

The role of sexuality in the construction of gender

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What gender is “gay man”? While the question may seem trivial or, even worse, potentially insulting, the response lies at the heart of modern sociolinguistic inquiry.

Social scholars have long recognized that gender is not equivalent to or necessarily even derived from biological sex. Gender is a social construction—a category incorporating inequalities in social access, mobility, and the expression of one’s sexual being—the interaction of pervasively different social histories, freedoms, and sanctions.

Once we begin to deconstruct our expectations of gender, then, should we not *expect* a functional difference between the broad strokes of “straight man” and “gay man”? Gay and straight men, after all, have different kinds of social access, networks, expectations for mobility, and—for the last two centuries, at least—widely different sanctions on the expression of self. What is that if not a description of two different genders?

Although we’ve long known that a speaker’s gender influences the way he or she engages linguistic practice (to the point where we’ve developed a set of near axioms: women are at the forefront of language change, men use more vernacular forms, etc.), sociolinguistics remains stuck in a model that reifies gender *qua* normative biological sex. The majority of sociolinguistic publications continue to use a male/female dichotomy solely, excluding any contribution of sexuality in the construction of gender. Even in those works where gender is allowed to be a “locally constructed” category, the biologically based male/female split remains deeply entrenched. Meanwhile, research that includes an explicit awareness of sexuality as an intrinsic component of a speaker’s sociality languishes in the academic ghetto of “queer studies”—studies set apart from “normal” research, excepted as something one only considers if one is explicitly investigating “queer people”.

So I ask again, what gender is “gay man”?

As I will show with a combination of sock puppet discourse and word-list phonetics, “gay man” is a separate gender, compositionally distinct from the broader categories of both “queer” and “male”. Using a four-way distinction of gender (man, woman, gay, lesbian), I will show how the incorporation of sexuality as an explicit aspect of speaker gender allows us to more fully understand and interpret sociolinguistic data. I will argue that the continued ignorance of speaker sexuality in sociolinguistic research is equivalent to the ignorance of ethnicity, class, or age—and that it is our job as critical readers to adapt our methods and remain as aware of sexuality as we are of any other aspect of identity. While this kind of reified box-model remains less than entirely desirable, it is only by first atomizing these possible dimensions of self-identity that we can gain an understanding of the resources available for true local identity construction.

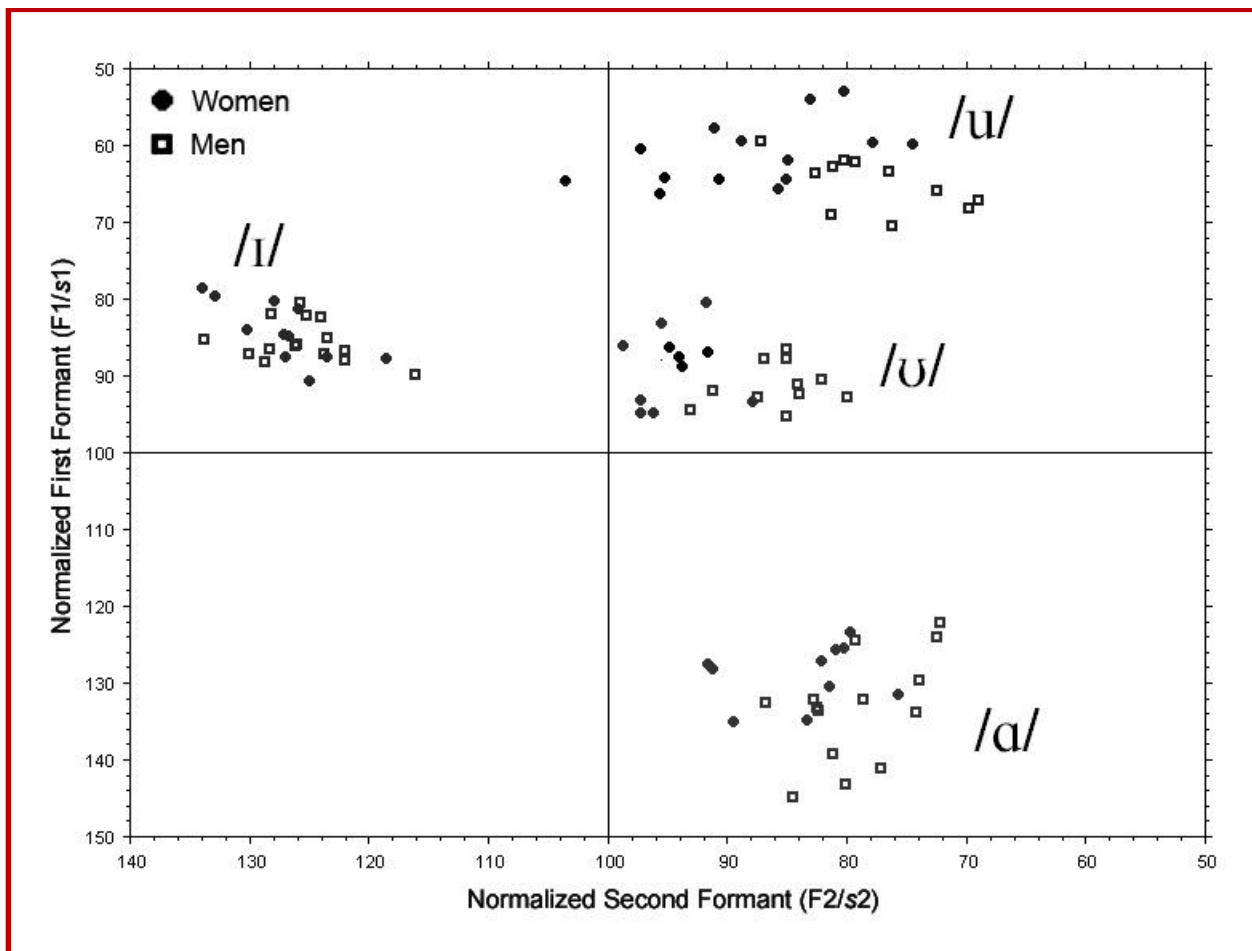


Figure 1: Variants of the Saluki Dialect, Binary Gender Model

Heteronormative speakers only, mean production values for the KIT, GOOSE, FOOT, and LOT vowels. Males are represented by black squares, females by black dots.

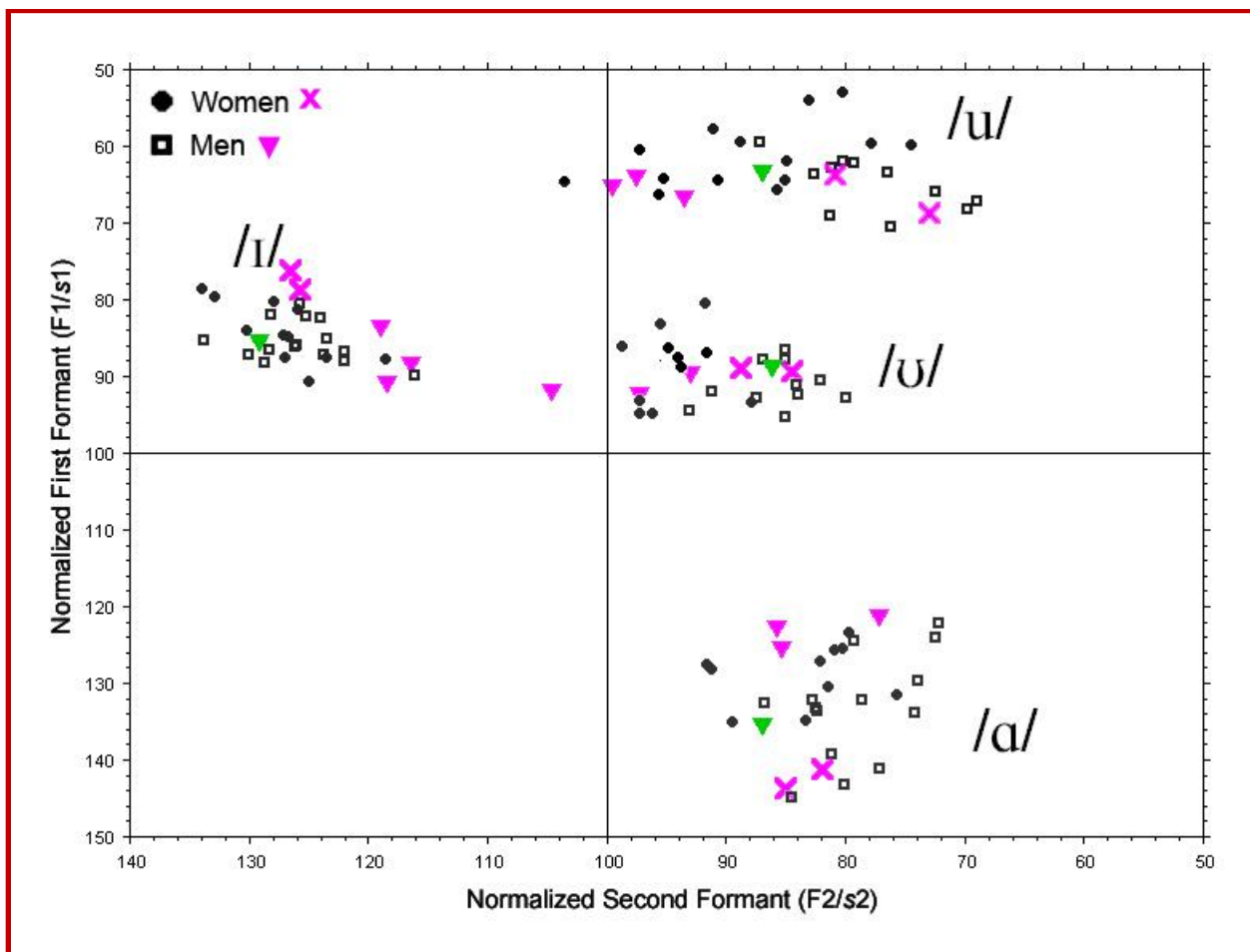


Figure 2: Variants of the Saluki Dialect, Four-Way Gender Model

Both heteronormative and homonormative speakers, mean production values for the KIT, GOOSE, FOOT, and LOT vowels. Straight men and women are represented by black squares and dots, respectively, while gays and lesbians are represented by pink triangles and x'es, respectively. Green triangles represent a single gay speaker who deviates from other gay speakers.

Homosexual Actors, Gay performance

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4m: I wanna go get a drink but I can't, cuz I have a test tomorrow .

4n: Bitch we got

5m: hhh It was so fun, we should hang

5n: fucking drunk last year, like crazy . It was

6m: out more

6n: I know but like . hhh Why don't we go to the movies tonight?

7m: I hate the movies, why don't we just go eat right now .

7n: Because I'm not hungry .

8m: But I'm starving, wouldn't you like to go get lunch with your friend that

8n:

9m: you haven't seen in a long time you little bitch .

9n: Not really, but . um .

10m:

10n: Look . Why don't we go get lunch, and then we can go, watch the movie .

11m: Neeh . But I hate the movies they're so loud and there's so many

11n: Yeaahh .

12m: people and I have to sit next to smelly people It is too loud,

12n: What the fuck are you talking about? It's not loud .

13m: and there's popcorn (XXXXX) and there's carnies and also

13n: Oh what ever . You're a fucking

14m: I am not a carnie . Let's go get food .

14n: carnie, bitch . Let's g- no I'm kidding .

15m: Yeah! That's a great idea and we can

15n: Um, why don't we go, downtown

Homosexual Actors, straight performance

16m: Whoa hey dude what's up I haven't seen you in forever since that party
16n:

17m: a couple years ago . Oh I got me some
17n: I know, fuckin' shit, I got some pussy that night .

18m: bitches, yeah it was great, those hos, oh, way, and beer, man .
18n: Dude .

19m: I was so hung over . I love me some bitches .
19n: I know . Fuckin' . Shit .

20m: Yeah! We should
20n: Um . So . D'you wanna go watch a movie or somethin?

21m: totally hang out, uh I think maybe we should get food though . I'm kinda
21n:

22m: hungry and I haven't eaten in five minutes .
22n: You're always fuckin hungry .

23m: Yeah well you know me I eat everything in sight, cuz I'm a guy .
23n:

24m: Well what'd'you wanna do?
24n: Dude I- I don't wanna have fuckin lunch dude .

25m: Well I don't really give a shit . Well let's
25n: Let's go fuckin watch a movie . Well fuck you man .

26m: go eat . Um . Wait h- how 'bout we go s-
26n: Fuck you I'm not hungry .

27m: downtown and get us some bitches . Yeah yeah bitches?
27n: hmm . Dude .

28m: Let's go . Dude .
29n: I want some man .

Heterosexual actors, gay performance

- 1e: Hey Jesse how ya doin'?
- 1f: Ah nothin' Hey hey s- Hey Chris, what's goin' on?
- 2e: I just had a wild night last night . What about you, where'd you go?
- 2f:
- 3e:
- 3f: Oh not much, uh . I was just, uh . I was hangin' out . With with uh, With some
- 4e:
- 4f: of my friends, at at my apartment . Um . We didn't do much, I've I've had
- 5e: Ah that's alright,
- 5f: a pretty hard week with classes .
- 6e: It's good to see you, man, how's it goin? [hug] Um . So uh . What'a'ya doin tonight?
- 6f:
- 7e: Well . Actually .
- 7f: We::ll, um . I dunno, what'do you wanna do tonight?
- 8e: I'm kinda busy . Would you like, just like to get, some lunch?
- 8f: Hmm . See the
- 9e:
- 9f: thing is I already ate, s' like, just a little while ago/
- 10e:
- 10f: y'know I real- I'm really that hungry . um . Um . Maybe . Uh . Maybe we
- 11e:
- 11f: should, uh, go see a movie . How about that?
- 12e: uh, Well y'know, um . I'm kinda busy tonight, as I said, so
- 12f:
- 13e: Why don't we just go downtown?
- 13f: OH down- that would be *wonderful*.
- 14e: Down to BoyzCellar . Alright . Pick you up at seven .
- 14f: Awesome . See ya dude.

Heterosexual actors, straight performance

- 15e: Jesse. Hey man. Haven't seen you for a while.
15f: What's goin' on dude?
- 16e: Not much. I've
16f: Yeah man it's been too long, whatcha been d- up to dude?
- 17e: uh . Just been really busy with schoolwork. But hey man, uh. It'd be good
17f:
- 18e: to chatch up . Y'know hang out with some friends.
18f: Yeah I got some time free.
- 19e: How 'bout, uh, we go see a movie tonight.
19f: ssss a movie dude, I dunno,
- 20e:
20f: I just saw Kill Bill, ah-ech-ii- it wa- it was alright dude, but I- I don't wanna
- 21e:
21f: waste my money, y'know/ I gotta be savin' up, I gotta get some new speakers
- 22e:
22f: in my car. Um . Why don't we go get something to eat, dude?
- 23e: Naw man I just ate, I've got this .
23f: Let's get some lunch. I'm starving.
- 24e: and I've got this date tonight, so . Dinner's pretty much out . for me.
24f: Oh tot- Yeah
- 25e: But hey, y'know,
25f: I totally understand dude, good luck with that bro.
- 26e: like uh . Once I'm . done with my stuff why don't we just go downtown?
26f:
- 27e: uh I would
27f: Hhh, that'd be awesome, dude . Yeah, uh, What time dude?
- 28e: say about 9 o'clock . fine .
28f: Sweet . Alright

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