

# Deconstructing Queer Speech: The Features and Nature of “Gay-Sounding Speech”

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## Abstract

One of the fundamental observations of sociolinguistics is that separate social classes and groups form individual speech patterns. Taking this fact into account for queer communities, this article explores the features of speech associated with a so-called “gay-sounding speech”, specifically in the realm of phonetics and acoustics, and the place of this speech in relation to the wider 2SLGBTQIA+ community. Through a survey of the research literature, it considers different kinds of acoustic variation to investigate the widespread idea that “gay-sounding speech” is characterized by a feminization of speech, a view deemed controversial. The article provides evidence both for and against this claim.

## 1 Introduction

The field of sociolinguistics posits the existence of certain linguistics subsets, or sociolects, which emerge from within social groups when their members have prolonged exposure to each other, and especially if they are cut off from speech associated with dominant social norms. Milroy and Milroy (1978) study the idea of Dense-Multiplex social networks, characterized by prolonged and constant exposure of the speakers in a network to one another, versus Loose-Simplex ones, determining that the former reinforces linguistic trends which diverge from the norm. In many nations around the world, queer identities have been, across history, forced into reclusion and hiding by the reigning heteronormative social norms. This led to the formation of a tightly knit (potentially dense) subculture, one which would also be expected to follow covert prestige rather than attempt to appeal to the dominant social norms so antagonistic to them. As a result of these factors (and a variety of others that could be considered), we may expect to observe a speech associated with these 2SLGBTQIA+ cultures.

Furthermore, many people of all sexual orientations and identities have some ability to identify speech they consider to be associated with queer people, notably with gay men. This ability has been confirmed many times, such as by Gaudio (1994) and by Linville (1998), the latter of which observed that

people could identify sexual orientation nearly four out of five times (79.6%) (Linville 1998:41). This leads to the question: What constitutes this “gay” or “queer” speech? What features does this speech possess which allow for identification, if any? This article will investigate this question, looking at one of the answers that is most often hypothesized: speech feminization in gay men. This article will first establish some background information on the topic. Subsequently, it will consider evidence for the feminization view, followed by evidence to the contrary. Lastly, it will reconcile both positions, proposing an analysis of the data and of the field.

First, we must establish that there are a number of levels of speech in which features denoting “gay” or “2SLGBTQIA+” speech may appear; among these, we can look at elements of acoustics, phonetics, lexical, prosody, and more (e.g., while less attested in the literature, one could observe for syntactical elements of “gay-sounding speech”). Despite this variety, the phonetic and acoustics elements appear as most common in the literature and will therefore be developed at greater lengths in what follows.

Before proceeding further, we can establish that the lexical features are the most straightforward and most definitive markers of “gay” speech. There is a history of observing a “gay argot”, a dialect associated with queer subcultures, one that has been characterized by many linguists, including Doyle (1982). We can conclude that a marker of the identification of gay and queer peoples in everyday speech will naturally be the usage of the lexicon(s) associated with queer culture; though not with certainty, as many terms of this lexicon do eventually get absorbed into mainstream (heterosexual) culture (Kulick 2000). Nevertheless, we can investigate Zeve’s work which characterizes the queer lexicon as one defined by reclaiming pejorative language, as well as the metaphorical redefinition of words (he supplies “closet” as a prime example of this, one that even extended itself to a redefinition of the word “out”, which equally takes on a new meaning) (Zeve 1993:4). However, while this is an element of any analysis of “gay-sounding speech”, it is an element beyond the acoustic quality of such speech, often considered to be its defining characteristic.

We therefore consider the perhaps more elusive question of what has often been characterized as “gay voice”, a mostly phonetic or acoustic measure of queer speech. While there is some disagreement, the most repeated hypothesis suggests that what denotes this form of speech in gay men is a higher pitch. This aligns with pre-existing linguistic analysis of the speech of gay men, where it has been suggested that gay male speech is associated with lower-class femininity (Barrett 1998:145); or further, that the language of gay men is an imitation of women’s speech (Lakoff 1990), a claim which was met with much controversy, explored below.

## **2 Preliminary Remarks on “Queer Speech”**

Before continuing, we must also consider that while this “gay-sounding speech” is heavily associated with gay men, the 2SLGBTQIA+ community is one which has historically been, and remains, strongly connected. If there is a social explanation to this “gay” speech, as the one offered by Suire (2020:2575) which posits these features may emerge as a marker of in-group identity, we must consider the influence of other queer individuals rather than focusing only on gay men. Indeed, we question whether this “gay” speech is monolithic across queer communities or if it is in fact distinct; we may not expect homosexual men to necessarily speak like any other member of the broader queer community, although this remains a possibility. To do so, we can consider work done to determine whether transgender individuals’ voices are also identified as this “gay speech”. Notably, Hancock et al. (2014) observed the listener judgments of 14 listeners in Washington D.C., who listened to the speech of 44 speakers who had been recorded discussing a painting. The researchers observed gender as opposed to perceived gender, and the influence of intonation on gender perception. They find that the speech of transgender women is not interpreted as belonging to men most of the time, with nine out of fourteen being designated as one of the non-male categories (ranging from ambiguous to female).

Not surprisingly, the feminization of speech is much more strongly attested amongst transgender women speakers; notably, this does not seem to contribute to “gay sounding speech” or “queer-sounding speech” (which have been historically associated with gay men) as transgender women are likely to be identified correctly as women, or to be identified as not belonging to the category of “men” (Hancock 2013:205). However, it may be hypothesized that, as some transgender women may first come out as gay before recognizing their identities, the feminization of speech in transgender women (and other transgender peoples) may have had a historical effect on what is considered gay speech (beyond the simple fact that both communities have historically shared many 2SLGBTQIA+ spaces).

Another remark is necessary before continuing. Because “gay-sounding speech” is widely attested cross-linguistically and has been found to share features cross-linguistically, the research considered in this paper is not restricted exclusively to English speakers.

## **3 For the “Feminization” Hypothesis**

One frequent claim is that “gay-sounding speech” in men is associated with speech feminization, which can be characterized by a general shift towards the speech of women, such as a higher pitch. A variety of research supports this claim: we can, for instance, observe the conclusions of Suire et al. (2020) or of Gaudio (1994).

Indeed, Suire and colleagues (2020) observed several linguistic factors in heterosexual and homosexual native French-speaking men and women (180 men and 150 women). The researchers recorded the participants repeat a story they had been made to hear. Then, they analyzed this data for fundamental frequency and frequency variation, breathiness, and jitter. They also tested the testosterone of each participant to observe whether this would have some correlated effect with sexual orientation and speech, though this did not prove to be the case. The study found that sexual orientation did show a significant effect on mean F0-SD (variation in F0) and HNR (breathiness). While the speech of the homosexual participants was significantly different from that of heterosexual women, the mean of these participants was shifted towards the values of women in certain variables (both F0-SD and HNR). They conclude a difference of 10.65% in overall speech acoustics of gay men as compared to heterosexual men. These differences represent a significant, though slight, shift toward the speech of heterosexual women. They also found that F0 observes no significant difference between homosexual and heterosexual men. Finally, they observe pitch variation, with greater pitch variation among gay men. Their findings indeed suggest that such variation would be used by listeners to identify sexual orientation. As such, they analyze these features overall as a feminization of speech in homosexual men.

While this supports the feminization hypothesis in production, research has also shown that feminization is perceptually associated with queer identities. Gaudio (1994) studied native speakers of Standard American English, specifically four gay men and four “nongay” men of ages 21 to 31, who were asked to read two short passages into a microphone, followed by an interview. 13 participants played the role of the listeners to obtain listener judgements. They observed for pitch, F0 for pitch variation and fluctuation, and for the listener's judgement pertaining to the gay, effeminate, emotional, and ordinary nature of the speech. They concluded that there was an undeniable accuracy in assessments of sexual orientation in the listener judgements, mainly in the recorded passages. Additionally, the speech of gay men was deemed by the listeners to be higher on the effeminate scale, and those who judged gay men as having effeminate speech usually identified the speakers as being gay. When it came to pitch range (based on F0 values), this feature seemed to not be correlated with the answers provided by listeners. However, intonational variability does seem to play a role in assessment, though its exact role remains ambiguous, and Gaudio concludes that this element, on its own, may not be enough to justify identification of homosexual speech. As such, while the actual pitch was not conclusive, listeners associated effeminate speech in men to be associated with an 2SLGBTQ+ identity.

To conclude, research demonstrates that feminization of speech is associated, both perceptually and in production, with queer identities and may form the basis of “gay-sounding speech”.

#### 4 Against the “Feminization” Hypothesis

While studies surveyed above support feminization, other research contradicts or nuances the feminization hypothesis. Indeed, many researchers find this explanation to be insufficient. Here, we focus on Baeck et al. (2011), Vanpoucke et al. (2018), and Linville (1998).

First, many articles conclude slight feminization, but not one strong enough to account for the perceptual effects of “gay-sounding speech”. Baeck and colleagues (2011) recorded speech samples to observe pitch amongst 30 homosexual men aged 18-59, 56 heterosexual men aged 18-60, and 54 heterosexual women aged 17-59, all being inhabitants of Flanders, in Belgium. Analyzing these, they observed higher fundamental frequency in the speech of homosexual men than in that of heterosexual men, though only slightly. The more notable difference was a much higher frequency variation in the speech of homosexual men. However, they could not confirm their initial hypothesis, according to which “gay-sounding speech” is a product of feminization, since the homosexual men in the study still fell within the general range for men despite a mean still somewhat above that of heterosexual men.

This is similar to the findings of Vanpoucke et al. (2018) who observed feminization not through pitch but nasality. The research observed nasality in 30 self-identified homosexual men, 35 heterosexual men, and 34 heterosexual women, from Northern Belgium. The nasality of speech was observed both instrumentally (through the calculation using the Nasality Severity Index) and perceptually (rated by the researchers), during the reading of certain texts. The study found higher nasality among homosexual men in the vowels /a/, /i/, and /u/ when these were tested individually, approaching the nasality of the heterosexual women (while /m/ was the same for all three groups). No such correlation was observed in the tasks involving longer texts; as such, the researchers preliminarily assumed nasality plays no role in identification of sexual orientation. However, they noted that in single sounds, the conclusions seemed different, as there was an observed trend. Ultimately, the difference was deemed irrelevant due to a large amount of variation among the homosexual speakers.

Lastly, Linville (1998) ruled out feminization, observing no such effect in its data. This study observed nine men aged 24 to 43 years old (five identifying as gay and four as straight), who were speakers of Standard American English. Each speaker was asked to read a monologue. The study observed duration of /s/, average /s/ peak frequency, speech formants, modal speaking frequency and speech rate. Perceptual tests were then performed by 25 young adult females. The study suggests that the idea of “feminization” as the primary feature of gay speech is incorrect, as this was not attested in its findings. It also notes that the perception of formants one to three (F1, F2, & F3) were irrelevant in determining sexual orientation. Modal speaking F0 was also not predictive of perceived or actual sexual

orientation. Indeed, the study finds duration and frequency of /s/ to be the most predictive, showing correlation. Also, one gay speaker was consistently identified as being straight, indicating that the community of gay men is not homogeneous. The tongue placement of /s/ is concluded to be the most related to gay speech.

In conclusion, the idea of “feminization” is not fully accepted by researchers in this field; quite the contrary, many sociolinguists believe this effect to be too weak to account for “gay-sounding speech” or outright incorrect.

## **5 Reconciling the Positions**

There is conflicting data as to the feminization of speech as a leading factor of “gay-sounding speech”. In fact, we initially seem to expect gay men to have speech that mirrors or approaches that of heterosexual women in many aspects — this is attested as the starting point for or referenced in nearly all the studies mentioned (Suire 2020; Baeck et al. 2011; Vanpoucke et al. 2018; Linville 1998; Gaudio 1994). However, as shown, there are some conflicting conclusions about the feminization of speech in gay men. Some studies found no element of this feminization of speech (Linville 1998:45), others found this trend only in an inconclusive sense (Vanpoucke et al. 2018:1447; Baeck et al. 2011:213), and still others found it to be correlated with sexual orientation (Suire 2020:2581). So, what can be said conclusively about “feminization” in this field?

First, it seems that the “feminization” observed in Suire (2020) is well attested, including by Gaudio (1994). Further, if this element is cast in doubt in both the studies of Vanpoucke (2018) and Baeck (2011), it is not because the mean showed no feminization, but because the variation observed among the gay respondents was too great (both studies could not conclude feminization due to a large amount of interpersonal variation amongst queer respondents). This is interesting as there is also much variation, linguistic or otherwise, within the gay community; while the means generally demonstrated some feminization, most studies found some homosexual speakers whose features of speech were more strongly correlated with the norms for men, or beyond that. For instance, Linville (1998) observed for most respondents very accurate recognition of sexual orientation, but found one gay man was consistently labelled straight (Linville 1998:41).

As a result, the most straightforward conclusion on the feminization of speech in homosexual men is that this feature does exist but that there is a wide range of different speech features among this group. It seems as though there are a number of gay men who demonstrate more feminization and that this has become one element socially associated with this gay-sounding speech, often described as being stereotypically “effeminate” (Gaudio 1994:31). We could be tempted to conclude that “gay speech” is a

collection of acoustic factors, including namely fundamental frequency and breathiness (Suire 2020:2583; Baeck et al. 2011:213), which displays a shift towards the means of these factors in heterosexual women. However, while these factors have contributed to the idea of what gay speech is, particularly to what a cisgender, heterosexual individual may use to identify someone as being gay or queer, this is only representative of a subset of a subset of the queer community, which is to say a minority of gay men.

This precursory conclusion remains incomplete; as observed by Linville (1998), other elements are also associated with “gay-sounding speech” separate from feminization, suggesting that this feature forms an incomplete explanation. Indeed, Linville believes the feminization of speech theory to be a flawed view of “gay-sounding speech”, concordant with the limitations of viewing feminization as the primary feature of this speech established above. She suggests an alternative solution, focused on the production of /s/. Linville concludes that both the duration and frequency of /s/ was strongly correlated with sexual orientation and used by listeners to assess the sexual orientations of the research subjects.

It can also be noted that each of Suire (2020), Gaudio (1994), and Baeck et al. (2011), in their observations of pitch, reached conflicting conclusions as to the pitch of homosexual men. Suire and Gaudio (2020; 1994) observed pitch to be correlated with sexual orientation, while Baeck did not. However, all three concluded that the speech of gay men, more so than of heterosexual men, displays an important role of variance in pitch and intonation, which is to say that they demonstrated a wider net of values of pitch. Pitch variance was also used by listeners to assess sexual orientation in speech, as seen in Gaudio (1994:54). As these studies find a consensus despite differing in other conclusions and while observing different populations, this is a strong indication that pitch variance is an important feature defining “gay-sounding speech”.

The discussion surrounding “gay-sounding speech” is diverse, with many hypotheses about its nature. We can conclude first and foremost that the idea of “gay-sounding speech” is not monolithic; it appears to be composed of a few distinct features, not all of which are attested at once within all speakers labelled as having gay speech. It seems that the (seemingly controversial) idea of feminization of speech (higher pitch as well as F0 and jitter nearer to that of heterosexual women), which has been theorized at length, is indeed attested, but only in a subset of gay speakers and of speakers labelled as gay by listeners regardless of sexual orientation. This is naturally correlated with the widespread stereotype that this gay speech is “effeminate”. This makes feminization alone a poor explanation of “gay-sounding speech”, as it explains too little of the accuracy observed in studies like Gaudio (1994), where listeners could correctly assess sexual orientation with much accuracy, and too few of homosexual speakers seem to pattern with this particular feminized speech (as observed by Baeck et al. 2011:213). Many other elements are necessary to form a complete theory of “gay-sounding speech”. These include the characteristics of /s/

(and the associated position of the tongue during its production) observed by Linville (1998) as well as the greater variation in pitch in “gay-sounding speech” observed by Suire (2020), Gaudio (1994), and Baeck et al. (2011).

## **6 Conclusion**

We can conclude that feminization is not sufficient to characterize or account for “gay-sounding speech”, a view which emerges from a range of studies arguing both for or against the importance of “feminization” but is especially found in Vanpoucke et al. (2018) and Linville (1998). However, this is not to say that there is no feminization: for many 2SLGBTQ+ people, especially a subset of gay men, this phenomenon is consistently observed (Suire et al. 2020; Gaudio 1994). Regardless, it is not sufficient to explain what is perceived as “gay-sounding speech”, especially as a variety of other factors, such as pitch variation or the features of /s/ may play equal or greater roles in characterizing the speech of gay men. We conclude that feminization is present in this “gay-sounding speech”, as spoken by gay men, but is not its defining characteristic.

Due to the fundamental association of the “gay-sounding speech” and gay men, which are the subset of the queer community most associated with such speech (Gaudio 1994), this analysis is mostly limited to that group. The exclusion of trans women is explained above, but the speech of trans men, lesbians, and many other subsets of the queer community could not be addressed, despite a strong co-existence of these with gay communities and by extension the speech emerging from a broader 2SLGBTQIA+ community. Further research should analyze the relations between the speech of these communities, as it may be possible that their historical proximity has led to some convergent factors (as well as the fact that queer peoples were at length perceived as similar or homogeneous, leading to stereotypes of gay and queer speech possibly emerging as amalgamations of the attested speech of actual communities). Such further research may also inform future research carried out to investigate the speech of gay men, of which the defining characteristic, shown not to be feminization, remains unidentified (further studies could in this way investigate pitch variation or sibilant production, which have been proposed as hypotheses).

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