

Sexual Orientation, Masculinity, and Cross-Linguistic Perceptions of /s/

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It is well documented that /s/ variation may act as a robust cue to sexual orientation and non-normative masculinity in both production and perception. This indexical association has been examined across multiple languages (English: Campbell-Kibler 2011; Zimman 2013; Levon 2006, 2014; Danish: Phrao *et al.* 2014; French: Hobart 2014; Hungarian: Rácz and Shepácz 2013; Spanish: Mack 2010; Walker *et al.* 2014). While all previous perceptual work has analyzed monolingual stimuli, we extend the paradigm to include cross-linguistic stimuli. We conducted a cross-linguistic Matched Guise study in which native English listeners respond to native English, French, German, and Estonian stimuli. This design tests how willing English respondents are to apply their socioindexical knowledge of /s/ variation to languages for which they have limited or no knowledge.

The Matched Guise test is based on experimental stimuli manipulated from excerpts of read speech from four male speakers, one each from four languages (English, French, German, and Estonian), each pretested by native listeners prior to manipulation as sounding relatively more 'straight' and 'masculine' than other speakers from a larger sample. The /s/ guises were created by cross-splicing three different /s/ tokens ([s-], [s], and [s+]; created in isolation by the first author) into each excerpt. Also included are guises that vary according to three levels of f0 pitch manipulation, for each language, based on excerpts containing no sibilants. Native English (n=27) respondents, from a variety of regional and social backgrounds, listened to all stimuli in all four languages and rated each one on six attribute scales (e.g. Masculine/Feminine; Gay/Straight), written in their respective language. Data was collected from native speakers of English, French and German.

The results (Figure 1) show that English listeners rated both higher pitch and frontier /s/ as sounding more 'gay' and 'feminine' than mid pitch and mid /s/. This effect held across all four stimulus languages. No results are seen between low- and mid-variants of pitch or /s/. Our results show that English listeners use /s/ variation as an indexical cue just as robustly when listening to languages they may be unfamiliar with (French, German, and Estonian). This effect can not be attributed to culturally universal patterns, like sound symbolism, since the German and French listeners' ratings were not affected by the /s/ manipulation in any stimulus language. Rather, the English listeners are extending their language specific socio-indexical knowledge to unfamiliar language stimuli. If the indexical meanings English listeners have for /s/ variation are not limited to English speech, then this raises the question of how indexical meaning is associated with grammatical knowledge.

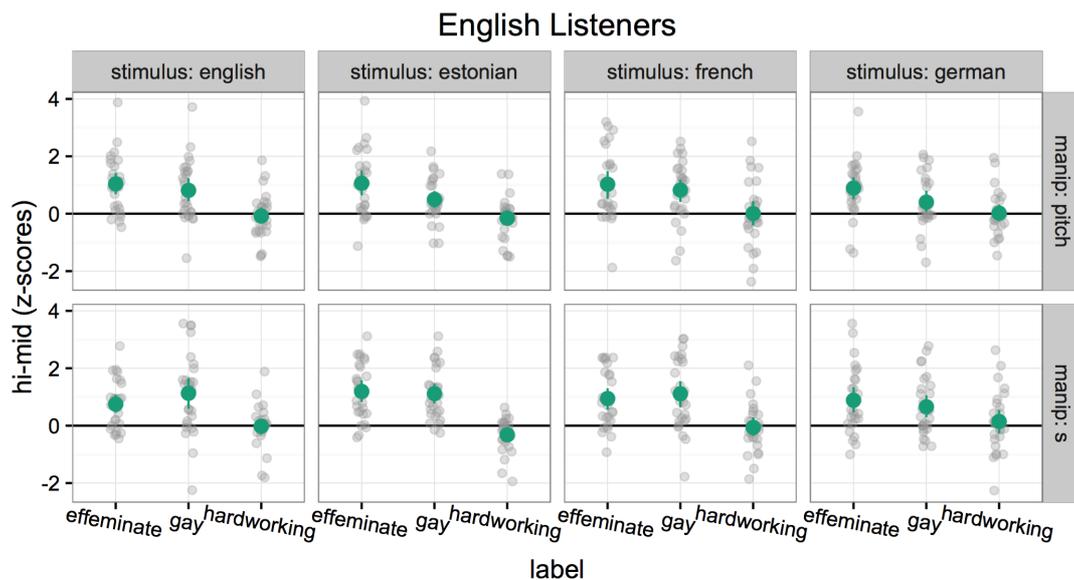


Figure 1: Means and bootstrap confidence intervals for 'gay', 'effeminate', and 'hardworking' rating scales between mid and high manipulations of pitch and /s/ for English listeners

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