Intersecting variables in evaluations of men's speech

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Sociolinguistic styles are collections of linguistic elements which link to social content (Coupland 2007, HMB Style Collective 2006). One area for the investigation of sociolinguistic style is the interaction of variables in speaker evaluation. Stylistic clusters should be visible as areas where variables contribute differently based on fellow members of a cluster.

This paper investigates a set of four variables which may belong to a common stylistic cluster: (ING) (as in shopping vs. shoppin'), pitch and the placement and length of /s/ and /z/ tokens. All three have been linked to masculinity and male sexual orientation, while (ING) has been tied to many other social attributes. Two recordings of spontaneous speech from each of four men were manipulated for:

- (ING) (-in/-ing)
- pitch (original/high)
- /s/ and /z/ placement (fronted/mid/backed)
- /s/ and /z/ length (original/long)

These guises were crossed to create 192 recordings, which were used as stimuli in a two phase social evaluation experiment. In the first phase (N=76), participants provided three descriptive phrases and a guess as to regional origin. Particularly common responses (smart, gay, feminine, south, country, city) were coded on a binary scale and analyzed using mixed effects logistic regression. Fronted /s/ tokens favored descriptions of gay (p<0.0001) and city (p=0.014) and disfavored South as a region (p=0.011), while -ing favored smart (p=0.009).

The second phase of the study (current N=55, data collection ongoing) asks respondents to indicate on 1-6 scales how well the following terms described each speaker: smart, knowledgeable, masculine, gay, friendly, laid-back, country and educated. Fronted /s/ guises are currently rated less masculine (p<0.001) and country (p=0.007). The collection of more data will allow enough power to investigate interactions between the variables, indicating the degree to which the variables are operating independently or are tied to one another in larger stylistic structures.

References