/s/tylizing the /s/elf: A First Look into the Concurrent Fluidity of Gender and Language
Montreal Benesch, Reed College, mbenesch@reed.edu

Identity, especially gender, is understood to be constructed through a variety of semiotic processes (Gratton, 2016). Extensive research has been done on how women and men construct their genders through their language, both trans (e.g. Zimman, 2017) and cis (e.g. Podesva & van Hofwegen, 2016), while research is generally lacking on people of other gender identities (see Gratton, 2016; Rechsteiner & Sneller, 2021). Further, research on style-shifting has departed from the assumption that identity is static (e.g. Podesva, 2007). This research fills these gaps in the literature, investigating style-shifting in genderfluid speakers. The analysis focused on a phonetic feature associated with binary gender identities in American English: /s/ articulation. I hypothesized that genderfluid people use variables in ways that align with cis people and the hegemonic norms of gender, for example, if they are feeling more feminine, they will use the variables associated with femininity (raised /s/ center of gravity (COG)), making use of the semiotic process of highlighting (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004).

Six genderfluid speakers were asked to record themselves speaking extemporaneously and reading the Rainbow Passage while at various genders. After each recording, they filled out a survey that captured information on how they were feeling in that moment, both in regard to gender, and other aspects of their identity and overall emotional state (Gratton, 2016). The speakers were recruited from a gender-diverse college in the Pacific Northwest.

Each recording was transcribed and forced-aligned. The variable of interest is the COG of /s/, which has been found to correlate with femininity in both binary gender and sexuality (see Calder, 2019, Campbell-Kibler, 2011, Podesva & van Hofwegen, 2016). Because the label "genderfluid" can mean different things to different people, primarily within-speaker analysis was used to see what ways, if any, a speakers' language changes as they experience, construct, and express their different genders.

Gender was quantified on a variety of scales, most of which were devised by the participants themselves through an initial interview. There were Likert scales (0-6) for several different properties including masculine, feminine, and others, with each participant contributing two scales that accurately and affirmingly reflect their personal range of gender.

Using the frameworks of indexicality (Ochs, 1992; Silverstein, 1985; Calder, 2019) and tactics of intersubjectivity (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004), this study investigated if and how genderfluid speakers use /s/ articulation in the indexing and construction of their own genders. The hypothesis was partially supported, in that one of the six speakers did this, but three of the participants did the reverse, and increased feelings of masculinity resulted in a raised /s/ COG. For some participants, their devised gender scales did correlate with /s/ COG, and for others it did not. For two of my speakers, there was no correlation between /s/ COG and any independent measures I considered. The main conclusion is that genderfluid speakers are not a monolith, and use /s/ differently, though there are patterns in the way it is used.

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