

The Production and Perception of a Lesbian Speech Style

The study of speech and sexuality has grown in strength in recent decades. In the study of language and identity, sexuality and sexual orientation provide an excellent example of how different speech styles are adopted and adapted as part of an identity, personality, and/or social persona. However, with only a few exceptions, very little of the research on speech and sexuality has focused on women and lesbian speech styles (Camp, 2009; Levon 2011; Lutzross 2010; Moonwoman-Baird, 1997; Van Borsel et al., 2013; Waksler 2001), which can offer further insight into questions of how sexual orientation and related aspects of identity and personality are perceived and projected through phonetic variation.

This study consists of two experiments aimed at addressing these questions. The first experiment recorded speech from 54 lesbian, bi, and straight women, and analyzed measurements of a wide range of acoustic variables. The second experiment played clips of these recordings to listeners and collected their judgments of various identity and personality traits of the speakers including sexual orientation. While measurements of the speech showed no correlation with self-identified orientation of the speaker, there were significant correlations with how listeners perceived the speaker. Figure 1 shows correlation with mean F2 ($F(1, 51)=4.511, p=0.4$). Other variables were mean pitch, pitch range, and creak. It is clear from the results that, despite the general impression that lesbians do not speak in a specific way, particularly in comparison with the prevalent concept of a “gay accent” in homosexual men, a stereotypical lesbian speech style does exist.

The study is additionally revealing in the inclusion of other speaker personality and identity variables beyond sexual orientation. On a 5-point Likert scale, listeners rated speakers as “shy/outgoing”, “compassionate/uncaring”, “formal/casual”, “uneducated/educated”, “masculine/feminine”. A principal components analysis revealed perceptions of distinct social personae. The first principal component was the recognizable persona of a feminine and compassionate straight woman. This persona was strongly correlated with the phonetic variables identified as making a speaker sound like a lesbian. As an example Figure 2 shows the correlation of F2 and the first persona ($F(1, 51)=15.7, p<0.001$). This indicates that, not only is this a socially salient stereotype, it is what listeners perceive most strongly when judging a woman based on her speech. This study reveals what other research on language and sexuality has overlooked: people do not judge individuals according to individual variables like sexual orientation, but instead perceive more complex and multifaceted social personae.

As previous research has shown, elements of a listener’s identity and personality can also affect how they rate aspects like sexual orientation according to speech. For example, Lutzross (2010) found that male listeners were significantly less likely to judge a speaker as sounding like a lesbian, and reported a general discomfort in making that assumption. As part of the perception experiment, I collected extensive data on listener identities and personalities, and will present an analysis of these data along with my findings on speaker and acoustic variables that influence sociophonetic perception.

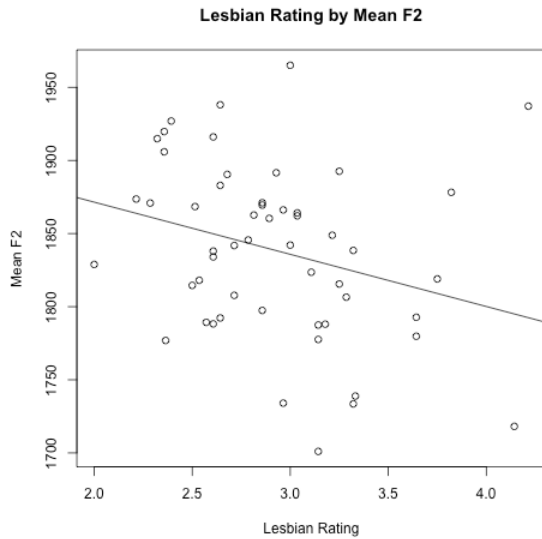


Figure 1: Perceived sexual orientation by mean F2

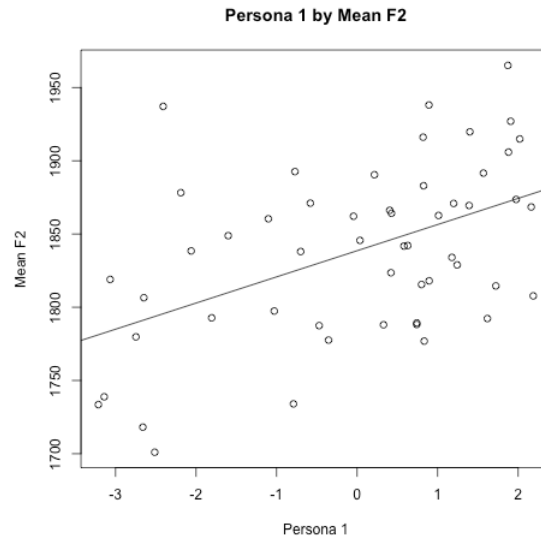


Figure 2: Score of first persona by mean F2

References

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