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Sounding Gay

Arnold M. Zwicky, Stanford University

J. Michael Bailey clicks on an audio recording of four men: Two are gay and two are straight. Can the audience guess which ones are gay just by listening to their voices? Asks Mr. Bailey, a professor of psychology at Northwestern University.

When the majority of those in the Stanford University lecture hall decide that a man with hissy *s*'s and precise articulation is gay, the professor pronounces them correct. The lesson: You can determine a man's sexual orientation after simply listening to him talk for 20 seconds.

Sound like science?

– Robin Wilson on 'Dr. Sex' in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* this June

1. The basic observation: Lots of gay men seem to give off no signals in their speech; they don't "sound gay". But lots of men do sound gay, and people turn out to be pretty good at picking them out. [experimental studies by Gaudio, Avery & Liss, Smyth et al.; much anecdotal evidence like that in Bailey's 2003 book]

2. What are listeners hearing? Some possibilities:

- Absolute pitch of the voice;
- Pitch of the voice, relative to the speaker's range;
- "Swoopy" intonation;
- Special intonations at ends of phrases: suspended fall from high, final rise ("uptalk");
- Use of special voice qualities (especially falsetto, creaky voice, breathy voice);
- Precise articulation;
- Relatively high vowel formants;
- Relatively high formants for the consonant *l*;
- Relatively long vowels, especially the "short *a*" of *cat*;
- "Hissy" *s* (and *z*): relatively long, relatively high-frequency, dental rather than alveolar.

3. The Femininity Connection. What counts as "feminine"?

- Failure to achieve signs of very conventional, "marked", masculinity (ball-throwing);
- Location on a continuum away from the conventionally masculine end (rough play vs. imaginative play, disregard vs. nurturing).

4. Are obvious gay men yearning for femininity? (Bailey) Or deviating from conventional masculinity? (Zwicky) Or doing something else? Some researchers think that what these men are doing is not so much sounding gay as sounding flamboyant; they're presenting themselves as a certain kind of person – involved, intense, playful – rather than sending out generic gaydar signals. In line with this, some men vary the signals from occasion to occasion. (Podesva)

cf: Cameron (1995:49): " 'Feminine' and 'masculine' are not what we ARE, nor traits we HAVE, but effects we produce by way of particular things we DO."

5. The double reverse: Belief Trumps Truth. Even if some behavior actually isn't associated with women, if people believe it is, then it is. (Cf. race.) So things that people *believe* are associated with women can index gay men too, if you believe that gay men are "feminine". Swoopiness.

6. An overarching folk idea about human characteristics: A Passion for Abstraction (Kagan) – psychological traits are abstract and enduring. Folk theories of human nature as sources of the abstract properties; "honesty".

7. Three folk beliefs about gender, sexuality, language, and social roles and statuses:

(1) Dichotomy: Thinking of gender in terms of a rigid opposition between masculinity and femininity, so that a deviation from masculinity is interpreted as femininity.

(2) Intrinsic Content: Thinking that bits of linguistic stuff (phonetic characteristics, vocabulary items, syntactic constructions) have intrinsic social content, rather than that they are "just stuff", available for conveying different social meanings in different contexts. (The very many social meanings of rlessness, dental vs. alveolar articulation, etc.)

(3) Package Deal: Treating the signs -- linguistic and otherwise -- of social roles and statuses (social class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, etc.) as hanging together "naturally", rather than coming together by historical accident. (Elite British English: vowels in *guard*, *fog*, *coat*, *dance*, *new*; *r* in *very*; *t* in *pretty*; etc.)

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