Perceived sexual orientation and gender normativity: What do gay men, nerds, and female-to-male transsexuals have in common?

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In this paper, I explore the role of gender normativity in predicting whether an individual’s voice will be perceived as “gay-sounding.” Previous studies of gay-sounding voices have uncovered a number of acoustic characteristics that correlate with the perception of male speakers in particular as gay, such as a higher peak frequency in sibilants or more peripherally articulated vowels. However, different studies have often reached contradictory conclusions regarding exactly which phonetic features are salient (e.g. Munson et al. 2006; Pierrehumbert et al. 2004; Smyth et al. 2003). Given these inconsistencies, I propose that we must take more seriously Zwicky’s (1997) suggestion that multiple acoustical styles may be lumped together into one perceptual category; specifically, that any male voice perceived to deviate from a hegemonic masculine norm might be categorized as gay-sounding.

As further evidence for Zwicky’s argument, I present findings from a study comparing the voices of men from a number of different social groups: gay men, female-to-male transsexuals, and nerds (see also Bucholtz 1999). My study shows that members of each group were perceived as significantly more gay-sounding than a group of straight men who identified as neither nerds nor transgender. However, acoustic analysis reveals a considerable amount of variability among gay-sounding speakers, while straight-sounding speakers are more homogenous. What this analysis suggests, then, is there is no single gay-sounding style. Drawing on these results as well as interviews with speakers from my study, I argue that men who disalign from dominant forms of heteronormative masculinity are more likely to be perceived as gay-sounding than those with more mainstream enactments of gender. That this holds regardless of a speaker’s sexual orientation or what particular variety of non-normative masculinity he enacts suggests that linguists interested in gay-sounding voices should take a closer look at the complexities of gender normativity.

References