

Sexuality as a Factor for Sociophonetic Variation

One focus of IGALA 5 concerns approaches to gender that "go beyond" the traditional sex and sexuality dichotomies. However, research on language variation and sound change has not yet even incorporated sexuality into the methods of gender classification. In current sociolinguistic research (e.g. Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2006; Milroy & Gordon, 2003; Gordon, 2001; Labov, 2001; Eckert, 2000; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1999; Tannen, 1990), we continue to find biological sex being taken to coincide with "gender", while sexuality remains largely ignored.

Although there is no shortage of linguistic research regarding speaker sexuality, most studies fall within what Kulick (2000) calls the "search for gay and lesbian language", either as discourse-based (e.g., Cameron & Kulick, 2003; Leap, 1996; Barrett, 1999) or perception-based (e.g., Levon, 2007; Munson & Babel, 2007; Gaudio, 1994). However, no current major work applies sexuality within a larger study of language variation. My research seeks to fill this gap by applying a "sexuality" variable to standard sociophonetic data.

This research is based on a sample of 35 "emerging adult" (Arnett, 2001) speakers from a sociophonetic dialect-contact study at a US university. Using data from word list citations and interviews (~5500 tokens analyzed), my research finds that a "sexuality" variable can show significant differences regarding vowel variation, and that the interaction of sex & sexuality (i.e., a combined "gender" variable) provides a new and important way to view language change. Briefly, although women are said to lead sociolinguistic change (e.g., Labov, 2001), in my data, non-heterosexual men actually show the most advanced variants of a sound change, followed by heterosexual women, followed by heterosexual men and non-heterosexual women. This evidence calls into question not only assumptions regarding the meaning of "gender" in linguistics, but also long-entrenched notions for explaining the different patterns of variation found for (heterosexual) men and women.