Introduction

In the media today, we are seeing a distinct and noticeable shift in the representation of LGBTQ characters (particularly gay men) in television and film. Where in the past we almost exclusively saw characters such as Jodie Dallas in *Soap* (played by Billy Crystal), representing a particularly “fay” and effeminate characterization of a gay man; or perhaps more notably, Jack (as played by Sean Hayes) in *Will & Grace*, who proudly and flamboyantly flaunts his sexuality; today we are instead beginning to see a heteronormative representation of gay men in mainstream media, which can be seen both as a positive (the implication being that not all gay men fall into the category of “feminine” in regards to gender-coding) and a negative (suggesting that there is a “more realistic,” gay man, thereby unfairly and generally cannibalizing a representation within the community itself).

Representation in general can be considered a positive, especially in regards to the critical acclaim and general popularity of series such as *Modern Family*, wherein we see two of the main characters – Cam and Mitch (as played by Eric Stonestreet and Jesse Tyler Ferguson, respectively) – who present a gay couple in a relatively positive way (there are still some tropes and stereotypes at play, but that is the subject of future papers). Perhaps less notably, but with great praise in the LGBTQ community, we see Hank (Kevin Daniels) in the FX series *Sirens*, who stands as openly gay, but is gender-coded masculine – a rare occurrence in and of itself.

However, while instances such as these can have mixed implications for the LGBTQ community, it poses an interesting scenario as a result. Where we saw in the past a clear and almost atypical representation of femininity in gay men (characters that “sounded” gay), today we are seeing something of a straight-washing in the media’s representation – suggesting that an entire identity is being forced to the background in order to make room for a “more realistic” depiction – unfairly creating a “better than” mentality within the community itself. This dichotomy between the two is where we see an important (although admittedly loaded) linguistic question being posed in the same vein as Richard Thorpe’s 2010 film *Do I Sound Gay?* and that is: what does the gay voice sound like?
While this question is relatively nebulous due to the connotations that the query suggests, it is not the first time that the notion has been considered by linguists. The concept of “lavender linguistics” (the concept of LGBTQ linguistic characteristics as advanced by William Leap) has recognized that while not indicative of sexual orientation in and of themselves, there are several distinct characteristics at play that often lead a listener to draw this conclusion (while still being groundless and highly presumptuous in the same right). These perceived characteristics of gay speech most notably include: vowel extension/shortening, vowel shift, pitch shift, S-Fronting, sibilance, and lexical; and exist as the (relatively stereotypical) attributes one might associate with overtly-feminized “gay speech.”

With this factor in mind, I chose to observe a relatively mainstream – and furthermore actual (as opposed to caricature) – representation of feminized gay men in order to see which attributes are perhaps the most prevalent in gay speech. Due to the relatively limited selection of mainstream representations of this archetype, RuPaul’s Drag Race stood out as a clear focus in order to observe these characteristics at play both in an honest and plentiful manner – both in the interest of simplification and economy of work.

That being said, I think it should be noted that correlation does not equal causation, especially in regards to one’s sexuality. The purpose of this research is not to prove that there is in fact a “gay voice,” but is instead meant to observe the characteristics associated with what people happen to consider as “sounding gay,” and ultimately see which of these characteristics is the most prevalent and potentially theorize as to why that is. This is not meant to persuade or convince or create a field guide to determining one’s place on the spectrum. Instead this piece is meant to see what characteristics are at play and perhaps even quell some of the notions that unfairly label speech as a representation of sexuality.

**Methodology**

For the purpose of this research, I chose to observe RuPaul’s Drag Race, because first and foremost, it falls under the category of reality television, whereas sitcom characters are undoubtedly a product of writing and intent, and are thereby unreliable representations for just this reason. Furthermore, the participants in the program itself are typically gender-coded feminine – thus lending itself to observation, as instances of observable characteristics would (hopefully) be more prevalent. Using the notions of “lavender linguistics” and pulling from previous research done on the concepts of gay vocalization and the characteristics therein by such linguists as Erez Levon, Don Kulik, Robert Podesva, and Emma Teitel, I observed the introductory segments (participant introduction segment only) from five episodes of RuPaul’s Drag Race (from the five most recent seasons to date,) noting instances of the aforementioned distinguishable characteristics: vowel
extension/shortening (i.e. bye as /bau/,) vowel shift (Californian accent/tonality,) pitch shift (vocal fry/falsetto,) s-fronting (/s/ → /θ/),) sibilance, and lexical (e.g., fish, gagging, eleganza, etc.). From here I was able to determine which instances are the most prevalent and typical of “gay speech,” and thus, could most closely be associated with the premises of feminine gender coding and identification as it relates to sexual orientation.

**Research and Analysis**

Taking note of the above characteristics, I was able to gather the following data through my observation of these segments. First and foremost, I wanted to provide an individual breakdown of each episode in regards to the characteristics as follows:
With these statistics in mind it is fairly easy to see that certain characteristics are more prevalent than others – pitch shift for instance, routinely showed up in the observed segments, allowing the resting total count for said characteristics to be almost triple that of the second and third most frequently observed characteristics (lexical and sibilance). Alternately, some characteristics rarely showed up during observation – specifically, s-fronting and vowel-shift, (resting counts at four and sixteen instances respectively over the course of all observed segments) barely register as an attribute due to the significantly rare instances of usage.

While some characteristics remained relatively consistent throughout each observed segment, while others rarely observed, others still (when observed through a chronological perspective) revealed a relatively distinct and unique curve regarding usage:

As you can see, lexical characteristics reached something of a peak at season five, but have been maintaining a steady decline since. It would be interesting to see if instances continue to diminish over time, as it would suggest that lexical markers are becoming less and less frequent – begging the question of whether or not this aspect of “gay speech” is a reliable indicator, or more or less based off of trends within the community itself.

Another curious aspect I noticed while observing these segments is that s-fronting occurred more often than not when spoken by participants from Puerto Rico and rarely otherwise. While relatively surprising in the context of this research, it was not that surprising dialectically, as in Spanish-speaking countries (such as Spain) where the seseo is present, the “s” phoneme /s/ is often pronounced /θ/. To illustrate this aspect, consider the pronunciation of the Barcelona: whereas in English it is typically pronounced /bərˈsɛloʊnə/, a native speaker on the other hand may
ronounce it as /barəlona/ fronting the “s” sound as such. With this aspect in mind, this particular characteristic becomes significantly less reliable as an association to “gay speech,” but rather as an indicator of nationality instead.

The other characteristics observed (vowel lengthening and vowel shift) provided relatively inconsistent results overall. While in some observed segments there was a relatively significant amount of observed instances for each characteristic, others still presented few, if any. With vowel shift for instance, the frequency seemed largely dependent on the dialect (hence being referred to as the Californian shift) of the speaker himself (an aspect that can be interpreted similarly to s-fronting). Comparatively, vowel extension/shortening seemed to occur intermittently as well – however, considering the scenario of the segments themselves (first introductions/meetings) the frequency of the incidents themselves could be interpreted as something of a false representation – being that even in “straight speech” people have a tendency to lengthen vowels in introductions as a means to convey positivity or excitement. Thus, this particular linguistic characteristic could be perceived as more mannerism than linguistic component.

**Discussion**

While this research was never intended to give a definitive answer to the original question (largely due to the relatively narrow scope that the research itself entailed) it did manage to provide some interesting insight into the attributes related to “lavender linguistics.” Generally speaking, the characteristics in and of themselves, while observable, are not necessarily traits that should be associated or linked to “gay speech,” primarily as they are not guaranteed to occur in the first place. Furthermore, because the original question is posed to find difference, as a result it can be seen as an attempt to marginalize an otherwise already relegated group.

All in all, while these characteristics may be indicative of gay speech on a larger scale, the relatively nominal results I gathered in my research make them relatively unreliable as indicators on the whole. Consequentially, I would go on to suggest that the bulk of these observed traits are not necessarily representative, but coincidental at best. Furthermore, given the relatively precarious associations that many of these characteristics bear in regards to their indication/prevalence in “gay speech,” this research did not effectively answer the originally posed question. Instead, it suggests an entirely different one as a result.

Whereas initially I hoped to see what characteristics could be the most closely associated with “gay speech” as a whole, I instead discovered that many of these traits (even when the observed subjects could potentially be seen as the most likely suspects to utilize them in the first place) are not adequate or reliable indicators in and of themselves. While certain features –especially pitch
shift — did seem to occur at a relatively high frequency in the observed segments comparatively speaking, one trait alone is not adequate representation (or even a logical correlation) to the implications of the original inquiry.

Instead, my results lead me to question whether or not the premise of "lavender linguistics" is fair in its attempt to relate what are, in essence, merely the qualities of linguistics as a whole to sexual preference using a biased parameter. By comparison, if one were to try and attribute linguistic aspects to "straight speech," it seems like the end result would be one that unfairly presents it as "normal," suggesting the opposite for "gay speech" (i.e. hegemony.) While it does present an interesting sociolinguistic experiment, it still can only be described as remarkably heteronormative and biased from the start, and at best only perpetuates anxiety about something that cannot be changed — and besides, the pitch of your voice holds no bearing in sexual orientation and is not adequate evidence even if the two should coincide. Ultimately, it appears that the original question has no real answer — so logically, it should bear only one snarky response as a result: and that is, "like a normal voice, only fabulous."

Works Cited


Do I Sound Gay?. Dir. David Thorpe. Sundance Selects, 2014. Film.


