Sounding Dyke-ish: Demystifying the Conventions of Lesbian Speech

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Abstract

The domain of queer studies as it pertains to sociolinguistic research has been predominantly concerned with analyzing the speech of gay men, while very little has been said about the nature of lesbian speech patterns. This failure to consider the speech of gay women as theoretically significant is a direct product of male supremacy as well as the unique combination of oppressive forces that ostracize lesbian existence, including misogyny and homophobia. This paper navigates a linguistic-anthropological approach towards dissecting the particulars of lesbian speech, drawing from a number of quantitative studies in tandem with queer theory. Data collected on phonetic and stylistic variables such as pitch, intonation, articulation, and politeness elucidate the complexities of lesbian speech habits, while shedding light on the phenomenon of "enforced invisibility" that hinders further research on the matter. Qualitative analyses on the social ramifications of perceived lesbian speech contest the reductive notion that lesbians merely seek to mimic the speech of heterosexual males, suggesting that the subversiveness of lesbian speech is inherent to the perceived deviance of the identity.

1 Introduction

Much of the literature concerned with the production and perception of markedly queer speech have dealt exclusively with the speech of gay men, while very little choose to focus on lesbian speech. This disproportionate attention, rooted in patriarchy, is indicative of the discomfort surrounding the subversion of gender roles as it manifests in lesbianism. To the extent that traditional womanhood is necessarily anchored to the preservation of male dominion, the romantic and sexual exclusion of men foundational to the lesbian identity necessarily threatens this social order. Given this deviance, the few sociolinguistic studies that have attempted to identify markers of lesbian speech often default to the assumption that lesbian speech is simply an elaborate imitation of male speech patterns. This reductionist assumption, yet to be proven,

fails to capture the nuances of lesbian identity which aim at subverting traditional notions of femininity by eradicating their ties to heteronormative expectations, rather than simply replicating a male dialogue. To the extent that lesbian existence is characterized by its own subversion, the linguistic apparatus must reflect this atypicality. Utilizing various quantitative studies on the matter, in tandem with scholarship in queer theory, this paper navigates a linguistic anthropology approach towards identifying the parameters and manifestations of lesbian speech, its origins, and its perception within the heteronormative matrix.

2 Discussion

The Birch Moonwomon-Baird's paper, published in the 1997 anthology Queerly Phrased, reflects on the complexities surrounding a quantitative evaluation of a lesbian speech style, as well as the politics of lesbian identity. Moonwomon-Baird uses the term "enforced invisibility" to describe the silencing of queer experience, which works two-fold on lesbians who, as women, are already positioned on the periphery (Moonwomon-Baird 1997: 204). They argue that this expectation of submissiveness and quietness expected of both women and queer individuals compounds into the inaudibility of lesbianism, in that lesbians are not only depicted as deviants, but are ultimately not supposed to exist. This intersectional perspective of systematic oppression serves as an explanation as to why the topic of lesbian speech is underrepresented and under analyzed, and why, therefore, lesbians are "hard to hear" (Moonwomon-Baird 1997: 205).

Moonwomon-Baird references their earlier 1983 study in which they tested for a correlation between listener's perceptions of a speaker's sexual orientation and the willingness of listeners to, consequently, identify particular speakers as lesbians in tandem with other marginalized identifiers that encompass linguistic variables associated with "unladylike" speech (Moonwomon-Baird 1997: 206). The participants of this study included six heterosexual women and six lesbian women, of which all twelve were white, native speakers of North American English. The listener pool was composed of 21 students at U.C. Berkeley who were all also native speakers of North American English. The latter group listened to 30-second stretches of the pre-recorded speech of the heterosexual and lesbian speakers and were asked to answer a questionnaire in which they identified various social and vocal characteristics based on their own judgment. The questions on sexual orientation were enmeshed with other social characteristics such as class, age, educational background, region of upbringing, and ethnicity, while the selected voice traits involved rate of speech, pitch, amplitude, and forcefulness. Analysis on the correlation between selection of "lesbian" and selection of other traits revealed that listeners were reluctant to identify certain traits, such as "lesbian". Additionally, when such traits were identified, they were much more likely to be selected alongside other "marked" traits such as "Jewish" (Moonwomon-Baird 1997: 208). Moonwomon-

Baird summarized these findings to conclude that, although accuracy in listener's perception was not particularly meaningful, this aforementioned reluctance was reflective of a stigmatization of identifiers such as "lesbian" and "Jewish". They remark further that, albeit the study dealt with a small sample size, listeners did in fact have some vague sense of what lesbian speech ought to sound like. While this preconception did not translate into selection for this particular trait in the questionnaire most of the time, it proved reflective of the discomfort lesbian presence is prone to invoke.

In the second 1984 study expanded upon in their article, Moonwomon-Baird focuses on intonation patterns and how certain speech strategies come to be exhibited by heterosexual women in contrast to lesbians. In this study, conversations between two pairs of women, one lesbian and one heterosexual, were recorded and an analysis on acoustic contours such as direction of pitch, steepness of rises and falls, and glides were to be indicative of the ways in which women executed gendered behaviour in relation to one another. Moonwomon-Baird found that, although a great deal of individual variation was discovered, the lesbian pair tended more towards one trend than another, and vice-versa for the heterosexual pair. In particular, the lesbians utilized a smaller intonation range than the heterosexuals, as well as lower and narrower pitch ranges. The heterosexual pair revealed increased usage of steeper glides, which coincided with speech strategies deployed primarily by women. Overall, this study elucidated the effect of conversational roles on gendered performance in speech, and how certain strategies that manifest in particular vocal traits are reflective of situational and communicative needs (Moonwomon Baird 1997: 210-211).

Auburn Barron-Lutzross' 2015 paper on the production and perception of a lesbian speech style combined two experiments; the first recorded and analyzed the speech of lesbian, bisexual, and straight women, while the second tested for a lesbian speech stereotype. Barron-Lutzross made use of a larger pool of speakers, as well as a larger sampling of speech recording, aiming to provide more depth to this area of study that has previously been compromised by small numbers. This study also included supplementary variables in addition to sexual orientation, such as how many friends a speaker has who identify as homosexual, and how familiar a speaker is with queer culture. The phonetic variables studied relative to these social variables included those typical to previous works, such as pitch, vowel formants, and fricative variability, as well as speech rate, word-final /t/ release, and creaky voice .

All 54 speaking participants were native speakers of North American English; 12 identified as homosexual, 18 as bisexual, and 24 as heterosexual. Ages ranged from 18-54, with most falling between the range of 18-21. From a predetermined list, speakers were instructed to read aloud monosyllabic and multisyllabic words at random, followed by increasingly longer utterances, sentences, and questions, with

this methodology serving to contrast hypothesized variation in broken versus continuous speech, and its effect on structure. The results revealed no direct correlation between the sexual orientation of any given speaker with any of the aforementioned linguistic variables and did not indicate any explicit characteristics of a lesbian speech identity (Barron-Lutzross 2015: 20-26).

A correlation was identified between the deployment of these linguistic variables and a given speaker's familiarity with queer culture; in particular, a higher familiarity yielded generally lower median pitch and faster rate of speech (Barron-Lutzross 2015: 30-31). This correlation was only meaningful with the speech of straight speakers, leading Barron-Lutzross to theorize that straight people might attempt to reinforce their association and alignment with queer culture through certain linguistic tendencies (Barron-Lutzross 2015: 31). In other words, straight speakers may be unknowingly deploying marked characteristics of a lesbian speech style in order to signify a queer affinity.

In the second experiment of the study, the focus shifted to an attempt to pinpoint a phonetic stereotype of lesbian speech, using the above variables as markers of judgment. The same speakers read from the same list of words as in the previous experiment, and listeners were instructed to rate subjects on three scales in two separate divisions: "very educated" to "very uneducated", "very formal" to "very casual", "very masculine" to "very feminine", "very shy" to "very outgoing, "not at all likely to be a lesbian" to "very likely to be a lesbian", and "very compassionate" to "very uncaring" (Barron-Lutzross 2015: 34). The results showed that listeners were generally accurate in rating a speaker's sexual orientation, and straight speakers were significantly less likely to be judged as sounding like a lesbian than lesbian speakers (Barron-Lutzross 2015: 35). Sexual orientation also correlated with the other ratings; straight speakers were significantly more likely to be rated as feminine than their lesbian counterparts, and lesbians in contrast were more likely to be rated as uncaring.

With regards to uncovering a blueprint for a lesbian speech stereotype, among those speakers who were rated most likely to be a lesbian, correlates included a lower median pitch, a lower F2 (or vowel backness), and a higher proportion of creaky voice. Those rated higher on the scale of femininity exhibited longer vowel durations and less creaky voice. These findings point to an unconscious internalization and conception of what ought to characterize lesbian sounding speech and affirm the hypothesis that there is a metric upon which listeners are able to discern and make generally accurate judgments about speakers' sexual orientations (Barron-Lutzross 2015: 47). Additionally, the ratings on sexual orientation were not only consistent with a specific speech style, but were accurate more than half the time, suggesting that lesbian speakers do in fact adopt certain traits of a lesbian speech style.

In his 2007 study on the acoustic correlates of perceived masculinity, femininity, and sexual orientation, Benjamin Munson provides insight on the ways in which gendered norms are exercised through language, and how listeners perceive adherence or deviance from this binary norm. In particular, the study comprised an exploration of the independence of perceived masculinity and femininity to that of perceived sexual orientation, and how the acquisition of a queer speech style ought to be more complex than simply resulting from sex-atypical ways of speaking (Munson 2007: 129). The participants consisted of 44 speakers, male and female, originally involved in Munson's earlier 2005 study, while the listeners were 10 adults who did not participate in this earlier study. All were native speakers of English. Listeners provided ratings based on acoustic measures on a scale of 1-5, with 1 denoting "definitely sounds heterosexual", 3 indicating "sounds neither GLB nor heterosexual", and 5 indicating "definitely sounds GLB" (Munson 2007: 130-131). Male and female speakers were rated separately along the axes of masculinity and femininity, respectively. Overall, self-identified lesbian and bisexual women were rated as sounding less feminine than their heterosexual counterparts, however, evidence points towards a distinction between perceived femininity versus perceived sexual orientation in women's speech, i.e., these two axes acted independent of one another. For instance, women were rated as less-feminine sounding when ratings were produced in response to words with sibilant fricatives (such as *gas*, *said*, and *some*) as opposed to words lacking these sounds, yet this same factor did not affect judgments of perceived sexual orientation. From these findings, Munson concludes that constructions of perceived sexual orientation and perceived masculinity/ femininity are not identical, but rather, may be related to unique acoustic parameters respectively (Munson 2007: 138). Analyses revealed that average F0, or fundamental frequency, was more strongly correlated to perceptions of masculinity and femininity, while average F1, or vowel height, was more strongly linked to judgments of perceived sexual orientation. The overlap revealed between these dimensions indicates that queer people are more likely to be identified as gay or lesbian when they exhibit speech characteristics typical of that of the opposite sex, and that it is a general tendency of queer speak to envelop patterns atypical of gendered expectations. Munson also adds nuance to these gendered subversions and argues alongside Moonwomon-Baird that where there is a lack of a lesbian speech stereotype, general listeners may default to assuming that the speech of lesbians must be similar to that of men.

In their groundbreaking 2006 book "Gender Trouble", Judith Butler deconstructs the prescriptive notion of gender as inherent to one's biological sex and argues that gender is not what someone necessarily is, but rather is something that one consciously performs. Butler asserts that "gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being." (Butler 2006: 45) In

alignment with the studies previously mentioned, if gender constitutes a performance, then the linguistic variables associated with an ideal masculinity or an ideal femininity are variable upon the individual exercising them. If gender is to be understood as nothing more than a socialized repetition of discrete acts, then the suggestion that "one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one" by Simone de Beauvoir necessitates a cultural and social expectation (Butler 2006: 11). De Beauvoir further dissects the latter's analyses, arguing that women occupy a deficit within a masculine economy, and therefore inherently elude the gendered dyad in absence of a definition (Butler 2007: 13). In the case of lesbian lived experience, an identity founded upon the exclusion of men, the lesbian ought to constitute a "third gender" that operates beyond the boundaries of sex and gender (Butler 2007: 26). If womanhood is constructed in such a way that is complementary to the centrality of proper masculinity, then lesbianism cannot fit neatly into this dichotomy. Whether lesbianism constitutes a third gender becomes a grey area of discourse; however, when analyzed through the lens that gender is a conscious enactment of prescribed norms, speech as a critical component of social performance becomes the vehicle through which the lesbian modality asserts itself. Operating within a binary that draws strict divisions between masculinity and femininity renders it increasingly difficult to define the parameters of lesbian speech if it is to be acknowledged that the lesbian necessarily operates and sustains herself beyond these gendered boundaries.

Robin M. Queen's article on locating lesbian language, published in the anthology Queerly Phrased, contends that lesbian speech is a broad amalgamation of several stylistic conventions, and is not necessarily derived from an approximation of traditionally feminine or masculine ways of speaking. Queen draws upon comic-book portrayals of lesbians to extrapolate the assumptions underlying these media representations into the broader social arena. Characterization of a particular trope, Queen argues, necessitates a real world anchoring upon which specific traits must serve to differentiate a lesbian character.

Queen identifies four stylistic tropes, based on personal observation as well as analyses on the characterization of lesbians in comic strips, that constitute a unique lesbian language: stereotyped women's language, stereotyped nonstandard varieties, stereotyped gay male language, and stereotyped lesbian language (Queen 1997: 240). These tropes serve as a linguistic umbrella, from which lesbians deploy specific features in various combinations that serve to recontextualize their associations in a distinctly lesbian light. In the first of these four tropes, Queen gives particular attention to the *butch* and *femme* dichotomy, a categorization of lesbian identities which encapsulates respective negative and positive appropriations of stereotyped women's language, in particular: "Lesbians may use structural elements that do not conform to stereotyped women's speech in order to distinguish themselves from the

stereotyped woman, or they may use particular aspects of stereotyped women's language in order to index their identity as women." (Queen 1997: 241). Queen makes the case that the masculine and feminine constructions of *butch* and *femme* identities are not simply due to an imitation of traditionally male or female speech, but rather an appropriation of these stereotypes that reinforces a queer relationality. This notion, in tandem with Munson's study on the perception of femininity and masculinity in speech, disproves the reductive assumption that lesbian speech is simply a homogeneous approximation of male speech. While lesbian speech typically rejects markers of women's speech such as elaborate adjectives, politeness, and increased intonation, it may also make use of these markers in different social scenarios to index some approximation to womanhood.

The second of these four tropes draws primarily upon Labov's 1972 analyses on the speech of working-class males and the use of non-standard varieties such as [in'] versus [ing], postvocalic /r/ deletion, contracted forms such as "gonna", and profanities (Queen 1997: 240). Queen notes that, unlike stereotypically male speakers, the lesbian characters in the comic strips they analyze use these features variably and arguably in more subtle applications. For instance, where male characters in the comic strips use [in'] consistently, lesbians may use the standard form in some cases, and where male characters exhibit vowel shifts such as "fooken" (fucking) and "yiz" (plural form of 'you'), lesbians do not (Queen 1997: 244). This contrast dispels the idea that lesbians aim to replicate the speech of men by showcasing a perpetual linguistic fluctuation that cannot be predicted nor categorized. Third, deployment of stereotypically gay male speech such as specific lexical items and an H*L intonational contour (high tone to low tone pitch accents), disrupts the idea of a continuum of female and male speech patterns upon which lesbians are assumed to operate. The interjection of increased exclamation and lexical items such as "fabulous" demonstrate an indirect approximation to markedly feminine speech traits that have been co-opted by gay males, and in turn a uniquely queer association (Queen 1997: 248). Finally, the fourth trope is identified as operating beyond the stereotypes of male and female speech as well, involving "hyperarticulation, with little pitch modulation or apparent language play" as well as "little or no nonstandard phonology" (Queen 1997: 252). These features are in alignment with Moonwomon-Baird and Barron-Lutzross' analyses which revealed the prevalence of a lower and narrower pitch range in lesbian speakers, supplementing the validity of the claim that some markers of lesbian speech are indeed uniquely lesbian.

Additionally, Queen suggests that the difficulty surrounding an identification of lesbian speech patterns in the dominant literature is due to the sheer complexity and ambiguity surrounding the notion of a "lesbian community". She draws parallels with several sociolinguistic scholars, including Labov 1972, who emphasize the centrality of a "speech community" in order to make claims about the social use of

language (Queen 1997: 235). Moonwomon-Baird's argument of enforced invisibility coupled with Butler's deconstruction of gender reinforces Queen's argument that the very attempts at categorizing a lesbian community proves not only meticulous but futile. By extension, efforts at identifying particular traits that may be exclusive to such a lesbian speech community proves insurmountable. Through this, then, the argument is made that scholarship surrounding the topic of lesbian speech should not be grounded in the centering of an ideal community, but rather in a "linguistics of contact", as coined by Mary Louise Pratt (1987) (Queen 1997: 238). This framework, rather than emphasizing membership as the genesis of lesbian marked traits, denotes the unique exploitation of language in specific relational contexts that indexes a lesbian identity, similar to Moonwomon-Baird's second study concerned with the deployment of gendered speech in distinct conversational settings. It is the very heterogeneity of an assumed lesbian community that takes precedence in this model, and the usage of marked linguistic tools based on this diversity that foregrounds lesbian social cohesion, whether conscious or unconscious.

3 Conclusion

In "Subversive Bodily Acts", the third section of their 2006 book, Butler contends with Monique Wittig's views on lesbian existence in which the latter claims that a lesbian transcends the binary opposition of woman and man. In particular, it is through such non-conformance that the lesbian exposes "the contingent cultural constitution of those categories and the tacit yet abiding presumption of the heterosexual matrix." (Butler 2006: 153) The various studies explored here illustrate the hindrance that an adherence to the gender binary poses to an understanding of lesbian identity and expression. The very discomfort with lesbian existence is what plagues research on the matter. Simultaneously, it is through the very social ostracization that lesbians experience that they construct their visibility. Therefore, if an authentic panorama of lesbian speech is to be developed, it must break free of the framework that foregrounds the speech of men and women as a theoretical yardstick. The lesbian's inherent deviance and refusal to conform is what characterizes her speech, and while certain linguistic features typically associated with men and women are certainly borrowed, it is her tongue that transforms them into utterances that are uniquely lesbian.

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