Individual attitudes and listener stereotypes in the perception of gender and sexuality
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Over the past 20 years, a number of experimental studies have attempted to isolate the linguistic correlates of perceived gender and sexuality in men (see Munson & Babel 2007 for a review). While this research programme has had a fair amount of success in identifying potential relevant linguistic features, scholars have also demonstrated the high level of variability in listener judgments that exists and hence the difficulty in obtaining consistent perceptual findings. In this paper, I explore this perceptual variability in more detail by examining the extent to which individual differences in listener attitudes to gender/sexuality as well as listeners’ own social group memberships have an impact on the perceived indexical properties of particular linguistic features. My goal in doing so is to integrate an examination of the social, attitudinal and contextual factors affecting sociolinguistic perception, and so contribute to the development of a more nuanced account of linguistic indexicality more broadly (e.g., Hay et al 2006; Campbell-Kibler 2009).

My arguments are based on the results of a modified matched-guise experiment that was designed to investigate the intersection of perceptions of gender, sexuality and social class in Britain. Three linguistic features were examined: TH-fronting, a widespread feature of working-class speech in the UK (e.g., Kerswill & Williams 2002; Foulkes & Docherty 2007); mean pitch, an oft-cited correlate of perceived gender in men (e.g., Gaudio 1994; Campbell-Kibler 2011); and the spectral shape of /s/, a feature argued to be linked to a gay male style of speech (Munson et al 2006). To test these features, three male speakers were recorded reading the same short passage. These recordings were then re-synthesised to create three sets of eight experimental stimuli that differed only in their respective settings for the three variables (i.e., +/- TH-fronting; high/low mean pitch; neutral/negative sibilant skewness). The re-synthesised stimuli were presented to 165 British listeners who rated the speakers on a variety of personality and identity-linked scales. Following the perception task, listeners also completed a short survey (adapted from Pleck et al 1994) that was designed to assess listeners’ attitudes towards masculinity.

Analyses demonstrate that social, attitudinal and contextual factors are all implicated in listeners’ perceptual reactions. While mean pitch, for example, is negatively correlated with perceived intelligence for all listeners, it only serves as an index of gayness for those who maintain more traditional attitudes towards masculinity. In contrast, sibilant skewness serves as an index of gayness for heterosexual listeners only, irrespective of explicit attitudes. This sibilant effect among heterosexual listeners is, moreover, salient enough to disrupt an otherwise robust association between TH-fronting and perceived speaker “likeability” when skewness and fronting are presented together. These findings are important because they support the claim that the social meanings of linguistic features are under-specified and variable (Eckert 2008). I would add that the findings also highlight the centrality of stereotypes and other normative systems of belief to the perceptual elaboration of sociolinguistic meaning.