

From *sissy* to *sickening*: the indexical landscape of /s/ in SoMa, San Francisco

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ABSTRACT:

This paper explores the relation between the linguistic and the visual in communicating social meaning and performing gender, focusing on fronted /s/ among a community of drag queens in SoMa, San Francisco. I argue that as orders of indexicality (Silverstein 2003) are established, linguistic features like fronted /s/ become linked with visual bodies. These body-language links can impose top-down restrictions on the uptake of gender performances. Non-normatively gendered individuals like the SoMa queens embody cross-modal figures of personhood (see Agha 2003; Agha 2004) like the *fierce queen* that forge higher indexical orders and widen the range of performative agency.

KEY WORDS:

Indexicality, performativity, queer linguistics, gender, drag queens

Introduction

This paper explores the relation between the linguistic and the visual in communicating social meaning. Specifically, I analyze the roles language and the body play in gender performances (see Butler 1990) among a community of drag queens and queer performance artists in the SoMa neighborhood of San Francisco, California, and what these gender performances illuminate about the ideological connections between language, body, and gender performativity more generally. I focus on fronted /s/, i.e. the articulation of /s/ forward in the mouth, which results in a higher acoustic frequency and has been shown to be ideologically linked with femininity, both in language production and perception (e.g., Campbell-Kibler 2011; Zimman 2013; Podesva and Van Hofwegen 2014). Through an acoustic analysis of /s/ production among eight SoMa queens, coupled with ethnographic observations and findings in previous sociolinguistic literature, I argue that through a type of “baptismal essentialization” (Silverstein 2003), linguistic forms—and undoubtedly other types of gender performances—become ideologically linked with certain types of bodies, a process I call *gender baptism*. The consequence of these ideological links is that gender performances may result in performative failure when emerging from bodies other than those established as appropriate through prior indexical orders. In other words, while gender can be articulated and performed in a myriad of ways, I argue that gender baptism—i.e., the essentialization of connections between body and performance forged through orders of indexicality—can impose top-down restrictions on performative agency. That is, not all possible performances are available to all subjects, in such a way that the desired social meaning is taken up by interlocutors.

I connect this argument with sociolinguistic understandings of social meaning and style— i.e., styles are meaningful clusters of linguistic variables (The Half Moon Bay Style Collective 2006; Podesva, Roberts, and Campbell-Kibler 2002), and the social meaning of any one variable is influenced by the stylistic context in which it is situated, including other variables that comprise the style. Eckert (2008) argues that each linguistic variable has an *indexical field*, a constellation of social meanings associated with that variable, any one of which is conjured interactionally based on stylistic context. I extend this concept and argue that, because of ideological associations forged through gender baptism, the body becomes part of the context that conditions indexical retrieval—the body may facilitate or inhibit a variable’s retrieval of a certain social meaning, depending upon connections forged between the body and a variable at previous orders of indexicality. In other words, not all bodies have access to the same range of social meanings for a particular variable.

Finally, I argue that gender non-conforming individuals like the SoMa queens combat these performative limitations by forging higher orders of indexicality, referencing and subverting lower order indexical links in order to allow for a greater range of performative agency. One of the ways this is accomplished is by visually transforming the body in order to exploit ideological connections between performances and visual signals, allowing access to performative resources and social meanings that would otherwise be ideologically inaccessible. In the case of SoMa queens, the transformation facilitates the embodiment of the *fierce queen*, a cross-modal figure of personhood (Agha 2004) that is legible and ratified in many queer communities of practice.

Gender variance and performativity

The concept of performativity was first introduced in Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* (1962). In this seminal work, Austin pushed the philosophy of language beyond the positivist approach in which utterances are merely constatives—i.e., utterances that denote something in the world and are evaluated in terms of their truth or falsity. Austin argued for the existence of performatives, utterances that are not truth conditional but rather accomplish something in the world when they are uttered (e.g., *I now pronounce you married* resulting in the binding marriage of two individuals). The success of a performative (i.e. that the performative accomplishes its intended purpose in the world) depends upon 'felicity conditions.' If felicity conditions are not met, the performative may fail (e.g., *I now pronounce you married* being uttered outside of a marriage ceremony or a courtroom not actually resulting in the binding marriage between two individuals).

Butler applied the concept of performativity to gender in 1990's *Gender Trouble*. She argued that gender is not a biological given, but rather, like Austin's performatives, it is accomplished in the world through performative acts. Gender is constituted repeatedly through the practiced citation of prior norms and conventions that constitute its felicity conditions. She also argues that bodies themselves are taken up into this discursive construction (1993), with certain types of bodies being constructed as normative or appropriate, and others being resigned to abjection; these abjected bodies comprise the 'supplement' (Derrida 1976; Inoue 2006) that is exterior to those bodies defined as legitimate, but necessary for the maintenance of the boundaries that define those bodies' very legitimacy. In sum, the gender binary—the coupling of 'male' and 'female' gender roles with 'male' and 'female' bodies—is discursively constructed in

contrast to those manifestations of gender that do not meet the performative felicity conditions and are therefore abjected.

In recent decades, the idea that gender is indirectly performed and constructed through practice has been explored by linguistic anthropologists and sociocultural linguists. In Ochs's (1992) study of the mothering styles of Samoan and Western mothers, she argues that gender is accomplished through stances toward mothering involving differing accommodation strategies between the two groups. Similarly, Eckert (1989) argued for a social construction of gender more complex than direct correlations between oppositional male/female categories and linguistic variables, showing that the use of features of the Northern Cities Shift by Detroit adolescent girls is mediated by membership in social groups. In addition, Bucholtz (1999) illustrated the ways a young white man incorporated features of African-American English in his narratives to construct a type of urban masculinity. And Mendoza-Denton's (2008) ethnography of cholas in a California high school explored the construction of non-normative 'macha' femininity through the use of language and visual semiotic resources like eyeliner, hair, and lipstick. Such work has proven instrumental in advancing the sociolinguistic understanding of gender beyond traditional variationist models that engage with gender only insofar as it is manifested through large-scale quantitative trends across broad speech communities. Indeed, incorporating performativity in studies of language variation has illuminated that gender identities like 'male' and 'female' are not only reflected in patterns of language use, but different ways of *doing* masculinity and femininity are constructed through practice. At the same time, one of the central possibilities of Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity remains underexplored in the sociolinguistic literature: that individuals can challenge binary gender roles themselves by performing their identities in ways that don't conform to the male-female dichotomy.

Butler argues that while gender performance is restricted by felicity conditions—i.e. normative conventions—the very act of performing gender is what constitutes these conditions. She argues that subversive performances of gender like drag can both expose the performative nature of gender itself and resignify what is socially conjured by a gender performance. In her 1993 work, *Bodies That Matter*, she suggests that all gender is drag:

To claim that all gender is like drag... is to suggest that “imitation” is at the heart of the heterosexual project and its gender binarisms, that drag is not a secondary imagination that presupposes a prior and original gender, but that hegemonic heterosexuality is itself a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations. (125)

The idea that all gender is imitation and none of it is prediscursive is echoed by famous drag performer RuPaul, whose well-known mantra is “We’re all born naked and the rest is drag” (1995; 2010).

The present work explores the potential of non-normative gender performances like drag to subvert the gender binary. Through an ethnographic and sociophonetic analysis of the pronunciation of /s/ among of drag performance artists in SoMa, San Francisco, I illustrate the ways in which gender non-conforming individuals may negotiate their abjected identities and make their performances of gender legible within communities of practice.

The SoMa queer performance art community

For three years, I participated (as both a researcher and performer) in a community of drag queens and queer performance artists in the industrial and rapidly gentrifying neighborhood of SoMa, San Francisco. SoMa is named for being located **S**outh of **M**arket Street, the city's main thoroughfare, which comprises the southern border of the city's downtown and financial district. SoMa occupies a significant position in San Francisco's queer history (see Rubin's seminal 1994 ethnography of SoMa's gay leather community), housing some of the city's oldest queer establishments (e.g., The Stud, established in 1966), most significant and well-known leather bars (e.g. The Eagle), and perhaps the country's largest and best-known BDSM festival, The Folsom Street Fair. While San Francisco's Castro neighborhood is perhaps the city's more famous gay mecca, SoMa represents the Castro's more deviant sibling, positioning itself as an underground alternative to the Castro's mainstream and commercial accessibility. While the Castro houses establishments that cater to wide audiences like the Castro Theater, the GLBT History Museum, and large dance clubs like The Café, SoMa is sprinkled with fetish shops, alternative events (catering to the leather, furry, and goth communities, for instance), and overtly sexualized venues like the Powerhouse (where I awkwardly walked in on a blow job being performed while collecting video and audio data for this project). The contrast between Castro and SoMa is further driven by the subsets of the LGBT community the neighborhoods cater to: the Castro is seen by many in San Francisco's queer community as catering largely to gay men (a fact that is perhaps evidenced by the naming of the GLBT History Museum and GLBT Historical Society with the 'G' first, rather than using the more widespread acronym 'LGBT'), while SoMa

events are seen as havens for queer individuals either too weird for the Castro or who feel their gender and/or sexual identities are not well represented there.

The ideological opposition between Castro and SoMa carries over into their respective drag communities. In Rusty Barrett's (1999) study of the performances of African-American drag queens, he describes two types of queens: 'glam queens' and 'messy' queens. Glam queens, on the one hand, "produce a physical representation of hyperfeminine womanhood... The ideal of glam drag is to be 'flawless,' or to have no visual hints of masculinity" (314). On the other hand, a 'messy' queen is one who doesn't live up to these standards of 'flawlessness'. They do not 'pass' as ideal women—and many don't intend to. This distinction between so-called 'glam' and 'messy' queens is reflected in the Castro-SoMa distinction. Castro queens generally prize beauty and glamour, embodying a polished aesthetic and excelling at intricately choreographed dance and lip-sync performances to beloved Top 40 hits. On the other hand, SoMa queens reject normative beauty standards and incorporate a less conventionally glamorous aesthetic. While glam queens wear extravagant costumes and jewelry, shave off their body hair, and practice "tucking" (i.e., pulling back and adhering the genitals with duct tape to minimize a visible bulge), it is not uncommon to see a SoMa queen with hairy legs, a visible crotch bulge, and even a beard. In other words, while SoMa queens do identify with femininity and incorporate feminine semiotic resources in their performances (including wigs, makeup, and dresses), many of them purposefully reject conventional beauty standards through the incorporation of visual signals that are less than 'flawless' (or at least through the neglect to hide those signals). In addition, drag performances in SoMa are often politically charged performance art pieces, relying more on shock value than polish. In one signature performance, SoMa queen Severina¹ stands on stage wearing a diaper and holding a staple gun, collects dollar bills from the audience, and staples

them to her flesh without lip-syncing to a word of the song playing over the speakers. While the polished performances of Castro queens reflect the accessible nature of the neighborhood, SoMa queens pride themselves on a punk-rock and rebellious orientation to drag.²



Figure 1

San Francisco glam queens in the Miss Gay California United States pageant



Figure 2

SoMa drag performers at The Stud

Furthermore, while most male-assigned drag queens maintain a male gender identity off stage, the boundary between stage persona and biographical identity is less rigid for SoMa queens. Many SoMa queens identify as non-binary or trans* in their daily lives, embracing femininity both on- and off-stage.

The importance of non-normative femininity among the SoMa queens in contrast to a wider gay culture in which masculinity is the pinnacle of desirability is a microcosm of the greater ideological opposition between masculinity and femininity. A fractally recursive (Irvine and Gal 2000) model of gender oppositions, in which the masculine-feminine dichotomy is reproduced at multiple fractal levels, represents contrasts between patriarchal normativity and deviance (see Figure 3). At the n-level, the dichotomy of the gender binary is constructed, while

sublevels within the ‘male’ superset reproduce the masc-femme contrast (i.e. ‘non-straight’ individuals assigned male gender at birth being ideologically linked with effeminacy at the $n+1$ level, and within that subset, ‘queer’ representing feminine identities rejected by homonormative ‘gayness’ at the $n+1+1$ level). In other words, at each order, one member of the contrast set, through being ideologically linked with femininity, is constructed as normatively deficient, with the deficiency of the feminine echoing its way down even into the $n+1+1$ level, where frequently-encountered phrases on gay hookup apps like ‘no fats, no femmes’ reproduce the idea that conventional masculinity is the only way to be of value in the homosexual market. The $n+1+1$ tension between normative gayness and radical queerness manifests in many contexts, both geographical and virtual, with the Castro-SoMa opposition being but one specific instantiation. While I don’t suggest any of the nodes or oppositions represented by this fractal model are essential or all-encompassing, these distinctions are nevertheless ideologically salient.



Figure 3

Fractal recursion of gendered oppositions

I focus on the SoMa community for a study of non-normative gender practices precisely because of the space it occupies in the social landscape. SoMa queens exist at multiple levels as the abject, the supplement that constructs its more masculine-oriented counterpart as legitimate. They embrace their place in the landscape as the queerest of the queer in San Francisco, overtly rejecting gender norms and embracing the femininity that renders them illegible in the broader ideology.

Fronted /s/ as a gender performance

While the drag artists analyzed here are stage performers, I explore gender performance in the Butlerian sense, rather than in the sense of staged performance. For this purpose, I focus on the fronting of /s/ in off-stage conversation. I view /s/ as a gender performance for a number of reasons. First, the fronting of /s/ has been linked with femininity in both speech production and perception studies. Secondly, while other linguistic features strongly correlated with gender may be influenced by biology (e.g., fundamental frequency, see Zimman 2017 for a review), variation in the production of /s/ results from differences in articulation rather than biologically governed differences (e.g., Strand 1999; Fuchs and Toda 2010; Flipsen et al 1999; Zimman 2013). Finally, the salience of the feature and its relation to certain types of bodies arguably contributes to its availability as a performative and indexical resource, with fronted /s/ being frequently characterized as a ‘gay lisp’ when emerging from a male body (see, in popular culture, Bowen 2002; Schulman 2015; *Do I Sound Gay?* 2014).

One acoustic measure that has been used to capture the fronted articulation of /s/ is center of gravity (COG), which represents the mean of where the spectral energy of a fricative is focused. Higher COG corresponds to more fronted articulations of /s/. While the spectral energy in /s/ occupies a high frequency range in general (above 4000 Hz in English, according to Shadle 1990; 1991), studies have shown that women produce /s/ with higher COG than men (e.g., Fuchs and Toda 2010; Hazenberg 2012). A review by Flipsen et al (1999) suggests that the COG range for /s/ produced by women is between 6500 and 8100 Hz, while for men the range is from 4000 to 7000 Hz. Though this acoustic difference has been shown robustly across multiple studies, it has been argued that /s/ production is socially rather than biologically conditioned (Strand 1999; Stuart-Smith 2007; Zimman 2013). The acoustic realization of /s/ is determined by the size of the cavity between the tongue and the top teeth (Shadle 1991) which is manipulated through articulation. Furthermore, production of /s/ has been shown to correlate with sexual orientation, with gay men producing fronter tokens than straight men (Munson et al 2006; Podesva and Van Hofwegen 2016).

In addition, fronted /s/ has been shown to be linked with femininity in numerous perception studies. A study by Strand (1999) asked participants to identify ambiguous auditory tokens as either /s/ or /ʃ/ (which has a lower frequency than /s/) and found that speakers placed the boundary between /s/ and /ʃ/ at a higher frequency when they believed they were listening to a female voice than a male voice. In other words, listeners expected female voices to produce /s/ tokens with higher COG than male voices. Finally, multiple perception studies have found that listeners rated male speakers as more gay-sounding and less heteronormatively masculine when they contained tokens with higher COG (Munson 2007; Campbell-Kibler 2011; Zimman 2013).

In this study, I expand upon the ideological link between fronted /s/ and femininity by exploring /s/ pronunciation among eight SoMa drag queens (who were assigned male gender at birth). Data come from video- and audio-recorded conversations³ during which participants visually transformed from male-presenting into their feminine drag personae, using materials like wigs, makeup, and undergarments. For each participant’s conversation, every token of /s/ was collected (14,085 tokens total) and COG measurements were taken for each token in Hz, to facilitate comparison with previous production studies. COG means were then calculated for each speaker. A visual comparison of SoMa queens’ COG with speakers from previous studies in Northern California is presented in Figure 4.

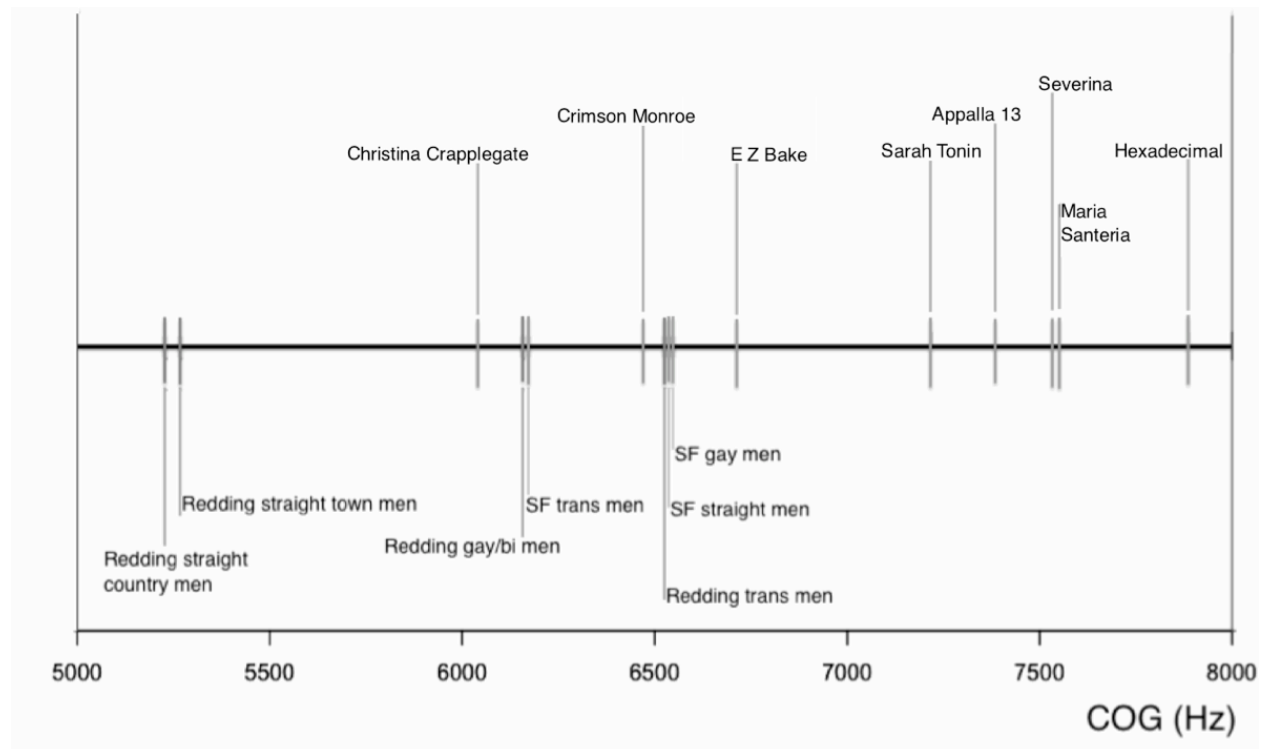


Figure 4

COG comparison with males from San Francisco (Zimman 2013) and Redding (Podesva and Van Hofwegen 2016)

As Figure 4 shows, all eight speakers fall at the higher end of the 4000-7000 Hz COG range for /s/ proposed by Flipsen et al for males (1999). In fact, 5 out of 8 speakers have means that surpass the upper end of that proposed range. Furthermore, when comparing each SoMa queen's mean COG with the means of male-identified speakers from both San Francisco (Zimman 2013) and Redding in Northern California (Podesva and Van Hofwegen 2016)—as shown with values for SoMa queens represented above the horizontal axis, and values for speakers from previous studies shown below the axis— it is evident that SoMa queens produce fronter /s/ than male speakers—including queer speakers— in the same geographical region. In fact, the majority of SoMa queens produce fronter tokens than even the frontest speakers in previous studies. These findings, taken with the findings from previous production studies, show an interesting trend: females produce fronter /s/ than males, queer men produce fronter /s/ than straight men, and SoMa queens produce fronter /s/ than other queer men in San Francisco and Northern California. In other words, as shown in Figure 5, pronunciation patterns for /s/ reflect fractal gender contrasts.

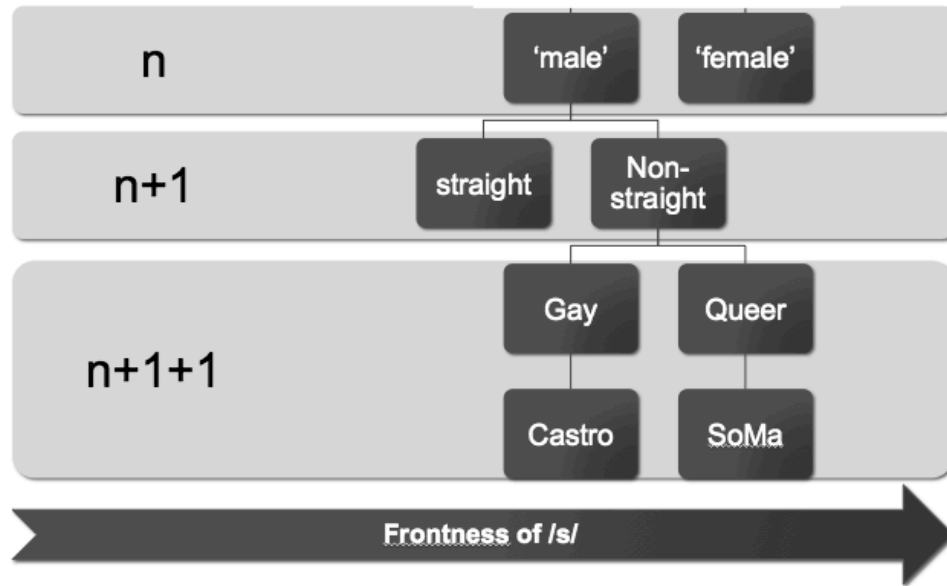


Figure 5

Fractal recursion and /s/ production

The fact that individuals ideologically linked with femininity in the fractal model produce fronted /s/ than their more normative counterparts is not surprising when we consider the role of linguistic differentiation in driving social oppositions. Linguistic differentiation “is not a simple reflection of social differentiation or vice versa, because linguistic and social oppositions are not separate orders of phenomena” (Irvine and Gal 2000, 425). Fronted /s/ does not only reflect ideological oppositions between masculinity and femininity, normativity and deviance, but fronted /s/ constitutes those oppositions. Because linguistic and social oppositions are inseparable, social deviants (represented in the right node at each level of the fractal model) both betray and establish their status as ‘linguistic deviants’ (see Hall 2003) through the production of fronted /s/— that is, linguistic features like fronted /s/ both index divergence from normative expectations and are used to construct anti-normativity. Because of this ideological intertwining between language and social positioning, patterns of gendered linguistic differentiation

represented in the fractal model contribute to the indexical and performative potential of linguistic variables like fronted /s/.

Performativity, orders of indexicality, and the body

Given that gender performativity relies on an established social-ideological antecedent for its successful execution (in that each performed act references and conjures gender standards sedimented through repeated use), I argue that indexicality provides a useful theoretical lens through which to explore the communicative potential of gender performances. Because linguistic resources also iteratively acquire social meaning, and this social meaning can later be indexed to accomplish interactional goals in the social world, I view linguistic resources like fronted /s/ as a type of gender performance.

Work in linguistic anthropology has adopted the perspective that links between signs—like linguistic features and gender performances— and meanings are neither one-to-one nor fixed. The relations between signs and social meanings are fluid, they change over time, and they are multiple. Any given sign may index multiple social meanings, as Eckert's indexical field model argues (2008). Which of these social meanings is conjured by a variable at a particular moment in time depends on the semiotic context in which it is situated. In addition, using a linguistic feature does not merely conjure an existing meaning in the indexical field, but has the potential to establish new form-meaning connections.

Perception studies echo the idea that social and stylistic context influences indexical interpretation, finding that “listeners’ linguistic behavior in response to a voice is modulated by

their social expectations about the speaker” (D’Onofrio 2016, 9). Campbell-Kibler’s (2007) study of (ING) provides a useful illustration of the indexical field. In a perception study of the variable, she argued for a range of meanings for both the velar variant and the alveolar variant, with the former indexing a range of meanings like ‘educated’, ‘formal’, and ‘pretentious’, and the later indexing meanings like ‘relaxed’, ‘lazy’, and ‘easygoing’. The specific meaning conjured in listener evaluations was influenced by the voice the variant was situated in. For example, the velar variant situated in a voice with a Northern US accent conjured meanings like ‘educated’, while the same variant situated in a Southern voice conjured meanings like ‘pretentious’, due to social expectations associated with each voice. In the case of fronted /s/, Phrao and colleagues (2014) found for Copenhagen Danish that listeners were more likely to judge the variant as sounding gay in the “modern guise” (a white, urban accent) than in the “street guise” (a salient variety associated with immigrants and gangsters). In other words, the social meanings associated with a particular style influence the social meanings conjured by a variant situated in that style.

I build on this theory and argue that the body is an influential part of the stylistic context that influences the social meanings retrieved by linguistic variables. Because bodies are loaded with social interpretations, their influence on the indexical potential of variables emerging from them is inescapable. In my fieldwork with SoMa queens, a recurring topic was the influence of the queens’ visual presentation on the way they were socially evaluated—while their feminine voices, mannerisms, and overall gender performances were evaluated unfavorably when they presented as male, the same qualities were interpreted positively when they were in feminine drag. In other words, visual presentation of the body— drag—influenced the social meanings

conjured by their feminine gender performances. In the words of SoMa performer Crimson Monroe:

- (1) It's as easy as makeup and a wig. You know? To completely change the way you are perceived and treated... Well that's the thing about drag. It's about being who you are. It's, you know, one of the few arenas in life, even gay life, in which your femininity can become an asset, not a liability.

She explains that while her voice and mannerisms are perceived as 'swish' or 'sissy' when she visually presents as male, those same feminine performances become what she calls 'social currency' when dressed in feminine drag.

This contrast in how feminine performances are received in male versus female presentation is echoed by Maria Santeria, a queen who feels much more 'powerful' in drag than out. In fact, she paints this power on her face, using severe 'bitchy' eyebrows that she says are influenced by 'chola' makeup. (For more on the connection between chola makeup and tough femininity, see Mendoza-Denton 1996).

- (2) The way I paint, people are like somewhat intimidated by me. Which it feels powerful to have that. But when I'm a boy and I go out to the same clubs and everything, I feel completely like I wanna leave. I hate it. I don't feel powerful at all.

Interestingly, as Maria suggests, the influence of the body on the evaluation of feminine gender performances matters not only in the straight world, but also within the SoMa queens'

own communities. The negative evaluation of feminine performances emerging from a body read as “male” can be reproduced even inside queer communities, including the “same clubs” that the SoMa queens feel powerful in when dressed in feminine drag.



Figure 6

Maria Santeria’s signature eyebrows

A particularly revealing conversation regarding the influence of the body on the social uptake of feminine gender performances was with Severina, an older queen widely considered to be a legend in the SoMa community. During our conversation, Severina reminisced on a period in the mid-1990s when she identified as a woman and was undergoing a physical transition, aided by the use of hormone therapy. She abandoned the transition after a few years, because she

felt her body prevented her then-desired gender identity from being actualized. She now considers herself ‘genderless’.

- (3) You know, no matter how much surgery or whatever, or what I call myself... I am still biologically a man. I’m still hairy. I mean that was one of my biggest battles when I was in transition, was that I’m very hairy. And I, you know, that was a real battle.

The hair on Severina’s body was a social sign so powerful that she felt no other performances of femininity were able to overcome it. In other words, although Severina wanted to index a ‘female’ identity with her performances, her body was so semiotically weighty that it prevented her from acquiring the indexical uptake she desired. Severina’s complicated relationship with her body is reflected in her stage performances, in which she employs self-mutilation (like the aforementioned staple-gun performance) in an effort to ‘transcend’ her own body.

The perspectives of the SoMa queens—who inhabit a uniquely fluid social space with respect to gender presentation—illuminate the influence of the body on indexical retrieval. While the indexical field of a feminine gender performance like /s/ consists of a range of social meanings related to femininity, the visual body, carrying its own indexical weight, determines which of the meanings in the field are accessible. For example, if fronted /s/ emerges from a body read as male, it may be restricted to types of femininity that more accurately represent inadequate masculinity, like ‘sissy’ or ‘swish’, as shown in the partial indexical field represented in Figure 7. However, when dressed in visual feminine drag, that same fronted /s/ can index

more positive and powerful feminine meanings like ‘fierce’ or ‘sickening’ (both positive evaluations in queer communities).

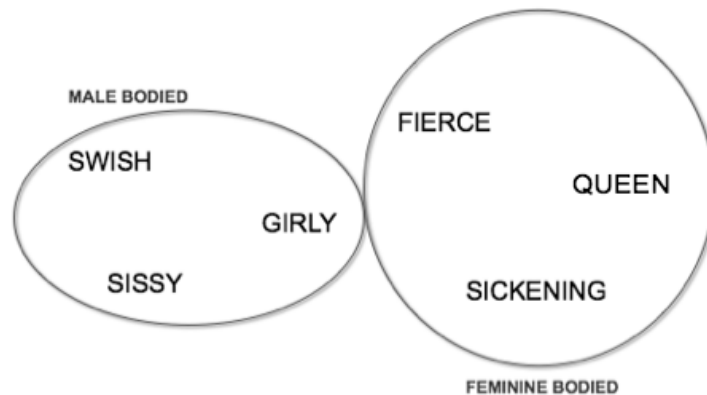


Figure 7

Partial indexical field for fronted /s/⁴

Fractal recursivity and indexical orders of /s/

I propose that the meanings that populate the indexical field and their embodied implications are established through orders of indexicality. Silverstein’s (2003) orders of indexicality illustrate the process by which linguistic signs acquire social meanings and account for the mutability of sign-meaning links. His model suggests that *n-order*⁵ values for a particular sign emerge from scientifically observable trends that connect a particular linguistic variant to a particular demographic group. The social recognition of the trend that links a particular form to a particular community contributes to what Silverstein calls a ‘baptismal essentialization’, the ritualization of the sign-meaning link that then determines the conditions for the ideological ‘appropriateness’ of

future iterations of the sign—i.e. the pragmatic contexts that will successfully result in the retrieval of the established social meaning in interaction. However, the sign is always susceptible to acquiring new social meanings, particularly once *n-order* links between demographic categories and linguistic variants are imbued with ideology. In other words, there is always the looming possibility that an *n+1-order* indexical link will be established, and thereafter an *n+1+1-order* link, etc., creating a multiplicity of potential meanings for a given linguistic variant, all in competition with one another, any one of which is able to be conjured in interaction based on the influence of pragmatic context—not unlike what is described by Eckert’s indexical field. The synchronic range of social meanings for a given linguistic variant that comprise the indexical field for that variant are diachronically established and ritualized through orders of indexicality.

Studies of Pittsburghese (e.g., Johnstone and Kiesling 2008; Johnstone et al 2006) have provided a useful illustration of the indexical orders for monophthongized /aw/ (such that *house* is pronounced [ha:s]), connecting the variant’s orders of indexicality with Labov’s categories of *indicator*, *marker*, and *stereotype* (1972). At the *n-order* (in Johnstone and Kiesling, the ‘first-order’), a demographic trend establishes a social link between speakers from southwestern Pennsylvania and monophthongized /aw/. That is, the feature is linked with Pittsburgh simply because most of the people located there use the feature, and becomes a sociolinguistic ‘indicator’⁶ (Labov 1972)—a variable that is defined “as a function of group membership.”

Eventually, the link between Pittsburghers and monophthongized /aw/ is socially recognized and imbued with ideology, such that the feature becomes available for stylistic use. This establishes an *n+1* order of ideologically mediated meanings relating to class, correctness, and locality, any one of which can be exploited in stylistic contexts. In other words, the feature

becomes enregistered (Agha 2003) as a sociolinguistic ‘marker’ (Labov 1972), such that monophthongized /aw/ becomes ideologically associated with certain styles of speech that may be used to accomplish interactional goals.

N+1+1 indexical links build upon the ideologies of the n+1 order and become salient enough that the linguistic feature becomes a subject of overt social commentary and is able to be drawn upon in high performance contexts (Coupland 2007) that reference the feature’s highly salient social meanings. It becomes what Labov calls a ‘stereotype’. An example of this in Pittsburghese is the comedic use of monophthongized /aw/ in staged performances to poke fun at the Pittsburgh accent and the people who use it.

In the case of fronted /s/, I argue that the variable has an indexical field comprised of a range of social meanings forged through orders of indexicality, such that each successive indexical order both reflects and constitutes fractal gendered oppositions. As each oppositional level represents different levels of community, and different communities constitute different spheres of interpretation, at each oppositional level, indexical presuppositions for fronted /s/ are forged, filtered through ideologies prevalent in the communities at the next level of opposition, and imbued with new meaning. In other words, for fronted /s/, higher order levels of fractal opposition create sites of higher order indexical innovation, as illustrated in Figure 8.

As in the case of monophthongized /aw/ in Pittsburghese, at the n-order, fronted /s/ is associated with a broad demographic category—in this case, female—a fact that has been scientifically observed in numerous studies of /s/ production. At this level, a type of baptismal essentialization—a *gender baptism*—occurs which links fronted /s/ to female bodies. Through this baptism, the female body, or one that is recognized as such, becomes part of the

presupposition (or felicity conditions) through which future manifestations of fronted /s/ are deemed pragmatically appropriate.

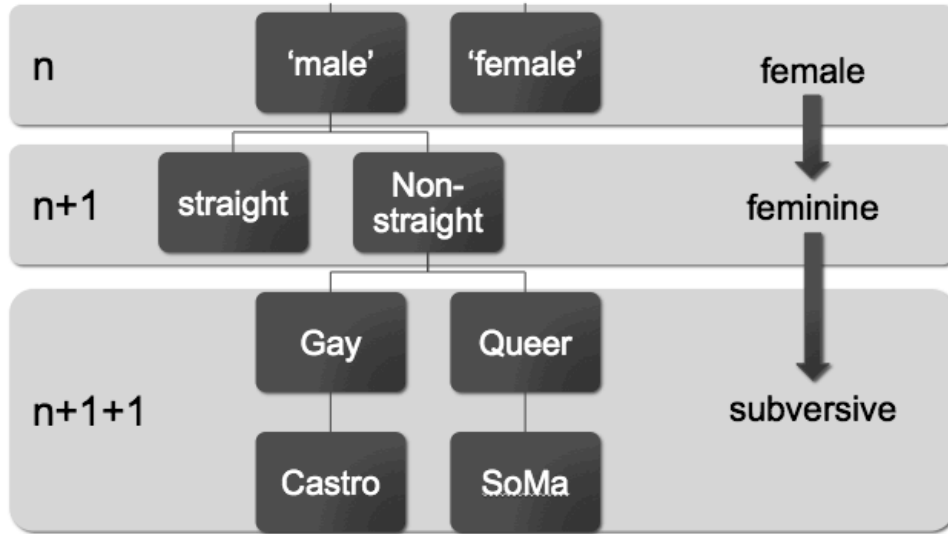


Figure 8

Fractal recursion and indexical orders of fronted /s/⁷

The correspondence between female bodies and fronted /s/ is recognized and imbued with ideology at the n+1-order. Fronted /s/ is not merely a consequence of an individual being assigned female gender at birth, but the feature is recognized as ‘feminine’, even, and especially, when it emerges from bodies characterized as something other than female. ‘Male’ speakers’ use of fronted /s/ enters discourses established by the gender baptism at the n-order, and since the feature occurs outside of the body-context deemed as appropriate for its use, an ideological mismatch occurs. The use of fronted /s/ by male-assigned individuals who deviate from normative masculinity links the feature to types of femininity seen more precisely as deficiently masculine, including ‘sissy’ and ‘swish’.

Finally, the femininity of fronted /s/, and the social consequences that come with it, are recognized at the n+1+1 order as exploitable stereotypes. As I will describe below, one of the ways SoMa queens forge higher order meanings for fronted /s/ is through recontextualization (Bauman and Briggs 1990; Linnell 1998): they appropriate the stigmatized feature in cross-modal constructions— with the help of visual materials— to index and constitute more positive meanings like ‘sickening’ or ‘fierce’. In other words, using visual feminine drag, fronted /s/ goes from ‘sissy’ to ‘sickening’.

The n-order opposition: /s/ and the gender binary

Exemplar theory provides a useful theoretical mechanism to illustrate the ways in which indexical links between linguistic forms, social meanings, and bodies become baptismally essentialized. Exemplar theory is a cognitive model of linguistic acquisition through which categories (e.g., lexemes) are forged in the brain through repeated exposure to linguistic tokens, or exemplars (see Drager and Kirtley 2016 for an overview). For example, a category, or *exemplar cloud*, for the word *cat* is formed in the brain through repeated exposure to exemplars of *cat* heard in the world; with each exemplar encountered, information (like phonetic and phonological characteristics of the word *cat*) feeds the exemplar cloud, forming a categorical backdrop against which future exemplars of *cat* are compared. Exemplars are thus sorted into exemplar clouds based on comparison with the stored information for various linguistic categories, established through exposure to previous exemplars.

Not only is linguistic information stored in exemplar clouds, but it has been argued that socio-indexical information—i.e., information about this speaker that informs social categories associated with linguistic forms—is also stored for each exemplar encountered (Sumner et al 2014). Therefore, given the robust production correlations between fronted /s/ and females, the connection between the linguistic feature and female bodies becomes iteratively baptismally essentialized through repeated exposure to exemplars of fronted /s/ emerging from bodies read as female. In other words, the n-order link between fronted /s/ and femaleness—including the embodiment of femaleness—is established in the exemplar cloud for the feature and comprises the category against which future encountered exemplars for fronted /s/ are compared. The fact that cognitive links exist between fronted /s/ and female bodies is suggested in Strand’s (1999) study of the feature, in which visual cues influenced categorization of a fricative as either /s/ or /ʃ/. Since listeners expected females to produce /s/ with higher COG, in one experiment, they placed the boundary between /s/ and /ʃ/ at a higher frequency when auditory stimuli were encountered with a visual presentation of a female face, than when encountered with a male face.

The fact that listeners expected /s/ tokens with female faces to have higher COG illustrates that the links between features and bodies forged through exemplar theory establish conditions against which future encountered exemplars are compared. In other words, as argued by Mendoza-Denton (2008):

Exemplars are stored, made robust in perception and activated in production on the basis of quantitative frequency information in our input... and social-indexical words are the vehicles that carry these frequencies, forming what Pierre Bourdieu in his analysis of practice calls *habitus*, the powerful automatic dispositions (including what

psycholinguistics would call perceptual biases), the bodily and mental habits that structure our presence in the world. (215)

That this constraining habitus (Bourdieu 1978) not only influences perceptual categorization but also linguistic production is evidenced by the aforementioned linguistic studies arguing that production of fronted /s/ is not biologically determined, but socially acquired as early as adolescence (e.g., Flipsen et al 1999). In sum, /s/ provides an illustration of how gender baptism, through formation of exemplar clouds, naturalizes the link between performances and bodies, reinforcing the male-female binary. Through gender baptism, constellations between types of bodies and types of performances form gendered constructions—not unlike the display schedules described in Goffman’s *Gender Advertisements* (1979)—that an individual’s own habitus may be measured against. Structural pressures like normative display schedules both constrain linguistic production (and other gender performances) and are constituted by it, so iteratively that the direction of causation is lost, or even inverted. Much like the features of Japanese women’s language described by Inoue (2004), the relation between /s/ COG and the gender binary becomes iconized:

The linguistic sign, which is arbitrary and nonmotivated by itself, appears as if it had some kind of inherent and inevitable essential quality. As a result—its historical referent—the actual sign production process—gets lost, the distinction between the indexing and the indexed collapses. (45)

Though the indexical link between fronted /s/ and female bodies becomes iconized in the wider social context (at least, in the English-language context), it has been suggested that alternative linguistic markets may commodify linguistic signs in different ways (Hall-Lew 2009; Woolard 1985). More specifically, different communities of practice may constitute and be constrained by display schedules and standards of performativity in different ways. While higher order indexical meanings for /s/ derive from the normative connections between body and performance formed at the n-order, the forging of higher indexical orders also has the potential to ideologically exploit and subvert these body-performance connections in alternative linguistic marketplaces.

The n+1-order opposition: /s/ and deviant masculinity

At the n+1-order, once the connection between front /s/ and ‘female’ genders—female bodies—is socially recognized, it becomes ideologically associated with femininity. Because of the essentialization of the links between types of gender performances and types of bodies at the n-order—contributing to the structuration of gendered display schedules—body-performance combinations in the real world that deviate from these normative display schedules are socially salient. To be specific, because the essentialization between fronted /s/ and female bodies made the female body the appropriate metapragmatic context for the situation of front /s/, tokens of front /s/ situated outside of bodies read as female do not satisfy the felicity conditions established at the n-order. The male body has already been linked with other types of gender performances, like a backer production of /s/, at the n-order. Therefore, the gendered body is an inescapable

indexical backdrop against which the use of social signs emerging from it will be constantly evaluated. Performances indexing n+1-order ‘femininity’ will, when situated in a body read as male, more accurately index types of femininity that more precisely mean ‘inadequately masculine’.

In other words, the exceptional (in the sense of ‘exceptional speakers’, see Hall 2003) body-performance combination of front /s/ situated in a male body is largely restricted to a negatively valenced set of n+1-order indexical meanings related to femininity, e.g., ‘sissy’ or ‘swish’. Because of the social salience of front /s/ at the n+1 order, these indexical meanings, and their negative connotations, are widely recognized.

For example, the indexical links between fronted /s/ and deficient masculinity are referenced in various BDSM and forced feminization erotica. In these genres, men are forcefully feminized in a process that is meant to be emasculating, disempowering, and humiliating. Excerpts from such stories illustrate that fronted /s/ (referred to in lay terminology as a ‘lisp’) is a ‘sissy’ trait, a ‘faggy’ trait, an object of ridicule: “lisp it, like a real fag sissy would”; “all I could do was nod and agree and thank her in my faggy lisp”; “he heard my lisp and started laughing hysterically” (‘Sissy’ 2008); “I lisped self-consciously... my lisp made my voice sound like a little girl; a perfect sissy” (Taff 2015). Furthermore, online sources like Urban Dictionary, a crowd-sourced online dictionary that reflects how everyday people define slang terms, illustrate the enregistered status of deficiently masculine social types like ‘sissy’ and ‘swish’.

sissy 🗣️

a man who acts like a girl

Look at Paul fussing over the wedding's colour scheme, he's such a sissy.

#gay #pansy #fag #faggot #homo #homosexual

swish 🗣️

(noun) A particularly effeminate gay man.

Hey, my decorator was awesome, but man what a swish he was!

Figure 9

Urban Dictionary definitions for ‘sissy’ and ‘swish’

A user-submitted definition for ‘sissy’ illustrates that a ‘man’—or someone with a body read as male—who acts ‘like a girl’—or employs feminine gender performances—is negatively evaluated, evidenced by the slur terms ‘pansy’, ‘fag’, and ‘faggot’ in the hashtags the user included in their definition. A submission for ‘swish’ carries similar negative connotations. While the definition itself is fairly neutral, the example sentence suggests that the ‘decorator was awesome’ *despite* being ‘a swish’—i.e. that being a swish in itself is a negative quality.

As these excerpts suggest, the connection between fronted /s/ and non-normative masculinity (when situated in a male body) becomes enregistered at the n+1 order by being linked to characterological figures through the use of *personifying terms* (Agha 2003). Social types like ‘swish’ and metadiscursive labels like ‘gay lisp’ function to “anchor speech repertoires to named positions in social space” and “imbue the phenomena they describe with specific characterological values” (236). As described in Zimman’s 2013 perception study, linguistic performances of non-normative masculinity become ideologically linked with gayness, in an entanglement of deviant gender performances and deviant sexual identities. That is, linguistic

features are heard as ‘gay sounding’ if they deviate from normative masculinity. Definitions on a crowd-sourced platform like Urban Dictionary illustrate the socially salient indexical links between fronted /s/, gayness, and deviant masculinity in popular culture, a social salience that is also illuminated by the aforementioned perception studies on fronted /s/ in male voices.

lisp

Something developed from repeatedly attempting to talk when there is a penis in your mouth. Mainly affects the gay community.

You can tell Tony gives good head, he's developed the lisp.

#tongue-slipper #parseltongue #eric douglace #blowjob defect #dick whisperer

lisp muscle

the muscle up a gay mans ass that is hit while butt fucking causing the gay man to speak with a lisp

ssssshit, you hit my lisp muscle (lissssp musssscle) you sssstud.

#lisp #muscle #lisp mussl #lisp musle #lisp mussel

Figure 10

Urban dictionary entries linking ‘lisping’ with gayness

General terms like ‘lisp’ conjure characterological figures, linking the linguistic feature to the non-normative identities it signals and constitutes. Though popular online sources like Urban Dictionary propose absurd, humorous, and arguably offensive explanations for the link between the ‘lisp’ and gayness—e.g., that the lisp results from a gay man having a “penis in [his] mouth” or a “muscle up [his] ass that is hit while butt fucking”—they nonetheless illustrate that fronted /s/ is constructed as a “gay” trait. That is, the link between fronted /s/ and gayness—or more accurately, deficient masculinity—has become essentialized at the n+1 order.

In sum, the n-order gender baptism that links fronted /s/ and female bodies creates a normative backdrop against which future manifestations of the linguistic feature are evaluated. Because a female body has been established as the appropriate metapragmatic context for the situation of fronted /s/— the felicity condition for its performative success—the realization of the feature in a male body results in a performative failure that creates n+1 order meanings clustering ideologically around insufficient masculinity, e.g., ‘sissy’ and ‘swish’. As these meanings populate the indexical field for /s/, the ideological links between fronted /s/ and gayness become enregistered and further essentialized through the use of personifying terms that link linguistic feature with identities as if they are causally related, obscuring the socially constructed nature of the connection between them. Through a further baptism, this construction of male gayness dictates, and is constituted by, the fronting of /s/. That is, fronted /s/ is a gay feature, and gay men speak with fronted /s/.

The n+1+1 order opposition: recontextualization of /s/

The gendered opposition between normativity and deviance, and the ideological links between these oppositions and different types of bodies, are reproduced in queer communities at the n+1+1 level. The essentialization of the connection between gay identities and feminine gender performances formed at the n+1-level results in the erasure (see Irvine and Gal 2000) of gay identities that don’t incorporate the performance of femininity. As a result, elided gay masculinities may feel the need to legitimate themselves within queer communities through the abjection of queer ‘male’ femininity. That is, in the construction of gay masculinity as legitimate,

femininity emerging from a male body is once again produced as deviant. In the homosexual marketplace, ‘masc’ acquires sexual and social capital in contrast to the less desirable ‘femme’. However, one way in which ‘male’ femininity becomes legible and celebrated within gay communities is through the cross-modal personification of drag.

One way drag queens (and arguably, other trans*-femme identities) can legitimate their performances of femininity is by inscribing visual femininity on their bodies. Gender-deviant femmes may exploit n-order connections between bodies and performances to create an embodied indexical backdrop of femininity against which their actions, voices, and mannerisms become suddenly legible. In the SoMa community, and other drag communities, this is done through the transformation of the body, using materials like wigs, makeup, and undergarments, to achieve a visual presentation that approximates the embodied felicity conditions for acceptable femininity formed at the n- indexical order. Viewing drag through the lens of actor network theory (Latour 2005; see Bucholtz and Hall 2016 for a sociolinguistic discussion), which views agency as distributed across complex networks of both humans and the inanimate objects they use to accomplish social goals, visual materials like wigs, eyeliner, corsets, and hip pads are crucial actors in the network that widens a queen’s performative range and enables their performative agency. In short, transforming the body allows male-assigned queens to transcend the limits imposed on them by the n+1 indexical order—which restricts the indexical access of feminine performances to a range of negative social meanings—by subverting the body-sign connections at the n-order—which satisfies embodied felicity conditions and allows access to, and the creation of, more positive feminine social meanings.

The visual transformation contributes to a cross-modal construction in which a stigmatized linguistic feature like fronted /s/ is resignified. Through recontextualization (Bauman

and Briggs 1990), actors situate stigmatized signs like fronted /s/ into new semiotic contexts that imbue them with more positive social meanings, subverting the constraints that would otherwise render them illegible. In the case of fronted /s/, higher order indexical meanings are forged and enregistered through the establishment of a cross-modal figure of personhood (Agha 2003) consisting of linguistic and embodied elements—the *fierce queen*.

In D’Onofrio’s (2016) perceptual analysis of the social meanings of the backing of the BAT vowel, she argues that linguistic features like backed BAT become “legible and iterable in their new contexts by virtue of the connection between the features’ prior established social meanings and the social meanings made relevant by new personae” like the Valley Girl and the business professional. The social interpretation of backed BAT is mediated by the indexical connections between the feature and personae that are both socially stigmatized (the valley girl) and valued (the business professional). In addition, Zhang’s (2005; 2008) work in Beijing has shown that social meanings of Chinese features like rhotacization and the interdental pronunciation of sibilants are made relevant through their connections to personae like the Smooth Operator or the Alley Saunterer.

Similarly, in the drag community, feminine performances like fronted /s/ are legitimated and ratified through the construction of the *fierce queen* persona. In contrast to the deficient femininities that emerge at the n+1 order, queer communities forge concepts like *fierce* to establish a type of femininity which is more positively valenced, and importantly, more powerful. For example, in a 2016 episode of reality television program *RuPaul’s Drag Race All Stars*, in response to drag performer Tatianna giving a tearful apology for her poor performance in the week’s challenge, RuPaul advises, “Don’t be sorry, be fierce.” In other words, the quality of fierceness isn’t one of defeat, but something more powerful. Once again, crowd-sourced

platforms like Urban Dictionary shed light on the positive valence of *fierce* and related concepts in queer communities. Unlike deficient femininities like ‘sissy’ or ‘swish’, fierceness is ‘exceptional’ and involves ‘being bold’ and ‘displaying chutzpah’.

fierce

being bold, displaying chutzpah, especially relating to fashion, clothes, hair or makeup.

Girl, work those heels! fierce!

Fierce

A term that gay men used in the late 1990s and early 2000s to describe absolutely everything that was of "exceptional quality".

How was that circuit party?

Oh my god, it was fierce.

Figure 11

Urban dictionary entries for ‘fierce’

sickening

This refers to something that is fabulous, over the top, fierce, the "T", eating it, flawless, frightening, nervous talent, etc. All terms coveted by the GBLTQ communities describing something that is extremely pleasing.

Mrs. thing was wearing the most sickening gown I had ever seen. She was just fierce!

#pooched #fierce #flawless #frightening #the deal

sickening

It refers to when you look at a person and they look so good it makes you sick, used esp. for females/drag queens/transsexual females checking out other females/drag queens/transsexual females - but meant completely as an admiration (with a slight connotation of politically acceptable jealousy)

That bitch is SICKENING!!

#sick-ning #striking #gorgeous #envy-worthy #well dressed #beautiful

Figure 12

Urban dictionary entries for 'sickening'

Hovering nearby in the ideological cloud is the concept of *sickening*. Similar to 'fierce', being 'sickening' means inhabiting a type of 'flawless' and 'frightening' femininity that sharply contrasts with the n+1-order femininities. 'Sickening' is not deficient, but worthy of 'admiration'. It is agentive and powerful. As drag performer Latrice Royale states in an oft-repeated quote from a 2012 episode of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, "It's okay to make mistakes. It's okay to fall down. Get up, look sickening, and make them eat it."

In drag communities like SoMa, powerful femininities like 'fierce' and 'sickening' are not only more easily accessible in drag than out of drag, they are established through the cross-modal figures of personhood that drag facilitates. In other words, 'fierce' and 'sickening' may emerge from the fusion of visual, performance, and voice achieved through drag. In Crimson

Monroe's perspective, stigmatized performances of femininity like fronted /s/ become 'currency' with the help of visual materials:

- (4) What's interesting about drag is that it's... I think one of the only places where you can make your ability to really inhabit a feminine energy into the prize, you know... It's about using the parts of yourself that society normally says are weird, shameful, and girly, and you know, stupid... and swish... it's all those things that are the weapons. Like it's those things that make you good... It's kind of empowering... It's a way of weaponizing your femininity and making it work for you... It's that kind of a social currency that you get to exchange. Which is interesting to get to use as a drag queen, because I'd never really had it as a boy. Looks is power. And currency.

E Z Bake echoes the power that visual drag affords, arguing that it emerges by referencing and exploiting connections between positive types of femininity and cis-women, particularly the diva persona (see Podesva 2007 for a discussion of the 'diva').

- (5) I've never been incredibly comfortable navigating space as Michael... it's a lot easier for me [as E Z Bake] in the sense that she lets me be social and have friends, because E Z Bake has friends and Michael doesn't... We [drag queens] really do have the power to connect with people on a bizarre emotional string that really only we can play with... it's kind of like creating in a gay man's head their favorite diva... you know, like the power, power female figures... I think there is a fundamental hunger for that with gay men for some reason. Or I guess queer people in general.

In addition to visual drag, actors can imbue a variable with positively valenced meaning is by situating it within practices valued in their communities. One such practice is "reading," a ritual insult practice common within drag communities. In an interview with *RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars* winner Alaska Thunderfuck, she argued that the social utility of reading is to “keep your claws sharp” in the face of oppression from the straight world. However, she notes, reading also establishes “camaraderie” between drag sisters through humor or solidarity. In other words, the practice has social utility within drag communities, both in demonstrating the verbal skill of the performer and strengthening connections between performers. Within the drag community, Thunderfuck argues, reading is differentiated from personal insult using an “affectation of the voice” to signal to the interlocutor that a “character is at work”. In other words, reading is framed (see Goffman 1974) through a performative linguistic stylization. For many queens, the “character at work” being employed in reading involves an amplification of the fierce queen persona who embodies a type of powerful femininity, conjured through the use of feminine semiotic resources like visual drag and hyper-fronted /s/.

In one example, Hexadecimal pokes fun at the signature eyeliner of her Katwalk co-host Sarah Tonin. Sarah’s oversized cateye forms a large angle above her eye, which Hexadecimal calls a “Dorito cateye”. In discussing Sarah’s eyeliner, Hexadecimal employs an “affectation of the voice” that includes /s/ tokens with dramatically higher COG than her mean of 7888.338 Hz (as well as dramatic pauses for comedic effect).

(7) It’s very (.) di/s/tinct. You can see it from /s/everal miles away.

9259.049

8515.291



Figure 13

Sarah Tonin's signature cateye

In another example, Hexadecimal employs hyper-fronted /s/ while poking fun at another queen's aesthetic, alluding to the fact that she doesn't make a very convincing woman.

(8) She (.) is (.) a very hand/s/ome woman.

9421.303

In addition, SoMa queens use reads and other displays of attitude to both reference and establish the neighborhood’s status as rough, gritty, and anti-normative, in comparison to the polish of other drag communities like the Castro. In example (9), Crimson Monroe pokes fun at queens who take themselves too seriously in SoMa venues, using /s/ tokens with a COG well above her mean of 6469.387 Hz, as well as elongated syllables for added effect. In example (10), E Z Bake responds to glamour queens who say that SoMa queens are “busted”—i.e., they fail to live up to conventional standards of feminine beauty. Her retort is delivered with an affective persona through the use of /s/ tokens with COG dramatically greater than her mean of 6713.895 Hz.

(9) “Look at my a:rt. Look at my a:rt.” You know? Like people who sometimes forget that they’re like, in the /s/ide room of the Powerhou/s/e.

7525.515

7084.179

(10) When people [criticize SoMa queens], I look at them and I /s/ay, “Your drag

8783.695

/s/uck/s/,

/s/o why would I listen to you?”

7740.172, 8686.486

7574.537

Displays of wit and attitude like reading are examples of an in-group practice that serves to both reference and solidify the indexical connection between feminine performances like fronted /s/ and the fierce queen persona. By situating the stigmatized variable into practices valorized within the community, SoMa queens repurpose the variable and construct higher-order

and subversive indexical meanings like ‘fierce’ or ‘sickening’. As Mendoza-Denton argues, “communities of practice are the theatres” (2008) for the usage and establishment of social-indexical signs. That is, SoMa, as a community of practice, comprises an alternative linguistic market (Hall-Lew 2009; Woolard 1985) established in contrast to the heteronormative market, in which feminine performances like fronted /s/ acquire covert prestige (Trudgill 1972) through their association with personae like the fierce queen and practices like reading. Not unlike the communities of Appalachia who assign value to the features of their dialect that are more widely stigmatized (Greene 2010) or the African American women who embrace the assertiveness they are criticized for (Collins 1986), SoMa queens recognize the stereotypical baggage associated with fronted /s/ and use recontextualization to transform the feature into social capital. As Crimson Monroe aptly observes, drag turns performances of femininity into “social currency”.

Conclusion: /s/, the body, and the indexical field

Fronted /s/ is but one type of gender performance which accumulates social and embodied implications through orders of indexicality. At the n-order, production of /s/ both signals and constitutes a binary opposition, in which males produce backer /s/ and females produce fronter /s/. Exemplar theory explains at a cognitive level how the correspondence between fronted /s/ and female bodies becomes perceptually recognized and baptismally essentialized. At the n+1-order, the femininity of fronted /s/ enters into discourses about male and female bodies: a fronted /s/ situated in a male body results in performative failure due to its divergence from gendered expectations established at the n-order, conjuring negative social meanings like ‘sissy’ and

‘swish’. Finally, at the n+1+1 order, SoMa queens use visual materials to transform their bodies and exploit n-order connections between bodies and gender performances, thereby avoiding the invocation of negative n+1-order social meanings. By lifting fronted /s/ out of their ‘male’ bodies and recontextualizing them within the cross-modal fierce queen persona, they establish higher order indexical connections between /s/ and positively valenced femininities like ‘fierce’ and ‘sickening’. I present an indexical field for fronted /s/ in Figure 14.

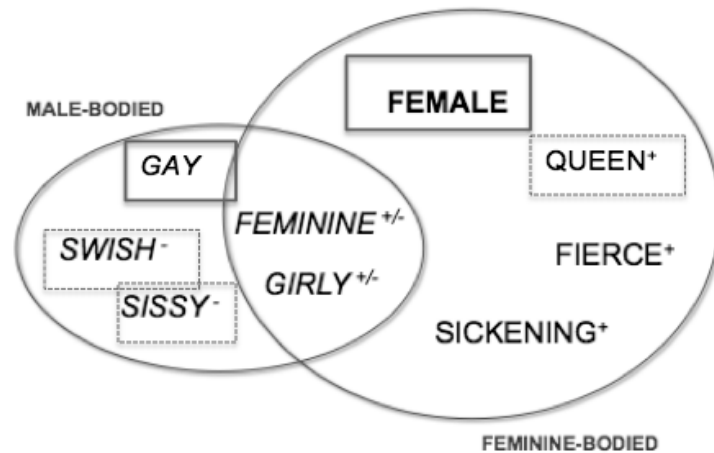


Figure 14

Indexical field for fronted /s/

Figure 14 illustrates the social meanings established for fronted /s/, their embodied implications, and the identities and personae the feature is associated with. The n-order connection between the feature and ‘female’ is represented in bold, with n+1-order meanings italicized, and n+1+1 meanings in regular typeface. I also represent what I call *indexical valences* in the figure, value judgments (positive or negative) attached to each social meaning. Indexical valences capture one dimension of the uptake of a linguistic performance; assuming

that an actor wants to project an identity in a way that maintains their positive face (see Brown and Levinson 1987; Goffman 1959), valences attached to indexical meanings can illuminate the limits of an actor's agency in performing identities in ways that are evaluated positively, and therefore ratified, by interlocutors. In Figure 14, evaluations are represented with a superscript minus sign and positive evaluations with a plus sign. Meanings whose indexical valence depends on the physical body are represented with superscript plus or minus (+/-). Finally, solid boxes indicate demographic identities the feature is connected with through baptismal essentialization, and dotted boxes indicate figures of personhood. While I don't intend to suggest that the indexical field proposed here is exhaustive, it provides a model of social meaning for a feature that moves beyond verbal language and incorporates other semiotic modalities that are ideologically linked to linguistic forms.

To be clear, drag communities like the one in SoMa are not the only sites where linguistic performances are inhibited or enhanced by physical bodies. Rather, all linguistic subjects inhabit an entangled semiotic web of bodies, linguistic varieties, and other signs—forged through orders of indexicality and mediated through social categories like gender, race, class, and local personae—and this entanglement influences the uptake of any semiotic resource an actor employs. An analysis of the SoMa queens' gender performances provides but one illustration of the ways in which actors negotiate, and potentially transcend, restrictive discourses about their bodies as they navigate the social world.

Notes

Acknowledgements. Acknowledgements here.

1. I use pseudonyms to maintain performers' anonymity. For the same reason, I use illustrations rather than photographs for visual representation of the queens.

2. The contrasts between the Castro and SoMa drag communities are by no means all-encompassing and without exception. In reality, while Castro is more linked with glamour drag than SoMa, and SoMa is seen as more fringe than Castro, both styles of drag are represented in each community, and there are many queens who perform in both neighborhoods. The distinction between the drag styles of the two communities is more ideological.

3. Conversations were audio-recorded at a 44.1 kHz sampling rate with a small, portable Olympus WS-823 digital audio recorder in order to make the recording process minimally intrusive, and a small external Olympus ME-15 lapel microphone attached near the speaker's shoulder. Following Podesva and Van Hofwegen's methods (2014), tokens of /s/ were automatically extracted and band-pass filtered to a 1000-22050 Hz bandwidth using a Praat script. COG measurements were taken for each token within a 40ms Hamming window centered at the segment midpoint.

4. I use the terms "male-bodied" and "feminine-bodied" to refer to visual presentations that are accomplished (and how they are taken up), rather than essential connections between bodies and gender identities.

5. Silverstein uses the term 'n-order' rather than 'first order', so as not to essentialize the n-order link between sign and meaning. I adopt this convention for the same reason.

6. While orders of indexicality correspond to Labov's concepts of indicators, markers, and stereotypes in the context of Pittsburgh, I don't take this connection to be necessary (with the possible exception of the connection between n-order indexicality and the sociolinguistic 'indicator'). I adopt the view that the only necessary condition for the establishment of a higher order of indexicality is that it builds upon associations formed at the previous order.

7. I make no claims that this model of indexical orders is exhaustive. It is entirely possible that there are established orders other than those proposed here, and some of the levels proposed here may even be more precisely fractured into multiple orders of indexicality. Instead, I propose this model as an illustration of the correspondence between social oppositions and indexical orders with regards to gender performances like fronted /s/.

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