Comparing coronals – a sociophonetic study of /s/ and /t/ in Danish drag queens

The articulation of /s/ has been shown through acoustic analysis in many languages to differ between the sexes, with female speakers having a tendency to have higher peak frequencies and/or spectral center of gravity in their productions of /s/ than male speakers (Flipsen et al. 1999). Other studies have shown that gay male speakers may have peak frequencies that are as high as those found for female speakers (Munson et al. 2006) and a study of /s/ in Glaswegian found that working class adolescent girls had peak frequencies as low as those of adult males (Stuart-Smith 2007). These studies suggest that differences in /s/ are not automatic consequences of vocal tract physiology, but can reflect gendered differences in articulation.

To further study the sociophonetics of coronals, we looked at the acoustics of /s/ and /t/ in a group of Danish drag queens appearing on a talk radio show. We include both of the coronal obstruents attested in Copenhagen Danish, because the stop /t/ is affricated, and has been shown to be involved in indexing gender in combination with /s/ (Pharao & Maegaard 2017). The study of gendered sociophonetic variables in the context of drag queen performances is of interest, because drag queens present an exaggerated image of femininity (Barret 1999, Calder 2019). By focusing on drag queen performances in a radio broadcast, we hypothesized that gendered sociophonetic variables like /s/ and /t/ would play an important role in how the drag queen personas were presented. 20 tokens of /s/ and /t/ were analysed in the speech of 5 drag queens and compared to the same amount of tokens of /s/ and /t/ in the speech of 4 gay men, 4 straight women and 4 straight men also obtained from talk radio shows.

Spectral center of gravity was found to be significantly lower in /s/ for the straight male speakers than for any of the other three groups. No significant difference was found between the straight women, the gay men and the drag queens suggesting that the speakers in these three groups have a more fronted /s/ than the straight male speakers. For the affrication of /t/ the center of gravity was found to be equal in the speech of the straight men and the drag queens and significantly lower than in the speech of straight women and the gay men, who again did not differ significantly from each other. Taken together, the straight women and gay men appear to have fronted articulations of both coronals as compared to straight men, whereas the drag queens appear only to front their /s/.

We interpret these results as an indication that the contrast between articulatorily related sociophonetic variables may be used for socially meaningful effect. By not fronting their /t/, the drag queens obtain a larger acoustic difference to their fronted /s/, effectively using the context to increase the social salience of the /s/.

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References


