

Meaning across cultures: /s/ duration and perceptions of sexual orientation

Andy Law (they/them/their)



Queen Mary
University of London

a.j.law@qmul.ac.uk

@andylaw31

Lavender Languages and Linguistics 24
University of Nottingham
28-30 April 2017

Background

Previous research

Historical North American English (**NAE**) focus in sociophonetics of sexuality research; recent diversification of sampling

Relevant findings

- > Frame of variable a source of perceptual variation e.g. “modern Copenhagen speech” versus “street language” (Pharao *et al.* 2014)
- > Longer /s/ correlates with perception as gay or no effect

Culture, perception and stereotypes

- > Rácz and Shepácz (2013) suggest perception of sexuality is culturally situated; levels of acceptance key
- > Levon (2014) suggests strong influence of stereotypes on perception



Research questions

1. Does /s/ duration hold the same indexical value outside of North America?
2. How do cultural background* and stereotypes affect the perception of sexual orientation through the voice?

* i.e. levels of acceptance of non-normative sexual orientations within listener’s culture

Methods

Speech data

Method

- > Read passage; short conversation in pre-acquainted, same sexual orientation pairs
- > 30-second clip per speaker per environment

Speakers

- > Four gay, four straight men
- > Northern England English (**NEE**) (York)
- > Three gay speakers involved in LGBT activism
- > Controls: age; age entered Northern England; ethnicity; gender assigned at birth; physique



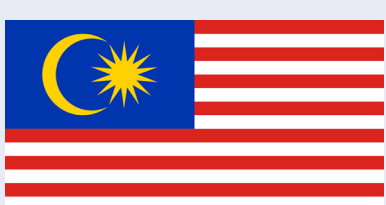
Perceptual experiment

Method

- > Seven-point semantic-differential scale: “definitely gay” to “definitely straight” (yes, problematic!)
- > Variety of obfuscating questions on other characteristics
- > Malay and Russian translations
- > Online distribution: university administrators; Facebook

Listeners

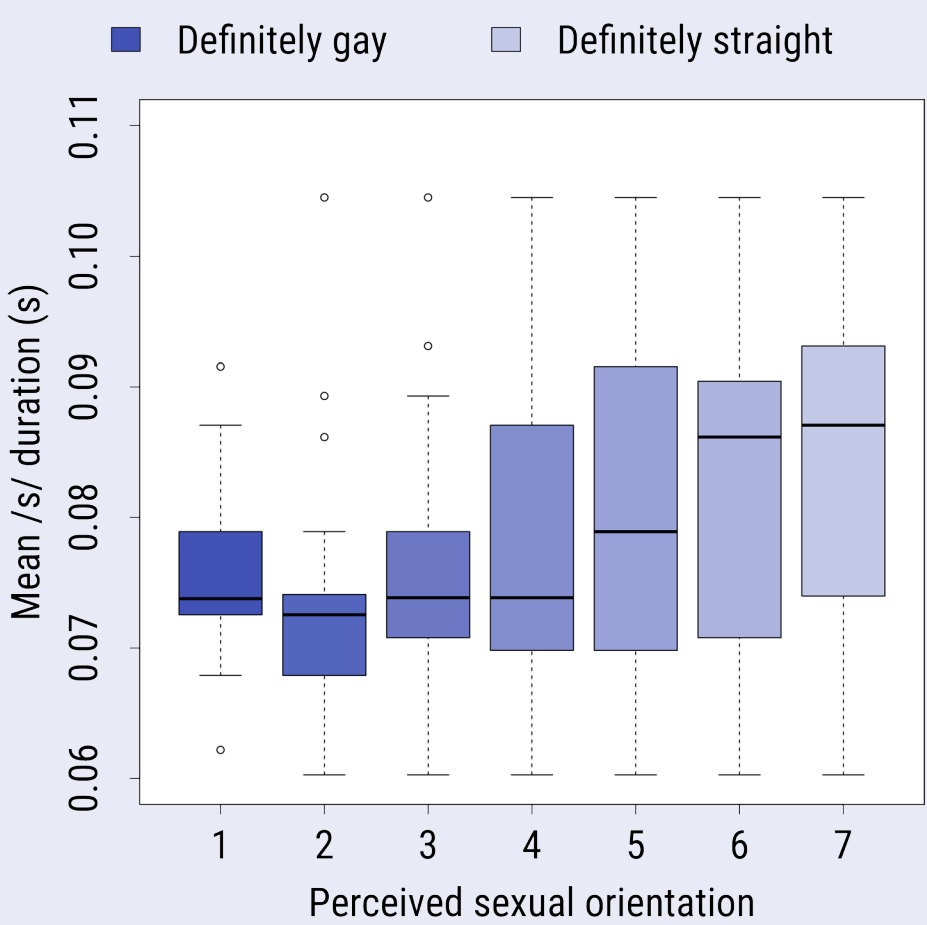
- > 45 total: 17 British (**UK**); 8 Belarusian; 8 Malaysian; 9 elsewhere – stark differences in Social Progress Index, particularly “tolerance for homosexuals”
- > 2/3 straight; 2/3 women; >2/3 18-35; only one trans



Results

1. Longer /s/ significantly correlates with perceptions of straight-ness, contrary to NAE findings (random effect: listener)

Other variables correlate in same direction as NAE (/s/ spectral skew and peak frequency; pitch/f0)



2. Listener cultural background* and mean /s/ duration interaction nonsignificant (random effect: listener)

* country of origin broken down into: (1) UK, Belarus, Malaysia and other (2) UK and other (including Belarus and Malaysia)

Discussion and conclusions

Discussion

- > Support for frame-based variation (NAE and NEE perceptual differences)
- > Intersectional perceptual variation: normative /s/ defined by interaction of culture and sexual orientation
- > Intercultural perceptual consistency: support for significance of stereotypes (Levon 2014) and their consistency across cultures (Blashill and Powlishta 2009) – same indexical resources, same perceptions
- > Rise of the *global gay*: “gay” coming to mean the same everywhere so everyone can recognise gay speech?

Conclusions

- > Perception of sexual orientation is complex
- > NAE findings may be inconsistent with patterns elsewhere
- > Listener cultural background unimportant



References

Blashill, Aaron J. and Kimberley K. Powlishta. 2009. Gay stereotypes: the use of sexual orientation as a cue for gender-related attributes. *Sex Roles* 61(11): 783–793.

Levon, Erez. 2014. Categories, stereotypes and the linguistic perception of sexuality. *Language in Society* 43(5): 539–566.

Pharao, Nicolai, Marie Maegaard, Janus Spindler Møller and Tore Kristiansen. 2014. Indexical meanings of [s+] among Copenhagen youth: social perception of a phonetic variant in different prosodic contexts. *Language in Society* 43(1): 1–31.

Rácz, Péter and András Shepácz. 2013. The perception of high frequency sibilants in Hungarian male speech. *Acta Linguistica Hungarica* 60(4): 457–468.