

# Teasing Apart to Bring Together: Gender and Sexuality in Variationist Research

Erez Levon  
Queen Mary University of London

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## Abstract

Sociolinguistics has long recognized the crucial interconnection between gender and sexuality. In this article, I situate sociolinguists concern with this topic within a larger discussion of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989) as a framework for theorizing identity. I argue that variationist methods provide a mechanism for redressing certain shortcomings of intersectional analysis that have been highlighted by scholars in other disciplines (e.g., Nash 2008). To illustrate my arguments, I offer an analysis of pitch variation among a cohort of Israeli lesbians. I demonstrate how despite the fact that gender and sexuality are tightly imbricated in the Israeli context, some speakers linguistically attend to these constructs in identifiably distinct ways. I close by suggesting implications of this argument for experimental research on the perception of sexuality and for the intersectional project more broadly.

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## INTRODUCTION

That gender and sexuality are related is undisputed. Sociolinguistic research has demonstrated time and again the tight imbrication of these two constructs both in speakers' linguistic production (e.g., Boellstorff 2005; Cameron 1997; Hall 2005) and in listeners' ideological perceptions (e.g., Gaudio 1994; Levon 2006, 2007, though cf. Smyth, Jacobs and Rogers 2003). The necessity of treating gender and sexuality together is succinctly summarized by Bucholtz and Hall (2004: 488) when they state:

'That the discursive construction of heterosexuality is often bound up with the discursive construction of femininity and masculinity is by now a familiar finding ... if researchers insist that sexuality be analyzed in isolation ... they run the risk of reading it through a theoretical lens that may be only partially revealing, at best.'

Bucholtz and Hall's assertion in this regard resonates with recent developments in cultural studies more broadly that seek to interrogate the explanatory adequacy of unitary categories like gender and sexuality and insist instead on an understanding of identity as a multidimensional phenomenon. Adopting a framework of INTERSECTIONALITY (Crenshaw 1989, 1991), research in this paradigm argues that no one category is sufficient to account for an individual's experiences or practices. Rather, we must focus on the ways in which multiple systems of social stratification (including sexuality, gender, race and class, among many others) exist simultaneously and in interaction (see also Brubaker and Cooper 2000).

The strength of intersectional analysis lies in its ability to theorize the complexity of identity formation by destabilizing simplistic categorical binaries such as man vs. women, gay vs. straight. This has had a profound impact on research across a variety of related disciplines (including linguistics) such that intersectionality has become by many accounts the dominant framework for conceptualizing identity (Zack 2005). Yet, despite its success, intersectional analysis lacks a consistent and theoretically-motivated methodology (McCall 2005; Nash 2008). What this means is that certain crucially important questions remain unanswered. These include:

- 1) What is an intersection and how is it defined? While the theory insists that 'subjectivity is constituted by mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender class and sexuality' (Nash 2008: 1), it neglects to specify how those intersections are to be conceptualized. Are they vectors of influence, such that the experience and practice of being 'black,' for example, affects the experience and practice of being a 'woman' in discrete and identifiable ways? Or are the two inextricable and interdependent, such that 'black woman' represents an indivisible unit?
- 2) Related to this, what is the relationship between categorical intersectionality as conceptualized by a researcher and an individual's lived experience? As Nash (2008: 11) puts it, 'If intersectionality theory purports to provide a general theory of identity, it must grapple with whether intersectionality actually captures the ways in which subjects experience subjectivity or strategically deploy identity.'
- 3) Finally, and most importantly, how do we locate intersectionality empirically? Assuming we reject an essentialist view of identity as something a person IS, how do we identify particular practices as being part of an individual's intersectional presentation of self (or not)?

Devising principled answers to these questions is central to the project of what has come to be called third wave variationist studies (Eckert n.d.). If, as Eckert argues, the goal of work in this paradigm is to understand how people use language to both construct and transmit social meaning, intersectionality – as a model of the meanings speakers work to present – is at the heart of what we do.

In this article, I outline an initial attempt to resolve these methodological issues. Building on sociolinguistics' recent engagements with critical (e.g., Bucholtz and Hall 2004) and psychoanalytic (e.g., Cameron and Kulick 2003) theory, I present an analysis of how two groups of Israeli lesbian activists use the same phonetic feature (variation in mean pitch) to differing social ends. I argue that the key to understanding the different meanings that the use of this feature represents lies in the distinct ways in which the women of the two groups understand the intersection of gender and sexuality in their lives. In other words, I aim to demonstrate how an analysis of the social meaning of language is inseparable from an analysis of our informants' lived experiences, and, in so doing, propose that the methodological architecture of sociophonetic inquiry provides a fruitful empirical way of bringing these two analytical projects together.

## BACKGROUND

The data used to illustrate my proposals are drawn from a larger examination of language and sexuality in Israel (Levon 2010). In that work, I was interested in exploring how members of different Israeli lesbian and gay activist groups use language to help construct and portray identities that are at once both lesbian/gay and Israeli. The issue is an interesting one because Israel is a country that has always maintained a very strong, normative conceptualization of what it means to “be (and act like an) Israeli” (Kimmerling 2001; Shafir and Peled 2002). Grounded in the tenets of early Zionist thinking, a large part of this conceptualization is a particular understanding of gender and sexuality (what is often glossed as the “men as soldiers/women as mothers” model) that serves to link traditional ideas about femininity, masculinity and heterosexuality to standard definitions of Israeli national identity. What this means in concrete terms is that Israeli men and women are subject to a set of rigorous (and, historically, very ideologically-laden) gendered behavioral expectations. For men, these expectations revolve around notions of strength, independence and virility (Almog 2000; Biale 1997). Women, on the other hand, are normatively defined almost exclusively in relation to motherhood, such that what is expected of women (whether they have children or not) is to be caring, supportive and nurturing (Berkovitch 1997; Sered 2000). Stereotypically, lesbians and gays are seen as existing outside of, and even in opposition to, this dominant discourse. There is, therefore, a palpable ideological tension between identifying as lesbian/gay and identifying as Israeli, and the goal of my work has been to understand how lesbian and gay Israelis negotiate this tension linguistically.

To do so, I spent twelve months in 2005-2006 observing and recording the members of numerous Israeli lesbian and gay activist associations. For our present purposes, however, I restrict my attention here to a discussion of the women in two clusters of these associations, what I call the MAINSTREAM and the RADICAL groups (see Levon 2010 for a detailed discussion of all of the groups). As my names for them suggest, these two groups position themselves quite differently across the Israeli political spectrum and espouse very different beliefs about sexuality and its place in the Israeli public sphere. In the most general terms, the Mainstream group adopts what I call an “accommodationist” stance with respect to sexuality in Israel. Members of this group argue that lesbian/gay sexuality is fully compatible with standard Israeli models of gender and the nation, and their activism is geared toward the

integration of lesbian/gay sexuality within existing Israeli social structures (for a discussion of similar movements in other countries, see Seidman 2002; Vaid 1995). In contrast, the Radical group rejects this integrative tendency (Ziv 2005). Arguing that the current structures are inherently discriminatory, members of the Radical group advocate a total reconfiguration of the Israeli gendered and sexual order.

Linguistically, my analyses are based on an examination of stylistic variation (e.g., Bell 1984, 2001) in the speech of group members. In terms of language style, I am interested in two things. The first is whether a significant differentiation in language use is evident as a function of the topic of speech (what for our purposes I simply gloss as “gay” versus “non-gay” topics). My interest in topic-conditioned shift is premised on the notion that Israeli ideologies of sexuality, to the extent that they may allow lesbian or gay identities to be expressed, require that these identities be confined to specific “gay”-identified spaces. As a methodological approximation, I take talk on “gay” topics to represent a gay conversational space distinct from talk on “non-gay” topics (see Levon 2009 for a fuller justification; see also Schilling-Estes 2004). The second thing I am interested in is the quality of any systematic alterations observed across topics, and, especially initially, how these alternations compare to Israeli sociolinguistic gender norms – norms that are themselves grounded in the standard conceptualizations of gender in Israel described above. Of the various norms that exist (see, e.g., Katriel 1986), I focus in the discussion below on those that equate higher mean pitch levels with normative femininity and lower mean pitch levels with normative masculinity.<sup>1</sup>

## GENDER, SEXUALITY AND PITCH

My goal in this article is not to go through a full analysis of the data I collected in Israel. Instead, I would like to hone in on the question of the intersection of gender and sexuality in our interpretations of variation in practice. To do that, I consider the example of one pitch pattern in my data: the ways in which the women of the Mainstream and Radical groups vary pitch levels in their spoken Hebrew across topics when recounting narratives.<sup>2</sup>

**MAINSTREAM WOMEN.** Figure 1 presents the results of an analysis of the Mainstream women’s use of mean pitch when recounting narratives. We see in Figure 1 that the women of this group are significantly differentiating their mean pitch levels across “gay” and “non-gay” topics.<sup>3</sup> When talking about “gay”-themed experiences (things like their first lesbian experiences; telling their friends and family about being a lesbian, etc.), the women have an average mean pitch level of 12.34 st. In contrast, when talking about past events from their lives that are not directly linked to their sexuality, the women’s average mean pitch level is 11.64 st.

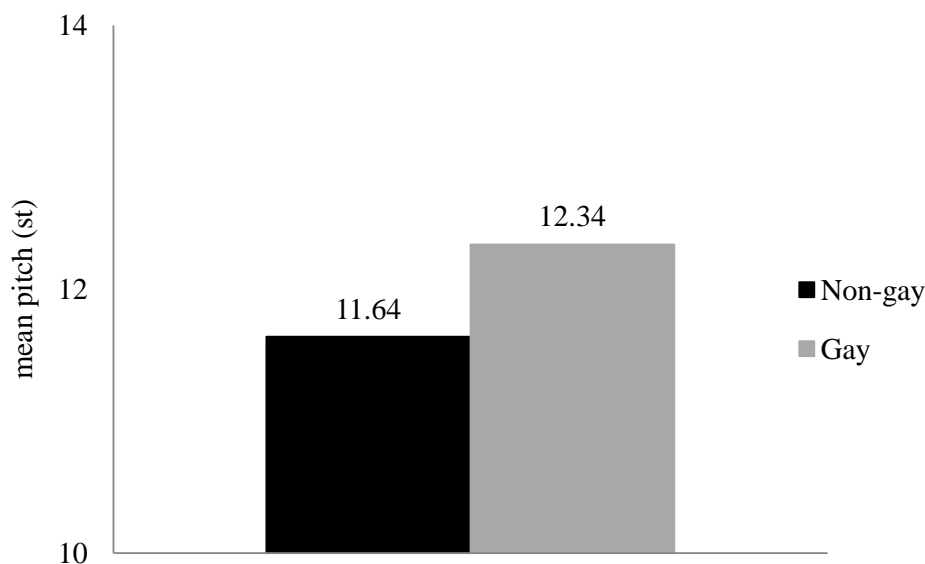
This finding is meaningful for two reasons. The first is the fact of the significant differentiation between “gay” and “non-gay” topics itself. In earlier discussions of these findings (e.g., Levon 2010), I have argued that this differentiation across topics can be taken as evidence that the Mainstream women are using mean pitch to help construct distinct “gay” and “non-gay” voices, and in so doing conform to Israeli normative conceptualizations regarding the necessary compartmentalization of lesbian identity.<sup>4</sup> As an illustration of what I mean by compartmentalization, consider how Miriam, a member of the Mainstream group from Tel Aviv, describes the place of lesbianism in her life:<sup>5</sup>

- (1) ‘It’s part of my whole life. I work, I sleep, I eat, I go shopping, I clean my home, I go to the bathroom, and I also have sex with people of my own sex. It’s not that

my life is all about sex. It's true that in terms of sex, my attraction is for women. But my lesbianism is not just a sexual orientation, it's my lifestyle. My lifestyle- but my lesbianism doesn't come out when I'm working, for example. My work isn't connected at all to my lesbianism.'

In her reply, Miriam takes pains to describe how her lesbianism is only one part of the many things that make up her life. And while her initial description of lesbianism is cast in terms of sexual object choice ('I have sex with people of my own sex'), she immediately clarifies herself to state that lesbianism is not only about sex. Rather, Miriam describes lesbianism as a 'lifestyle.' This lifestyle, however, is not prominent in everything that she does, and Miriam is quick to point out that her lesbianism has nothing to do with her work, for example. Miriam's comments, then, provide evidence of a particular epistemic stance with respect to sexuality among the Mainstream women, one which views lesbianism as an isolated and distinct part of a woman's social subjectivity that is unrelated to the rest of who she is or what she does. My proposal is that the significant differentiation we observe across "gay" and "non-gay" topics is part of the linguistic materialization of this subjective understanding.

FIGURE 1  
Average Mean Pitch for Mainstream Women in Narratives



The second reason why the Mainstream women's pitch practice in narratives is meaningful has to do with the direction of the variation between "gay" and "non-gay" topics. In shifting to higher mean pitch levels on "gay" topics, I suggest that the Mainstream women are accommodating to Israeli norms of femininity and strategically adopting a more stereotypically "feminine" pitch style. This interpretation, moreover, is supported by the women's own descriptions of what lesbianism means to them. Consider how Shira, a Mainstream member from Haifa, responded when I asked her about the place of lesbians in Israeli society:

- (2) ‘In terms of acceptance, you have to take it. Nobody is going to come say, ‘come be a part of things.’ You want to be accepted? Establish yourself. And for me, I do it everywhere I go. And so people say to me, why are you always bothering with the lesbian thing? Why are you always making such a big deal about it? Because I know a lot of people don’t have the courage to stand up and say this is how I am. So I do it- I have the strength, I have the self-esteem, I have the voice- so I do it. I mean, I have a good kind of visibility. I can make progress because I live in the consensus.’

We notice that in her comments Shira highlights the fact she lives in the ‘consensus.’ By this, she means that she is in a committed monogamous relationship, has children and to a large extent accepts Israeli ideologies of gender and believes that her lesbian identity is perfectly compatible with them. It would seem possible, then, to take Shira’s comments as evidence in support of the idea that linguistically as well the Mainstream women are accommodating to Israeli gender norms.

In fact, I would go one step further and argue that not only are they accommodating to gender norms, they are embracing them. Consider how Miriam, the Mainstream member first introduced above, defines lesbianism:

- (3) ‘In my eyes, a lesbian is a woman who loves women, with everything that that includes- in a very comprehensive way. That in their social lives they prefer women; that at work, they prefer to work with women, if possible- as much as possible. She supports women wherever she can. And also in her love life, she is with women and she prefers women.’

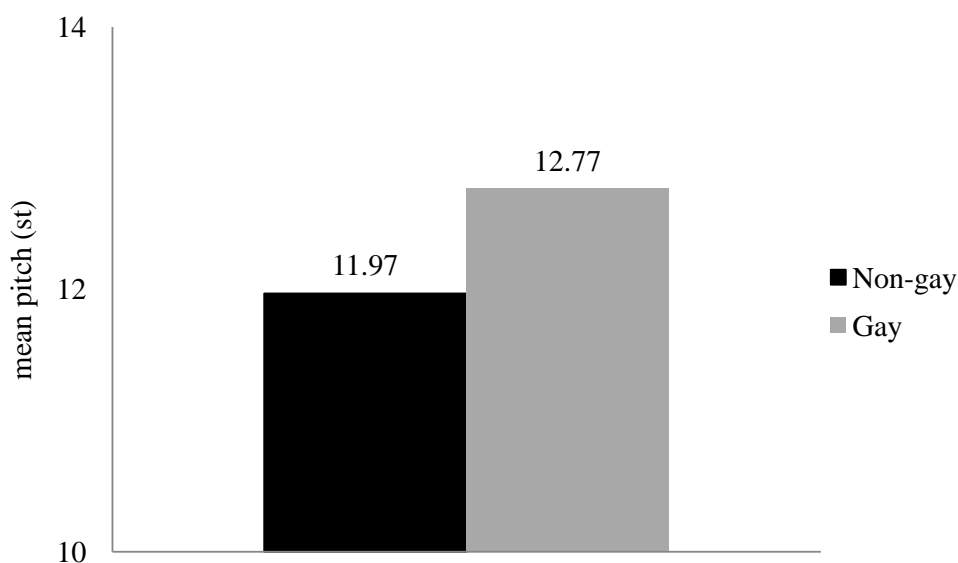
Miriam’s definition of lesbianism highlights a theme common to all of the Mainstream women, namely that being a lesbian is first and foremost about being a woman and feeling a connection among women – as Miriam puts it, ‘loving women in a very comprehensive way.’ In other words, it would seem that the Mainstream women understand their lesbianism as a sort of more “authentic” version of normative Israeli femininity. In light of this, I argue that the women’s use of mean pitch reflects this understanding and allows them to enact a “hyper-normative” feminine speech style on gay narratives as a way of portraying their version of lesbian identity.

Because providing a full and complete analysis of the Mainstream women’s practice is not my primary focus in this article, I have allowed myself to stipulate much of my preceding argument. I do, however, hope to have demonstrated how for the Mainstream women sexuality is in many ways dependent upon gender. By their own account, the Mainstream women define their lesbianism strictly in relation to their womanhood, such that being a lesbian essentially means being a special kind of woman (cf., for example, Bunch 1972). Linguistically too, I suggest that the language the Mainstream women use to “do” sexuality (i.e., the language they use to help materialize lesbian subjectivity) is derived (and even gains its meaning) from the language used to “do” gender. In short then, I would argue that my analysis of the Mainstream women’s pitch variation in narratives provides us with an empirical snapshot of at least one of the ways in which the intersection between gender and sexuality is experienced and constructed linguistically.

But is this the only way? Can the insights gained from an examination of the Mainstream women be extended to form the basis of a general theory of the intersection between gender and sexuality? In order to address this question, I turn in the next section to an examination of the Radical women’s pitch patterns.

RADICAL WOMEN. The Radical women's use of mean pitch in narratives is presented in Figure 2. There, we see that the Radical women's practice parallels what was found for the Mainstream women: the Radical women are also varying average mean pitch levels across "gay" and "non-gay" topics by employing significantly higher pitch levels on "gay" topics (12.77 st) than on "non-gay" topics (11.97 st).<sup>6</sup> The most straightforward interpretation of this finding would be to suggest that the Radical women's practice is grounded in a similar understanding of the intersection of gender and sexuality as the Mainstream women- that the Radical women also conceptualize lesbianism in terms of normative Israeli womanhood and thus make use of essentially gendered linguistic features to construct and portray sexual identity.

FIGURE 2  
Average Mean Pitch for Radical Women in Narratives



I, however, do not think that this interpretation is an accurate one. To begin, the Radical women explicitly reject dominant Israeli discourses of gender and what they view as the Mainstream women's overly accommodationist stance to them. Consider, for example, how Tova, a Radical member from Tel Aviv, describes her initial contact with Israeli lesbian activism:

- (4) 'And I really quickly understood that I don't have any connection to [Mainstream]. It is, you know, this 1970s feminism, it's Dworkin feminism. There never was the battle for the lesbian sex here [in Israel]; there never was Pat Califia. [Mainstream] is a very conservative feminism ... As a group, [they] have never tried to challenge the straight world. They've always been involved in the whole issue of children and families. But I think instead of saying that we want to take part in their oppressive institutions, we should struggle against established beliefs in partnership with progressive elements of the heterosexual society in order to change the system into something that's less oppressive for everyone, and that way also help ourselves.'

In her comments, Tova argues against what she sees as the outdated conservatism of Mainstream activism. She takes issue with the Mainstream women's focus on securing rights for adoption and marriage, essentially equating these struggles with a capitulation to what she describes as the 'oppressive institutions' of Israeli society. Instead, Tova advocates for a new way of conceptualizing gender and the place of women in Israel. Given comments like these, I would argue that interpreting the Radical women's practice in terms of a portrayal of normative "hyper-femininity" (as I do for the Mainstream women above) is ethnographically unjustified.

In addition to this, and on a deeper level, the notion of a necessary dependency of sexuality on gender that I argue underpins the Mainstream women's practice does not seem to apply to the Radical women. Recall Miriam's definition of a "gender-derived" lesbianism above. Compare this with Tova's description of how she defines her sexuality:

- (5) 'I'm a lesbian in terms of my desires, both sexual and emotional, that are geared towards women. However, in terms of my community affiliations, my affiliation is to men and women and other such whose primary identity is not straight. So I have a much stronger connection to queer heterosexuals, or heterosexuals who embody different kinds of gender roles, than I do to lesbian and gay straights.'

We find in Tova's definition a dramatically different perspective than in Miriam's. Rather than seeing lesbianism as a radical statement of gender (i.e., 'loving women in a very comprehensive way'), Tova works to destabilize the very notion of gender upon which Miriam's formulation is based. In effect, Tova seems to be de-coupling her understanding of gender from sexuality, seeing the two as distinct and only partially overlapping constructs. Taking Tova's comments as representative, it would therefore seem inappropriate to interpret the Radical women's practice in relation to Israeli sociolinguistic gender norms. Not only do the Radical women reject those norms as outdated and oppressive, they do not understand sexuality as inherently dependent on gender. In order to accurately model the Radical women's use of language, we must adopt an analytical approach that parallels the women's own beliefs and experiences, and allows for the possibility that the language used to "do" sexuality may have nothing at all to do with gender.

This leaves me in the admittedly unorthodox position of arguing that while the Mainstream and the Radical women exhibit identical linguistic practices (i.e., higher mean pitch levels on "gay" narratives), that practice means two different things for the two groups. For the Mainstream women, I propose that it essentially means "gender." My argument in this regard is based on the Mainstream women's own understanding of lesbianism as a special kind of feminine gendered status such that the use of higher mean pitch levels on "gay" topics can be understood as a strategic deployment of a normatively feminine voice as a way of portraying a lesbian identity. For the Radical women, on the other hand, the ethnographic preconditions of this analysis do not hold. The women's own descriptions of their experiences of gender and sexuality give me no reason to believe that they would be engaging in a presentation of normative femininity when using higher mean pitch levels or, for that matter, that their linguistic construction of sexuality on "gay" topics is in any way related to gender (normative or otherwise). Thus while their linguistic practices may be superficially similar, I argue that the differences in the Mainstream and Radical women's conceptualizations of sexuality force us to adopt distinct interpretations of what the use of that language means for the two groups.<sup>7</sup>

I concede that my arguments here are somewhat speculative, grounded as they are in an analysis of language PRODUCTION alone. For this reason, I would like to briefly mention what I see as potentially promising avenues for future research in language PERCEPTION that



could help provide a more solid empirical base for my assertions. In particular, I have in mind research on TALKER NORMALIZATION (e.g., Johnson, Strand and D'Imperio 1999), in which researchers examine how subjects reconcile the presentation of socially salient audio and visual stimuli with their own stored mental representations of persona types (like “woman” or “lesbian”). In addition, recent advances in experimental methods for testing implicit cognition (e.g., Greenwald, McGhee and Schwartz 1998) provide a mechanism for determining the extent to which subjects associate one social category with another. Both of these approaches would offer a useful complement to analyses of language use and contribute to the larger project of unpacking the relationship between intersectionality and sociolinguistic variation.

## CONCLUSION: LANGUAGE AND INTERSECTIONALITY

I began this article by arguing that intersectionality has a central role to play in our understanding of the social meaning of linguistic variation. In the analysis presented above, I use the example of mean pitch variation among two cohorts of Israeli lesbians to illustrate the ways in which differing conceptualizations of how gender and sexuality intersect lead us to distinct interpretations of what variation is being used for and what particular indexical meanings speakers are drawing on when engaging in variable linguistic practice. This kind of ethnographic sensitivity is important because the meaning of sociolinguistic variables is inherently underspecified. As Eckert (n.d.) argues, variables only gain their full indexical potential when they are meaningfully deployed in interaction as part of the construction and presentation a social self. Intersectionality provides us with a window into what “self” speakers are aiming for, and thus better insight as to what meaning a variable has in context.

And yet more than just highlighting the importance of intersectionality to variationist research, I would also like to argue for the importance of variationist studies of language to the continuing development of intersectionality theory. I list above three methodological shortcomings of intersectionality that have been described in the literature: 1) the lack of a precise conceptualization of intersections themselves; 2) the lack of a critical engagement with the relationship between theory and individuals’ lived experiences; and 3) the lack of a clear empirical method for locating intersectionality and its social manifestations. Beginning with the last point, I hope to have demonstrated above the way in which an examination of variation that combines both quantitative and qualitative methods allows us to locate intersectionality in practice. The quantitative identification of a variable linguistic pattern is the first step since it provides us with information regarding the symbolic resources speakers are using to construct and portray identities. Subsequent qualitative analyses then allow us to better understand what speakers take those resources to mean, and hence what the contours are of the identities they are working to construct. Finally, though not illustrated above, perception testing offers both a method of verifying the results of production-based findings and a way of indirectly teasing out the fine-grained connections between language and different (combinations of) social categories that non-experimental approaches can easily miss. In short then, I suggest that third wave variationist analysis represents a robust method for the empirical examination of intersectionality.

Applying this method, moreover, also helps to address the other two methodological critiques. In my discussion above, I argue that the Mainstream and the Radical women conceive of the intersection between gender and sexuality differently, and this difference results in the two groups of women attaching distinct meanings to the same sociolinguistic variable. I believe that what this finding suggests is that, like sociolinguistic variables, INTERSECTIONS as theoretical constructs are themselves underspecified. In other words, we

cannot know *a priori* how an individual will experience the intersection of two social categories in their lives or how that experience will inform their social practice. Rather, it is only in the context of empirical investigation that intersectionality gains its explanatory potential – a potential that is itself necessarily grounded in the facts of observed social practice.

## NOTES

The research upon which this article is based would not have been possible without the guidance of Renée Blake, Rudi Gaudio, Greg Guy, Don Kulick and John Singler or the support of the Social Science Research Council (with funds provided by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation) and the Torch Fellowship Program at New York University. Thanks also to Debbie Cameron, Penny Eckert, Kira Hall, Robin Queen and Rob Podesva for helpful discussions and comments on the ideas presented here. All errors and shortcomings are, of course, my own.

- 1 In the interest of space, I am glossing over a huge amount of both social and linguistic detail here. For a more complete treatment of the different linguistic features that are involved in the implication of gender and sexuality in Israel, including a discussion of those features' social histories, see Levon (2010, chs. 2-3).
- 2 Briefly, I define narratives as those portions of the interviews in which informants recounted prior events from their lives. Structurally, narrative talk was all temporally past tense, proceeded sequentially and contained non-immediate deictic reference. See Levon (2009) for more details.
- 3 Data for quantitative analyses are drawn from individual sociolinguistic interviews conducted with informants. For details of interviews and quantitative methods, see Levon (2009, 2010). Following Henton (1989), mean pitch measurements are taken in semitones (st) across an entire intonational phrase (corresponding to a level 4 break in the ToBI system). For Figure 1,  $n = 492$ ;  $F(1, 486) = 8.731$ ;  $p = 0.003$ . Note too that while the difference in average mean pitch level across topics may appear small in absolute terms (0.7 st), this difference represents a change of seven percent in the women's observed pitch range, a level of change that previous research has clearly identified as being perceptually salient (see Biemans 2000).
- 4 I concede that other possible interpretations of the women's practice exist. The differentiation between "gay" and "non-gay" topics could be grounded, for example, in a difference of affect or emotional investment associated with the topic categories, such that "gay" topics elicits higher mean pitch levels. While in the interest of space I am unable to address the question of alternative interpretations here, the reader is referred to Levon (2009, 2010), where I deal with these issues in detail.
- 5 All names are pseudonyms. Extracts reproduced here are my English translations of informants' spoken Hebrew.
- 6 Note that the Radical women's data is not regularly distributed. Analyses were therefore conducted using Mann-Whitney tests. For Figure 2,  $n = 500$ ;  $U = 27815.0$ ;  $Z = -2.122$ ;  $p = 0.034$ . The absolute difference of 0.8 st across topics represents a change of seven percent in the Radical women's total observed pitch range (cf. note 3).
- 7 My point here is that the Radical women's use of higher mean pitch levels does not mean "femininity" (or "gender"). For preliminary suggestions of what it could mean, see Levon (2010).

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