

Dude, Let's Go Shopping: the Performance of Gay and Straight Speech

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This project looks at the identity markers that are perceived as salient in the speech of in-group and out-group members across male sexualities. That is, what do straight and gay men draw upon linguistically when performing both their own, and each others', identities?

Schilling-Estes (1998) points out that by looking at Performance Register, we can gain insight into features that are linguistically salient to the performer, either consciously or unconsciously. Likewise, Butler's (1990) notion of identity as a construct that must be continually performed has received much attention in queer/gender theory. While recent work has addressed Butler's idea from the perspective of "natural" speech in intra-group settings (Cameron 1997, Barrett 1999), these works do not mention Performance Register speech. Meanwhile, work on identity performance in the Performance Register (Bucholtz 2001, Preston 1992, Schilling-Estes 1998, Trester 2004) has looked at either the linguistic variability in performing one's own in-group identity, or accuracy in performing an out-group identity, but does not address sexuality/gender issues. This study combines these approaches, along with Rampton's (1995) notions of "crossing", to provide an account of how both in-group and out-group sexuality/gender identities are constructed in Performance speech.

Specifically, this project is focused on the different ways in which gay and straight males perform Gay and Straight Speech. Sexuality and gender matched dyads improvised (using sock-puppets) the performance of a conflict-resolution scenario, once as if their characters were gay men, and once as if their characters were straight men. The goal was to determine how the ways in which people perform both in-group and out-group identities reveal over-arching stereotypes of those groups. Since improv performances are often a reproduction of identities with social significance and meaning (Trester 2004), this knowledge can then lead to a better understanding of the linguistic markers and practices one draws upon in one's own mundane identity construction (following Kiesling 2001).

To arrive at an analysis, linguistic features of gender/sexuality that have proven useful in the current literature were considered. For example, Barrett (1999, 1997) has shown that a performed gay identity will contain many of the variables typically associated with "women's language" (Lakoff 1975). For this reason, tags, hedges, and so-called "empty" modifiers are examined. In discussing the construction of a heterosexual masculinity, Kiesling (2001) found that the commonest way to form this "unmarked" identity was by invoking an out-group Other as contrastive. For this reason, a qualitative view of topics is also considered.

It was expected that, since the "gay guy" identity is marked while the "straight guy" identity is unmarked, across-dyad performance similarity would be found mostly in the gay performances, while the straight performances would show a more scattered sampling of linguistic features; that is, the more marked identity should have more linguistically salient markers attached to it. However, what I have found is the opposite. The "gay guy" performances show very little patterning, while the "straight guy" performances are virtually identical from one dyad to the next. This is generally true for both in-group and out-group performances. (499 words)