Operationalizing Sexuality within Sociophonetic Variation

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Female vowel space is, on average, larger than male vowel space
- Females have shorter vocal tracts
- Anatomical differences cannot account for the kinds or magnitudes of difference between male and female speakers (Diehl, et al., 1996)

- This isn’t sex OR gender... “speaker height”?
Men and women participate differently in sociolinguistic variation

- women lead change; women are more conservative
- women adhere more to overtly proscribed norms (Labov, 2001)
- women prefer community-level, wide-solidarity forms...
- ...while men prefer group-level, close-solidarity forms
  (Milroy & Gordon, 2003; see also Coates, 2003)

Problems?

- Implicit binary gender variable = implicit heteronormativity
- We’re still begging the question of why these difference exist
“search for gay and lesbian language”

Discourse-based Approaches
- What do “gays” talk about & how?
  Leap, 1996; Barrett, 1999; Cameron & Kulick, 2003

Perception-based Approaches
- What makes a speaker “sound gay”?
  Gaudio, 1994; Levon, 2007; Munson & Babel, 2007

Sexuality as a factor in sociolinguistics
- Speaker sexuality as a factor for categorization has largely been ignored
Sex+Sexuality = GENDER

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SEX→SEXUALITY</th>
<th>biologically male</th>
<th>biologically female</th>
<th>other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>normative</td>
<td>“men”</td>
<td>“women”</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>non-normative</td>
<td>“gay”</td>
<td>“lesbian”</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>“trans”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Problems...
- define “normative”...
- trans individuals = “other”?
The Speakers

- 15 sexuality-normative females (“women”)
- 10 sexuality-normative males (“men”)
- 2 sexuality-non-normative females (“lesbians”)
- 4 sexuality-non-normative males (“gays”)
- Emerging Adults (Arnett, 2001) in a university setting
  - Dialect contact
  - Southern Illinois South-Midland + Chicagoland NCS
Vowel Variants

- **LOT**
  - Raising
    - merger with THOUGHT
- **GOOSE**
  - Fronting
- **FOOT**
  - Fronting
- **KIT**
  - not undergoing any shifts
“Straight” Men & Women
“Gays” & “Lesbians”
Variation by GENDER
- “Gays” show the most progressive variants
- “Women” follow “Gays” in progressive variants
- “Men” & “Lesbians” tend toward the most conservative forms

Ta-da!
- Sexuality is important in sociolinguistic research, even if sexuality per se isn’t under investigation
- But why?
  (Hint: sexuality has nothing to do with it)
Males and Females…
- are afforded different opportunities
- engage in different kinds of networks (women tend toward more loose connections)
- conceptualize sex & sexuality differently
  - Women are “community-oriented”
  - Men are “self-oriented”
- Can a person be both? Neither?

Gays and Lesbians…
- ?
Active vs. “Passive” Identity Construction

- **Active**
  - aware, self-constructed, oriented *towards*

- **“Passive”**
  - subliminal, society-constructed, oriented *away*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMMUNITY→SELF ↓</th>
<th>active “community”</th>
<th>passive “community”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>active “self”</td>
<td>“gay”</td>
<td>“male”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>passive “self”</td>
<td>“female”</td>
<td>“lesbian”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Exception...
Vanguard Speakers
  • Actively creating “community” and “self” identities

Progressive Speakers
  • Actively creating “community” identity; passively creating “self” identity

Old-guard Speakers
  • Passively creating “community” identity; actively creating “self” identity

Conservative Speakers
  • Passively creating “community” and “self” identity
Nah, maybe not…

- “Gender” as related to sex has advantages
- People & society USE sex-linked “gender”
- People likewise are aware of sexuality

But

- Gay & Lesbian speakers account for 4~10% of randomly selected data
- Speaker sexuality can no longer be ignored, conflated, or overlooked

Grand Conclusion: Get Rid of “Gender”!
Thank you!

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