Indexing Gay Identities in American Sign Language

Abstract

A sociolinguistic style consists of a set of linguistic resources that carry specific meaning within a social context (Campbell-Kibler 2011). One such resource is the use of phonetic variants that do not change the denotative meaning of a word, but are different enough to be recognized as unique. This type of socially constrained phonetic variation has frequently been dismissed as being outside the realm of phonology. In this study, I examine the feasibility of using social variation to inform phonological theory. I present a study of sociophonetic variation in men who identify as members of the Deaf and gay communities in the San Francisco Bay Area. I propose that a linguistic style employed by some Deaf gay men includes frequent use of distal joints in the articulation of signs. I show how analysis of this style can both enhance our understanding of the phonological structure of sign language and also demonstrate how models of phonology can accommodate sociolinguistic variation. By recasting social variation as a meaningful and informative aspect of phonology, we may better understand how we perceive, acquire, and use phonological structure.

One of the central tasks of phonology is to determine how the sublexical components of language are conceptualized, organized, and accessed. Since it is (at this time) impossible to directly access mental activity, phonologists must extrapolate from the observable data. In pursuit of this goal, current research in phonetics and phonology tends to focus on systematic variation. For example, phonology typically focuses on language-specific variation (e.g., allophonic alternation of

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