Politically Speaking: Prosodic variation among gay men in Israel

This paper presents the results of a sociolinguistic and ethnographic inquiry of gay men in Israel. While Israel is one of the most politically progressive nations with respect to the legal rights of its gay and lesbian citizens, only in the past 15 years have homo ‘gay’ and lesbīt ‘lesbian’ become socially accepted identity categories (Fink and Press 1999; Kama 2000; Walzer 2000). This disparity between legal enfranchisement and social acceptance is due in large part to powerful national narratives that define belonging in Israeli society as grounded in a discourse of the traditional family. In this study, I analyze prosodic variation in the speech of gay men in order to examine how these men vary their use of specific features in their linguistic performance of sexuality. Prosodic features are chosen both because they figure prominently in the literature on language and sexuality (Gaudio 1994; Levon 2006; Podesva 2003; Smyth et al. 2003), and because they are perceptually salient in the Israeli context.

I present a sociolinguistic analysis of the speech of 18 gay men, who were observed and recorded over a period of 12 months. Of different ages, ethnicities and political affiliations, these men represent the diversity of gay life in Israel, and the different ways in which gay identities can get linguistically materialized. Quantitative and qualitative results suggest that linguistics features such as pitch range, pitch dynamism and F0 floor may be significantly influenced by external social factors that determine how these men imagine their own sexuality. For example, those men who strongly identify with Israel as a nation and with their own identity as Israelis show little evidence of distinctive linguistic practice that could potentially be linked to the expression of a gay sexuality. On the other hand, those men who are more critical of Israeli society and distance themselves from identifying as Israelis make use of specific linguistic practices that challenge the norms of gender and sexuality in Israel.

These results are meaningful because they illustrate how gay sexuality remains partially marginalized in Israel, despite the progressive nature of the legal system. Israeli gay men find themselves in many ways caught between their own desires to realize their sexual identities, and the dominant conceptions of national belonging that exclude the possibility of that realization. Language provides a window into how these men negotiate this tension, employing different linguistic strategies to variably align themselves as more or less affiliated with the standardized conception of Israeli identity, and the discourses of gender and sexuality inherent in that conception.

References
Kama, Amit. 2000. From ter ra incognita to ter ra firma: The logbook of the voyage of gay men's community into the Israeli public sphere. Journal of Homosexuality 38:133-.