

“Linguistic Ear for the Vandy Queer ”

What does it mean to “sound gay”? From a sociolinguistic perspective, there are a number of factors which could cause one to “sound gay”; it could include using a different vocabulary-“gay vocabulary”, differences in pragmatics, or differences in discourse. Discourse, the organization of conversations, includes scripts and strategies, such as presuppositions, preinvitation, and turn taking. Though there are many components of discourse, this study focuses on the use of minimal responses, words that are uttered by a listener during a speech event (Fellego 1995:186).

Minimal responses include words such as mmhmm, right, and yeah. There are a number of different opinions of why minimal responses are used; some believe that minimal responses are a signal of active listening (Fellego 1995: 186). Deborah Tannen’s studies on gender differences and minimal responses, suggests that women use minimal responses as a sign of support while men use them as a sign of concurrence (Jacobs 1996:58). Tannen suggests that ultimately, the differences between the discourse of males and females is that women are more cooperative speakers, using a rapport style, while men are not, using a report style. Others believe that minimal responses are utilized by people who are bored in conversations and are a sign of inattentiveness (Fellego 1995:186).

However, these results are generalized for all males and females and do not take into account sexual orientation. Many people, including Deborah Tannen (Jacobs 1996:49), stereotype homosexual males as adopting the behavior of heterosexual females. Since the differences in discourse between homosexuals and heterosexuals have not been extensively addressed, it is necessary to research how discourse makes one “sound gay.” Is there any validity to the claim that, with respect to discourse, homosexual males and females will adopt the behavior of their heterosexual counterparts? The purpose of this study was to determine if there was a relationship between discourse, particularly utilization of minimal responses, and sexual orientation. More specifically, the purpose was to determine whether homosexuals do in fact use minimal responses as frequently and in a similar manner as their heterosexual counterparts.

METHOD

The study participants were two heterosexual females, two homosexual males, two homosexual males, and two heterosexual males. All of the participants were students at Vanderbilt University and were approximately the same age. Eight conversations of groups or couples of willing participants’ were observed. A focal subject was chosen randomly from the group or couple when more than one person with the focal gender and sexual orientation was present; the focal subject was not notified of the fact that he or she was the focal subject. For five minutes of the eight different conversations, the number of times that the focal subject used a minimal response was recorded. Minimal responses in this study were defined as utterances, usually one or two words that were interjected during a speaking event; these did not include clarification requests.

All of the observations were made while the focal subject was with his or her own peers. It was necessary to observe the subject while in his or her normal setting of peers so that the interaction was comfortable and natural; information on the sexual orientation and gender of the peers was recorded after the five minute observation period. Also, a

casual observation was made on how the minimal responses of the focal subject were used in each conversation; whether the minimal responses were used for displaying active listening, boredom, or agreement was determined.

RESULTS

Number of minimal responses/5mins

Focal Subject

1 Heterosexual Female 3(Active Listening)
2 Heterosexual Female 5(Active Listening)

1 Homosexual Female 4(Active Listening)
2 Homosexual Female 4 (Active Listening)

1 Heterosexual Male 5 (Active Listening)
2 Heterosexual Male 3 (Agreement)

1 Homosexual Male 3 (Active Listening)
2 Homosexual Male 4 (Active Listening)

DISCUSSION

Though it is evident that there is not an association between sexual orientation and use of minimal responses given the average number of minimal responses of different sexual orientations and genders was very similar, a chi squared(χ^2) contingency test was used to validate the observation. The χ^2 value (0.0172) was less than $\chi^2_{critical}$ (3.841), therefore the differences observed between the groups occurred by chance; there is no significant difference between use of minimal responses and sexual orientation among males and females on Vanderbilt's campus.

The results of this study are in congruence with a prior study conducted on gender and minimal responses by Fellegy (1995: 198); the footnotes included a statement that indicated that based on casual observations, the differences between homosexual males and females and heterosexual males and females' minimal response use was nominal.

Even though there was no significant difference between the amount of minimal response use among the different sexual orientations, the homosexual males were the only group to differ from the other three groups; they used minimal responses the least, an average of 3.5 per five minutes of conversation, while the other groups used an average of 4 minimal responses per five minutes of conversation. This supports the fact that homosexual males do not adapt the speech behavior of heterosexual females as Deborah Tannen suggested (Jacobs 1996:49); all subjects used minimal responses at approximately the same frequency.

The casual observation of the manner of minimal responses indicated that there was almost no difference between all of the focal subjects; most participants appeared to

be using the minimal responses to demonstrate active listening. However one heterosexual male seemed to use the minimal response, sure while talking to another heterosexual male to convey a sense of agreement. It is also interesting to note that Homosexual Male 1 and Heterosexual Male 1 were both actors; perhaps their attentiveness was merely a convincing performance. Regardless, the overall trend among the different subjects was to use the minimal responses to convey active listening; there were no differences between the manner of use of minimal responses among heterosexual males and females and homosexual males and females. Perhaps this was due to the fact that all of the focal subjects were having conversations with friends; if the study was conducted on acquaintances, there could be variation in the amount of minimal responses used because of decreased connectivity between the participants.

Although this study indicates that there are no differences between the use of minimal responses among homosexual males and females and heterosexual males and females on the Vanderbilt campus, these results must be accepted with some skepticism due to flaws with the methodology: primarily the small sample size and observer effect which appeared to cause some participants to be uncomfortable.

Due to the flaws in this study, conducting studies on this very topic with a larger, more diverse sample, with respect to socioeconomic background and race, and also removal of the observer effect, would allow the results of this study to be accepted more easily or may display varying results. Another interesting aspect of this study that would prosper from further exploration is determining whether the speaker's gender and sexual orientation have an effect on one's use of minimal responses. Though the gender and sexual orientation of the other speakers was recorded in this study, there was no analysis of any trends. This is because of the inability to find enough different homosexual and heterosexual males and females to observe. Also it would have been difficult to isolate subjects to converse with only one other individual since this was a naturalistic observation to ensure natural results. Nevertheless, the results of this a study similar to this would be interesting and perhaps provide more insight into any possible differences between the use of minimal responses among homosexual and heterosexual males and females.

CONCLUSION

Sounding gay" with respect to the use of minimal responses is not a valid statement on the Vanderbilt Campus; there is no significant difference in the manner or amount of utilization of minimal responses among homosexual males and females and heterosexual males and females. The stereotype that homosexual males and females sound more like their heterosexual counterparts is refuted by the results of this study and also by Fellegy's casual observations (1995:198). The increased awareness of the fact that there are few differences between homosexual and heterosexual males and females speech will hopefully increase the public's sensitivity to the subject and therefore decrease the likelihood of stereotyping homosexuals.

REFERENCES

Fellegy, Anna M. Summer, 1995. "Patterns and Functions of Minimal Responses." *American Speech*.70:186-199.

Jacobs, Greg. Spring, 1996."Lesbian and Gay Male Language Use: A Critical Review of the Literature." *American Speech*. 71: 49-71.