities as large and diverse as that of gay men, since this step is paramount to understanding "gay voice." Levon (2006) shares Cameron and Kulick's (2003) view that typical methodologies for gay sociolinguistic research "ignore the reality that linguistic practice is highly variable, both within and between speakers" (Levon 2006: 61). Rendall, Vasey and McKenzie (2008) also stands out to me as a bold study of gay speech which asserts the idea that sexual orientation has some biological implications— namely, certain hormones present during puberty— and that this should not be ignored in the search for an explanation for "gay voice". The existence of "attempts by [gay] speakers to project through a body size that seems larger or smaller than they truly are" (190) is a particularly interesting idea that exemplifies a speaker's own intuitions about their physical qualities in relation to language-use and definitely warrants further research. Among the various suggestions for future research on gay speech, I agree with Rendall, Vasey and McKenzie (2008) that "body size considerations should be routinely integrated" (200) into research on homosexuality and speech production.

4 Conclusion

In this foray into research on the sociolinguistic phenomenon of gay speech, various potential qualities for perceiving sexual orientation from speech alone have been proposed. Since no single feature can apparently influence listeners' judgement of a speaker as either gay or straight, it is clear that this is a nuanced process of both production and perception that warrants investigation from a range of social science perspectives. Since the focus within this field of study shifts from archaic lexicons to speaker judgements using polar adjectives, then on to speech manipulation and various more advanced forms of research, it is safe to say this is a rich and worthwhile topic of study. The widespread use of social media and the consumption of queer media (or at least media with queer origins) have vaulted the question of

how gay identities are constructed using language into a place of more pertinence than ever. The five studies on gay speech examined above have highlighted how "perceptions of sexuality are ideologically linked to other perceptions of personality and personhood" (Levon 2006: 73), which solidifies the importance of language's ability to "construct particular identities" (Cameron and Kulick 2003: 102). Among the various potential candidates for markers of gay speech, formant height variation (Rendall, Vasey and McKenzie 2008), pitch dynamism (Gaudio 1994; Levon 2006), and sibilant duration (Gaudio 1994; Levon 2006; Podesva, Roberts & Campbell-Kibbler 2002), have stood out as possible components that could, in sum, constitute the ever-elusive phenomenon known as "gay voice." In future studies on this topic, much could be gained by examining gay speech in the context of social media and popular culture among teenagers, as well as the relationship and commonalities between gay speech and that of "valley girls", as well as of young women more generally.

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