

The fierceness of fronted /s/:
Social and linguistic influences on a variable among San Francisco drag queens

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This talk explores the relative influences of social and linguistic pressures on the realization of a phonetic variable, focusing on the pronunciation of /s/ in a community of radical drag queens in San Francisco (SF). The drag queens and queer performance artists in the community, many of them male-bodied, share an anti-normative orientation to gender, which manifests in their recruitment of phonetic resources indexing femininity. Part of this phonetic repertoire is the pronunciation of /s/ forward in the mouth, which results in a high spectral center of gravity (COG) that has been shown to index femininity and queerness in language production and perception literature (e.g. Zimman 2013, Podesva & Van Hofwegen 2016). While the SoMa queens exhibit a fronted /s/ than their geographic peers, ethnographic analysis reveals that the queen's visual gender presentation influences the social uptake of fronted /s/. While ideologically feminine fronted /s/ is negatively evaluated when queens visually present as male, a visual transformation into their feminine personae enables the use of the feature to project 'fierceness', a positive type of femininity in the community. Given the influence of visual presentation on social uptake, the question remains whether visual presentation influences the variable's acoustic properties.

Using quantitative sociophonetic analysis, I explore the relative weights of the visual transformation and language-internal factors on the acoustic manifestation of /s/ among the SF queens. Taking data from recorded conversations during which queens visually transform using wigs, makeup, and shaping garments, I track changes in the realization of 3 acoustic dimensions of /s/ over the course of the transformation: COG, duration, and intensity. As the queens transform, /s/ COG decreases ($p=0.0003^{***}$), duration decreases ($p<0.0001^{***}$), and intensity increases ($p=0.0329^*$). The decrease in duration can be explained in terms of an increased speech rate ($p=0.0075^{**}$), which would also predict a decrease in /s/ COG and a decrease in /s/ intensity. While COG patterns according to the predicted language-internal influence, decreasing over the course of the transformation, /s/ intensity runs contrary to the prediction, increasing over the course of the transformation. I argue that language-internal pressures (increase in speech rate, decrease in /s/ duration) and social projects (the projection of 'fierce' femininity) compete in their relative influences on the acoustic realization of /s/ COG and intensity. The tensions between language and social influences are resolved in order to facilitate the projection of the 'fierce' persona. While decreased duration predicts the decrease in COG over the course of the transformation, the queens remain distinct from their geographic peers by maintaining a comparatively high COG. In addition, despite the predicted influence of decreased duration, queens acoustically underscore their ideologically feminine fronted /s/ with increased intensity.