

Style-shifting and power dynamics: Comparing many variables

Matthew J. Gordon, Rebecca Honeyball, Lydia Ghuman – University of Missouri, Columbia

In popular discourse, women are commonly criticized for embracing speech features that make them sound uncertain or weak. A classic target is "uptalk" while "vocal fry" has recently risen to the top of the complaints list. Linguists have pointed out that such features are used by both men and women and have been for some time. Still, we may wonder how individuals draw on such features (and others) to index stances of deference, certainty, etc. The present study takes this broader cultural conversation as a backdrop to investigate how constructions of and responses to authority intersect with gender dynamics through stylistic variation.

We explore the stylistic choices of young men and women (aged 18-25) from the central US. The speakers (n=22) were recorded in two main contexts: in casual conversations with peers and during a sociolinguistic interview with an older male "authority figure" (an unfamiliar professor at their university). Several were recorded in both same-sex and cross-sex dyads with peers and completed a task involving one partner giving instructions to the other. The goal was to create situations with distinct power dynamics.

Stylistic variation is investigated with regard to a wide range of linguistic features in order to test whether some types of variables are more subject to style-shifting than others. In selecting the variables we sought features that were (a) very widespread in American English, and (b) discussed in the sociolinguistic literature or in popular media as varying along gender lines. Moreover, we are interested in how varying degrees of consciousness might factor into stylistic choices, and so we consider features of varying degrees of salience. We examine segmental phonological features (e.g. fronting of GOOSE vowel; frequency of /s/) and suprasegmental features (e.g. uptalk; creaky voice) as well as the discourse particle *like*.

Results indicate that all of the features examined serve as indexical resources for stylistic variation though, not surprisingly, individuals differ in which features and how much they vary. For example, we find creaky voice is used at roughly the same overall rate by men and by women, though women generally show much greater stylistic variation and creak more when speaking with peers (especially male peers). It's perhaps not surprising that much discussed features like discourse *like* vary stylistically, but we are intrigued to find differences related to /s/, a variable commonly examined in studies of gender and sexuality. Drawing on mean frequency (center of gravity) measurements, we find stylistic differences for several speakers even in read speech; i.e., when reading the same passage in front of a peer vs. a professor. Our results are discussed in terms of current research in gender and style.