East end boys and west end girls: /s/-fronting in southeast England

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In this paper, we revisit the impact of gender and social class on language (e.g., Eckert 1989, 2000; Labov 1990; Milroy et al 1994) through an investigation of the variable realization of /s/ in southeast England. Previous work on /s/ variation in English has suggested that, for a number of varieties, backer, more [ʃ] like variants are associated with men while more fronted realisations are associated with women. In addition, work in the UK has also demonstrated a positive correlation between /s/-fronting and higher levels of social class (Stuart-Smith 2007). Building on this, we examine the ways in which gender and social class interact and specifically consider the possibility that speakers may use gender-linked variation to construct class-based identities.

Our data come from speakers in two British television programmes: Made in Chelsea and The Only Way is Essex. Both programmes are "scripted reality" shows that follow a group of young friends in the greater London area. The class stratified sample – upper-class Chelsea and working-class Essex – provide an ideal test site for examining how gender and class are imagined and linguistically constructed in the relevant communities (e.g., Coupland 2001).

Quantitative analyses of 1170 tokens of /s/ produced by 24 speakers in our sample demonstrate a systematic pattern of sex-differentiation across all speakers: women have significantly higher centres of gravity (CoG) and spectral peak frequencies in their /s/ productions than the men, as consistent with previous work on this feature (e.g., Munson et al 2006; Stuart-Smith 2007). Further analysis reveals that this differentiation is quantitatively much more extreme in Essex than it is in Chelsea. In Chelsea, women’s CoG and peak frequency levels are only slightly higher than the men’s, and there is substantial overlap in the distributions. By contrast, the Essex women’s CoGs and peak frequencies are on average nearly twice those of the Essex men’s, and there is little overlap in the distributions. In addition, significant differences emerge in the quality of /s/ produced by the Essex men as compared to all other speakers. While for all speakers peak frequency and CoG are positively correlated, for the Essex men the slope of that correlation is significantly flatter than for all other groups. We hypothesize that this finding may indicate that Essex men produce lower energy realizations of /s/ in the high frequency range, and we consider other spectral measures (including skewness and kurtosis) to further explore this claim.

Overall then, we suggest that while sex-linked differences are evident in both groups of speakers, Essex speakers exaggerate these differences so as to create hyper-gendered articulations of /s/ as part of their construction of a distinctive class-based identity. For Essex women, this seems to involve a heightened fronting of /s/, while for Essex men variation in the quality of /s/ produced also seems to play a role. We support these interpretations with information regarding other social practices in which Essex speakers engage, and discuss the implications of our analysis for sociolinguistic treatments of gender and social class more broadly.