Indexical meanings of [s+] among Copenhagen youth: Social perception of a phonetic variant in different linguistic contexts
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The social meanings of fronted versus alveolar (s) – [s+] vs. [s] – have been studied in English by several researchers. The use of [s+] in English seems to often evoke stereotypical perceptions of male speakers as gay (Campbell-Kibler (2011), Levon (2006), Mack & Munson (2011)). In Danish [s+] also seems to be quite strongly associated with femininity or gayness. However, [s+] has also been observed to be used in social and linguistic contexts where the social meanings appear to be different.

Linguistic features do not carry specific indexical meanings of their own, but can have different meanings in different clusters of features (e.g. Podesva 2007). Two such clusters are the clusters of features that are stereotypically associated with “modern Copenhagen speech” on the one hand, and “street language” on the other. These clusters are associated by young Copenhageners with categories of speakers that stereotypically have very different social characteristics. Built on previous findings and acquaintance with public discourse about the subject, our main question is to which extent [s+] contributes to different social meanings in the two types of speech. Is the use of [s+] observed in “street language” part of a composition where the femininity or gay indexicality is used in combination with other features and other indexical meanings to create a sum of different indexical meanings? Or does the use of [s+] in this type of speech not construct femininity or gayness at all – but does it instead contribute to the overall heterosexual masculinity associated with this type of speech?

In this paper we present and discuss responses to the use of [s] and [s+] by male speakers in two different registers (Agha 2007) labelled “modern Copenhagen speech” and “street language”. Data was collected in two high schools in different areas of Copenhagen. Using the matched guise technique we collected two rounds of data; the first one using open-ended questionnaires, the second using a fixed scales format, where the scales were based on results from the first round. We designed stimuli that differed only in the quality of the sibilant. This was done by splicing tokens of [s] and [s+] into short samples of speech, thereby creating completely matched guises. Results show that the [s+] indexes femininity and gayness when it occurs in “modern Copenhagen”, whereas the (s)-variation has a different and less significant effect when occurring in “street language”. We discuss the implications for theories of indexical fields (Silverstein 2003, Eckert 2008) and the relation between features and clusters of features in speakers’ perceptions. The second round of data collection furthermore contained a recognition task, where informants were asked to mark which variant they heard in each of the eight guises. Results from this part of the study indicates that the more social potential a specific linguistic feature has in a certain register, the more potential the feature has to be recognized.