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# Sharing Resources and Indexing Meanings in the Production of Gay Styles*

ROBERT J. PODESVA, SARAH J. ROBERTS AND KATHRYN
CAMPBELL-KIBLER

## 1   Introduction

In recent years an increasing number of linguists have criticized sociolinguistic approaches to style limited to correlations between linguistic variation and pre-defined social categories. Instead, researchers such as Ochs (1991), Irvine (2001), and the California Style Collective (1993), have sought to highlight the ways in which linguistic practice produces and reproduces social meaning.

Drawing on this work, we propose a new approach to style, which centers around two important concepts. First of all, we distinguish between linguistically conveyed meanings relating directly to the immediate context of the discourse participants, and those involving the construction of personal or stylistic identities. Further, we argue that indexical relationships (in

the sense developed in Ochs 1991) relate these different types of social meaning to each other, as well as to linguistic resources. Using this approach, we examine a gay activist's use of phonetic features in a radio interview to project a style which is markedly gay and yet differs from the style usually identified as gay by researchers and the culture at large.

In section two we focus on issues peculiar to the study of gay men's speech, or the speech of men perceived to sound gay. While the topic has garnered some interest over the years, only through a closer analysis of specific gay communities and identities can one address what it means for any given individual to sound gay in a particular context. We argue that it is necessary to recognize where and how gay men differ from each other in their linguistic performances, as well as to see how variables not limited to the gay community may be used within it.

We outline in section three several existing notions of style, reviewing the approaches of Labov, Bell, Irvine, and Ochs, and also detailing our own framework of style. Specifically, we explain our understanding of style as the ongoing construction of identity, built both directly through linguistic (and other) resources, and indirectly through the performance of social acts or activities, and the projection of emotive stances.

In section four we lay out the rationale and procedures of the study. We discuss the context of the radio interview from which we gathered our data, as well as its impact on the performance of the speaker we analyze. We also introduce the variables examined in the study, and review results found elsewhere for these same variables.

The results of our study are discussed in section five. We show that the speaker under investigation does not use the same variables previously reported to trigger a gay percept. Our claim is not that he is refraining from or does not command a recognizably gay style, but that he is using a different style that is neither stereotypical nor flamboyant.[1] He uses different variables to achieve a performance of competence and non-stereotypical gay identity.

## 2   Gay Ways of Speaking

Sociolinguistic research on the speaking styles of gay men has centered on identifying the features that constitute a monolithic speech variety, often referred to as Gay Speech or the Gay Accent. Scholars have argued that the speech of gay men, or alternatively gay-sounding speech, differentiates itself from other speaking styles on the lexical (e.g., Rodgers 1972), phonetic

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[1] Though not all stereotypical styles are flamboyant, flamboyance is associated with stereotypical gay style.

(e.g., Crist 1997), and discourse (e.g., Leap 1996) levels. Although we do not question that some segments of the gay male community may use the features discussed in these works, we take issue with the practice of labeling them as specifically gay male features. We argue that labeling a linguistic feature as gay is at once too general and too specific.

First, the assumption that there is a singular gay way of speaking homogenizes the diversity within the gay community, erasing or at least deeming unimportant to sociolinguistic inquiry the many subcultures comprising the community. Gay culture encompasses reified categories such as leather daddies, clones, drag queens, circuit boys, guppies (gay yuppies), gay prostitutes, and activists both mainstream and radical, as well as more local communities of practice which may not even have names. Membership in one of the subcultures often takes precedence over a more general affiliation with the gay community, and social activities—and hence opportunities for linguistic exchanges—are usually organized around membership not in the gay male community at large, but in its subcultures. The distinction between the subcultures is constructed stylistically, through dress, use and choice of drugs, music preferences, and linguistic resources. The meanings of stylistic resources, linguistic or otherwise, are negotiated in these gay subcultures. Thus treating the meaning of a linguistic feature as generally as gay ignores the community that has worked to give the feature meaning.

Second, while labeling linguistic features as gay is too general, it also runs the risk of not being general enough. By simply assigning gay meanings to linguistic features, one reifies as gay certain linguistic features that are shared throughout society. For instance, Leap (1996) identifies cooperative discourse as a marker of 'Gay Men's English,' but Cameron (1998) points out that cooperative discourse also occurs among young heterosexual men. And then there are the original cooperators: women, the subject of the first discussions of cooperative discourse in the language and gender literature (e.g., Coates 1998, Tannen 1990). By labeling cooperative discourse as a specifically gay feature, one ignores its use by women and straight men. What is missing is an analysis that allows cooperative discourse to contribute to heterosexuality in some situations and to the construction of gay identities in others.

To avoid these two problems, we propose a framework for style in which linguistic features become associated with communities by indexing the stances, acts, and activities that characterize and constitute them. Such a framework moves beyond linguistic features that directly index gross demographic characteristics (e.g., gay), allowing for linguistic features that index social meaning on a micro-level. At the same time the framework enables

linguistic resources to index identities through intermediary social meanings (e.g., stance of precision), and these social meanings may be shared across communities. In the following section we explicitly lay out our framework for style.

# 3 Style

We view style as the situational use of linguistic resources (including phonetic variables, syntactic constructions, lexicon, discourse markers) to negotiate one's place in the local communicative context as well as in society in general. Style permeates language not as a separate component or dimension but as a building block for creating and perpetuating social meaning. However since meaning is always somewhat in flux and dependent on the ever-changing contexts in which resources are used (see McConnell-Ginet, this volume), style itself is always a work in progress.

This approach differs considerably from many contemporary approaches to style. In variationist sociolinguistics, style (intraspeaker variation) is usually treated as unidimensional and linked in some way to stable social categories. Labov (1966) and others (e.g., Wolfram 1969, Trudgill 1974) regard style as a function of attention paid to speech, ranging from casual to highly monitored speech. Their methodology reveals the stratification of social categories such as class or 'sex' by correlating linguistic variation to stylistic variation. This approach shows that categories have empirical relevance to linguistic variation, but (as with any correlational approach) it does not reveal whether categories shape linguistic practice or are themselves derivative of language use. It also assumes the stability of both style and social categories; this methodology routinely elicits pre-defined 'styles' from speakers (such as Casual Style, Reading Style, etc.) and categories serve to locate a given speaker within a fixed social structure. Finally, this approach limits style to a single dimension and does not explain how situational and interactional factors, such as social power, mode of interaction, topic, setting (as discussed by Hymes 1972 and Biber 1994), contribute to intraspeaker variation.

Bell (1984) proposed an alternative unidimensional approach that treats style as interpersonal audience accommodation. Drawing on accommodation theory (Coupland and Giles 1988), Bell proposed that style represents efforts by speakers to converge with or diverge from the speech of their addressee(s). As a result, style as intra-speaker variation is derivative of inter-speaker variation (the style axiom). In a recent revision to his model (Bell 1997), he highlights the role of identity and differentiation in the production of style. He characterizes the process along the following lines:

1. Group has its own identity, evaluated by self and others.

2. Group differentiates its language from others': 'social,' or inter-speaker variation.

3. Group's language is evaluated by self and others: linguistic evaluation.

4. Others shift relative to group's language: 'style,' or intra-speaker variation. (Bell 1997:244)

Identity therefore serves as the basis of social and linguistic differentiation, and evaluation links social attitudes towards groups to the groups' patterns of variation. These attitudes then filter down to the level of intraspeaker variation: 'Style derives its meaning from the association of linguistic features with particular social groups.' (p. 243)

Bell's model however takes as its starting point predefined 'groups' which already possess their own identities. It accepts uncritically the notion, questioned by Cameron (1998) and others, that identity is a predetermined and stable fact instead of a construct constituted through social and linguistic practice. As research in the field of language and gender has often shown, identity cannot be separated from the social performances that produce and perpetuate meaning. By making style a by-product of identity, Bell precludes the possibility of style as a means of constituting group identities.

Our approach to style, in accordance with recent research on identity and the role played by language in forming identity, assumes that identity and style are co-constructed. Instead of treating stylistic variation as merely reflective of one's social address or identity, we view style as the linguistic means through which identity is produced in discourse. A style may be viewed as a collage of co-occurring linguistic features which, while unfixed and variable, work together to constitute meaning in coherent and socially intelligible ways. Style simultaneously gives linguistic substance to a given identity and allows the identity to be socially meaningful.

Irvine (2001) mentions that distinctiveness underlies both style and identity: 'Whatever 'styles' are, in language and elsewhere, they are part of a system of distinction, in which a style contrasts with other possible styles, and the social meaning signified by the style contrasts with other social meanings' (p. 77). Along these lines, we need to examine a style not just in relation to others it may draw on, but also in relation to those other styles to which it opposes itself—particularly in the local, situational contexts in which styles are produced. In the case of gay styles one would need to consider how a given style opposes itself to other perceived gay styles (such as those associated with the various subcultures mentioned in the previous section), in addition to the obvious opposition between gay and straight. An approach to gay speech that posits a single dimension of identity or 'gayness' independent of local context misses not only much of the diversity

within the gay community but also ignores Zwicky's (1997:31) observation that variables are employed by 'different speakers, in different places, on different occasions.'

Ochs (1991) proposes an explicit framework for understanding how linguistic resources are linked to abstract categories or groups. Most resources are not correlated directly to social categories. Rather they bear pragmatic information about particular situations. Certain resources may contribute to stances and acts that impact the immediate speech situation; for instance, 'tag questions may index a stance of uncertainty as well as the act of requesting confirmation/clarification/feedback' (Ochs 1991:335). At the same time, speakers derive from past experiences an understanding that these resources are differently used across society and therefore develop 'norms, preferences, and expectations regarding the distribution of this work *vis-à-vis* particular social identities of speakers, referents, and addressees' (Ibid, p. 342). As a result, resources may indirectly index abstract social categories in a constitutive sense; for instance, one may lay claim to a female identity by using tag questions to produce a stance of hesitancy, which in some communities is normatively associated with female identity.
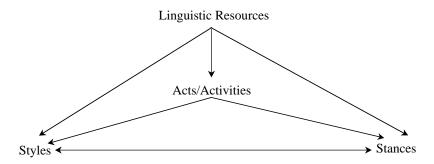


**Figure 1.** Indexical Relations Between Linguistic Resources and Social Meanings

So while a few variables directly index a given category (such as the indexing of male gender by the pronoun *he* or the use of *gay* to index a putative gay category), most index categories only indirectly and function primarily to express pragmatic meanings relating to local context. We have diagrammed the indexical relationship between these meanings and style in Figure 1. The meanings that contribute to style may either derive directly from the use of linguistic resources or indirectly via the speech acts, activities (socially-defined speech events such as debate or prayer), or stances that speakers perform in the course of conversation.

For instance, /in/ vs. /iŋ/ variation (as in *workin'* vs. *working*) is a classic example of a variable which expresses a stance of informality, contributes to working class styles, and is meaningful ideologically in contrasting a friendly, close-knit working class group against a more institutionally-based middle class (Eckert 2000). This approach allows us to incorporate Labov's concern for formality/informality (which he characterized as attention paid to speech) while distancing variation from simple demographic characteristics. Conversely, styles that are legibly associated with certain social groups may be used to enact certain stances. Cheshire (1997) discusses the case of a teenaged boy increasing his use of vernacular markers in a school setting relative to his out-of-school speech, in contrast to his friends, who decrease their use of the variables at school. In this case he uses his vernacular style to display a stance of resistance against the authority of the school.

Our priorities, as set forth by this approach to style, would include the identification of linguistic resources that are used to constitute different gay styles, an analysis of how these resources are used to index different meanings, and speculation on how a particular style may index more than a single category at the same time—as one's identity as gay is hardly independent from other possible identities relevant to a given context. In the data presented below, we examine what might be termed 'mainstream gay activist style,' which is here constructed in the setting of a radio discussion, primarily in opposition to a straight audience, as well as to a more flamboyant gay style. Gay identity is highly salient for representatives of gay political organizations, especially in public discussions. But at the same time, participants are frequently warned against sounding 'too gay.' We suggest that the style displayed is an attempt to portray at once strong gay identity and professional competence—as evaluated by a mainstream, mostly straight audience.

## 4  The Study

The radio discussion selected as a data source for this study occurred on a popular National Public Radio talk show and dealt with a politically sensitive gay issue: namely, whether private voluntary organizations reserve the right to ban gays from their membership. Our study focuses on the speech of speaker A, an openly gay attorney and reasonably famous gay rights activist. We chose to examine his speech because it evoked a strong gay percept and because his contribution was of suitable length for phonetic analysis. When he appeared on the radio program, he was representing in court an individual who had been dismissed from such an organization. Although the host introduced issues directly bearing on gay identity at the outset of the program, the debate mainly revolved around an intricate discussion of anti-

discrimination laws. Speaker A's contribution foregrounded his expertise in interpreting law and repeatedly named the ousted individual as his professional 'client.' For the most part, he was speaking more as an attorney than as a gay man.

We contrast Speaker A's speech with that of Speaker B, his opponent in the debate. Speaker B was a representative of a libertarian organization, and his speech did not evoke a gay percept. Their primary point of contestation did not revolve around gay rights but rather concerned the role of government in regulating the internal affairs of private organizations. Speaker B, in fact, made it clear that he did not personally favor the discrimination. Since the issue structuring the opposition between the two speakers called on Speaker A's legal expertise instead of his experience as a gay man, Speaker A's role as attorney was emphasized.

An acoustic analysis was conducted on the speech of speakers A and B, concentrating on the following variables:

1. Durations of /æ/, /eɪ/

2. Durations of onset /s/, /l/

3. Fundamental frequency (f0) properties (max, min, range, and value at vowel midpoint) of stressed vowels

4. Voice onset time (VOT) of voiceless aspirated stops

5. Release of word-final stops

Though we have opted to call these phonetic features variables, we do not use the term in the traditional sociolinguistic sense. Rather than coding data categorically, we have quantified values acoustically. For example, the duration of a segment is coded in milliseconds rather than with a perceptual label, such as short or long. With the exception of word-final stop releases, all variables considered here are continuous.

Following Crist (1997), who reported that for five out of six male speakers the segments /s/ and /l/ were longer in gay stereotyped speech, we examined the duration of /s/ and /l/ in onset position. Rogers, Smyth, and Jacobs (2000) have since duplicated Crist's finding, showing that sibilants (both /s/ and /z/) and the lateral approximant (/l/) exhibit greater duration in gay-sounding speech.

The pitch properties of speakers A and B were also investigated, since high pitch and wide pitch ranges are often anecdotally associated with gay styles of speaking. Though Gaudio (1994) found that neither pitch range nor pitch variability provided sufficient cues to yield a gay percept, Jacobs, Rogers, and Smyth (1999) have recently found that listeners are more likely to identify speakers as gay if they have large pitch ranges, regardless of whether the speakers are gay or straight. Four measures of fundamental

frequency (f0), the acoustic correlate of pitch, were taken for each stressed vowel: maximum f0, minimum f0, f0 at vowel midpoint, and f0 range.

The variables discussed thus far—the durations of onset /s/ and /l/ and the four measures of fundamental frequency—have been associated with stereotypically gay speech, but as mentioned above, speaker A does not employ a flamboyantly gay style. We have therefore identified a number of other variables that could potentially be used in an activist style based on our impressionistic judgments from radio interviews with six gay activists. These variables included the durations of the vowels /æ/ and /eɪ/, the duration of voice onset time (or aspiration) for voiceless stops, and the release of word-final stops. Unlike the continuous variables discussed above, the release of word-final stops was coded as a boolean: marked for the presence or absence of a burst. Long voice onset time (VOT) and the frequent release of word-final stops exemplify hyperarticulation, a feature identified by Walters (1981), as cited by Barrett (1997).

We now turn to a discussion of Speaker A's stylistic construction of identity using the phonetic features reviewed in this section.

## 5  Results

The variables we examined fall into roughly three categories. We first discuss segment duration of onset /s/, onset /l/, /æ/, /eɪ/, and aspiration of voiceless stops. These variables group together naturally as the findings for any one segment cannot be analyzed without looking at the others, given the strong influence of overall speech rate. Next, we present the findings related to f0: the high and low for each vowel (stressed vowels in multi-syllabic words), the range (difference between them), and the f0 at the midpoint of the vowel. Finally, we give the results for the frequency with which each speaker released final stops.

The duration variables do not lend themselves to straightforward analysis, due to the confounding factor of overall speech rate. Table 1 summarizes the results for the duration variables. Speaker A has a higher mean for three of these five variables: /æ/, /s/, and VOT. Given this trend, it would be inadvisable to interpret these specific duration variables as individually significant in this context. Instead we suggest that speaker A merely has an overall slower rate of speaking than does speaker B, and these variables are not being used independently of rate. Thus the vowel /eɪ/, which contradicts this trend, is being used as a meaningful variable, or correlates with a meaning distinct from overall speech rate. This correlation may indicate a relationship between words in which this vowel appears and topics which inspire emphatic stress or shifts in speed. Throughout the interview both

speakers vary their speech rates to color their points. In addition, they both use repetition of particular key lexical items freely as a rhetorical device, and the selection of words to repeat (and stress) may influence these duration results.

| | Mean | | Standard Deviation | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | A | B | A | B |
| /æ/ | 93* | 76 | 44 | 39 |
| /eɪ/ | 107 | 131* | 46 | 53 |
| /s/ | 111* | 100 | 36 | 30 |
| /l/ | 70 | 66 | 20 | 31 |
| VOT | 73* | 59 | 25 | 23 |

\* Significantly longer (alpha level = 0.05)

**Table 1.** Results for the Duration Variables (in ms)

Use of this strategy is evidenced in the duration of /eɪ/ in the word *gay*. Hypothesizing that this word could serve as a locus of performance or meaning, we looked at the duration values of Speaker A's tokens of /eɪ/ in *gay*, in all other words, and in other words in which it is the final segment. The results are shown in Table 2. Speaker A's tokens of /eɪ/ occurring in the word *gay* are significantly longer than those that do not, and have a higher mean than speaker B's overall mean. A similar lexical analysis could not be conducted on Speaker B's speech, as he avoided the term *gay*, using it only twice during the hour-long program.

| | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|---|---|---|
| tokens of *gay* | 162.2 | 68.2 |
| other tokens of /eɪ/ | 102.4 | 39.8 |
| other tokens of word-final /eɪ/ | 101.5 | 50.3 |
| all tokens of /eɪ/ | 107.8 | 46.2 |

**Table 2.** Speaker A's Durations of /eɪ/ (in ms)

As mentioned previously, the durations of /l/ and of /s/ have been linked to stereotypically gay performances (Crist 1997). We found no difference in the duration or the variance of /l/ between the two speakers. Speaker A does have a significantly longer mean for duration of /s/ than does Speaker B. This may indicate some stylistic use of this variable, or it may result from an overall speech rate difference, as discussed above.

Another commonly cited factor in establishing a gay percept is f0, the results for which are summarized in Table 3. Speaker B has higher average levels for maximum f0, minimum f0, and f0 at vowel midpoint, as well as a

higher variance for all of these values. This suggests both that speaker B has a generally higher voice than speaker A (whether through biology or effort), and that his f0 is more variable across tokens.[2]

|  | Mean | | Standard Deviation | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | A | B | A | B |
| V midpoint | 131 | 137* | 31 | 39* |
| max | 142 | 152* | 33 | 41* |
| min | 122 | 130* | 128 | 36* |
| range | 21 | 21 | 19 | 18 |

\* Significantly higher (alpha level = 0.05)

**Table 3.** Results for Fundamental Frequency (f0) Variables (in Hz)

The two speakers exhibit no difference in the f0 range, calculated as the difference between the maximum and minimum values within each vowel. This shows that neither speaker exceeds the other in use of 'swoopy voice,' a feature commonly associated with gay men.

Overall, Speaker A uses neither a higher pitch nor a wider f0 range relative to his counterpart to perform a gay identity. These results establish that speaker A does not use pitch in ways usually attributed to gay-sounding men. Nonetheless, speaker A is self-presenting as a gay man, and is immediately perceptible to listeners as such. We conclude that the type of gay style speaker A is performing differs from the other styles that have been investigated. Further, the way that his style differs from this more recognized style is not merely idiosyncratic (or inexplicable) variation, but a deliberate and common response to the meanings associated with wide pitch variation and especially its use by gay men. In particular, we propose that higher pitch and even more, wide pitch ranges, form part of a recognizably flamboyant gay style. We use flamboyant here, not to describe the intensity of the social meaning, but as an integral part of the meaning itself. It is frequently tempting to see broad demographic categories as essential basic meanings, and variation within them as aligned along a continuum.[3] In this case, the continuum might place the stereotypical 'queen' at the far extreme

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[2] Either Speaker B is using a variable pitch as a facet of his radio performance, or Speaker A is deliberately controlling his use of pitch as a variable, or both. With two speakers interacting, however, such a distinction is not useful, as they will respond to one another.

[3] This notion is discussed by Irvine and Gal (2000) under the name 'fractal recursivity,' wherein an opposition between two large groups is repeated within the groups, often to indicate better or worse representatives of the category. For example, if men are on average taller than women, this may be reified into the opposition 'men are tall, women are short.' In turn, this opposition may be repeated, such that height is a masculine and desirable trait in a man, and an unfeminine and undesirable trait in a woman.

of gayness. Others who deviate from that image, either in terms of body-related characteristics such as race, disability status, weight, or linguistic performance, are then cast as less gay. We question this arrangement, and suggest that the speaker under investigation, while striving not to sound too gay, is not bound to the continuum, but is rather inhabiting a different space altogether. That is, using high f0 and wide f0 ranges is not simply a flamboyant way of being gay in the world, but rather a way of being flamboyantly gay. It is precisely this performance which speaker A is avoiding, both as a result of his goals for the show (which include being non-threatening and competent) and the paths along which the discussion runs, focusing primarily on legal questions, and as a result, requiring him to speak with authority on serious topics.

In addition to duration and pitch, we investigated the release of word-final stops for both speakers. Speaker A has a significantly higher percentage of released stops than speaker B, as shown in Table 4. This result does not mean, however, that this variable directly indexes gay for this speaker, as sexual orientation is hardly the only difference between the two speakers, or even the only difference made relevant by the context and topics of discussion. To look for the meaning of this variable in one context, it is useful to see where and how it is used by other people in other contexts. Bucholtz (1996) mentions this same feature as forming a part of a geek girl style, and that it has a particular link to education and literacy for these speakers. Ashburn (2000) discusses its use by members of the science fiction convention community, as does Benor (in press) among Orthodox Jews, again with similar implications.

|  | A | B |
|---|---|---|
|  | (N = 248) | (N = 202) |
| released | 22.4% | 12.9% |
| unreleased | 77.6% | 87.1% |

$$\chi^2 = 7.04, df = 1, p = 0.004$$

**Table 4.** Percent of Released Word-Final Stops

We propose that this variable has a culture-wide relationship to education or precision, and that speaker A is using it for this purpose. This use accomplishes two goals. In the first place, as a lawyer he has an interest in establishing his identity as an educated and competent representative of the profession especially in a context where he is answering questions on specifically legal issues. And secondly he may be trying not to sound too gay, a goal often explicitly discussed by activists and speakers in the gay community as important when appearing before a mainstream, mostly straight audi-

ence. We posit that the phenomenon of not sounding too gay is not merely a function of dampening general features that say 'gay', but a different performance entirely. 'Too gay' here is, in fact, a code. It is code for other social meanings associated with gay men and particular gay styles such as frivolity, promiscuity, and excitability. While speaking to potentially hostile audiences, activists often construct themselves in opposition to these images, as well as the other meanings populating the social space around them. Invoking cultural ideas concerning education and authority is one way to distance oneself from these qualities.

## 6   Conclusion

Our findings further problematize the notion of a singular gay way of speaking, as discussed in §2. First, we have demonstrated that speaker A is not exploiting pitch or the duration of /l/ to produce a gay style, even though these phonetic features have been linked to stereotypically gay speech. We argue that speaker A is performing an entirely different kind of gay identity, one which strongly contrasts with a stereotypically gay style. Although high pitch, wide pitch ranges, and prolonged /l/s index a gay style, they index only one of many gay styles. Speaker A is performing a non-stereotypical gay identity, and his performance illustrates that linguistic styles—including gay styles—are as diverse as the individuals and communities producing them. Second, speaker A uses the release of final stops, a feature which also constitutes part of a geek girl style, in the production of his gay identity. This finding illustrates how a linguistic feature may be employed without evoking solely a gay meaning and also highlights the importance of contextualizing features that express social meaning.

   We would like to emphasize that there is a need for additional studies investigating how sets of variables cluster together to form gay styles and all linguistically constructed styles. If we can demonstrate patterns similar to those observed in this study for a number of speakers, and in particular if we observe those speakers cross-situationally, we will be able to abstract over individual idiosyncrasies and arrive at a more complete understanding of how variables group together to index different kinds of identities. The overall picture would express much more complexity than an approach assuming simple oppositions, such as gay vs. straight. With a focus on style as an indexically constituted social meaning, we are better equipped to analyze how the individual negotiates identity across situations and how groups may co-vary in interesting and perhaps unexpected ways.

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