



REED COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF LINGUISTICS

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Terry Gross, Host
Fresh Air
National Public Radio

Dear Ms. Gross,

While I am a loyal fan of your program, I'm very disappointed in your interview of David Thorpe and Susan Sankin from 7 July 2015. As both a phonetician who specializes in intonation, stress patterns, and voice quality, as well as a gay man, I found the opinions expressed in the interview to be not only inaccurate, but also offensive and damaging.

1. Straight people convey sexuality in their voice too

We know from decades of linguistic research that all people express themselves in ways that can convey an affiliation with a particular group or identity. We know that gender identity, sexual orientation, regional background, socioeconomic status, racial/ethnic affiliation, level of education, age, political beliefs, and many other social categories can be indexed through manipulations of voice quality, pitch, rhythm, vowel quality, consonant articulation, etc. Crucially, it's not just the minorities of these categories who use such features; majority groups make use of these indexical features as well. For example, straight male speakers of American English are known to have deeper voices than straight male speakers of many other languages; even prepubescent boys in the US have been documented to have significantly lower pitch than girls of the same age, even though the two groups are physiologically indistinguishable in their throats. This trend has been getting more extreme since the 1960s, with American boys getting deeper and deeper voices with each generation.

This means that inviting a gay man to talk about how his voice conveys gay-maleness is (scientifically speaking) just as valid as asking a straight man to talk about how his voice conveys straight-maleness, how a white person's voice conveys whiteness, how a middle class person's voice conveys middle class-ness, how a college-educated person's voice conveys education, etc. But I can say I've never heard of such an interview from your program or any program; this is only something that gets asked of women, gay men, African Americans, immigrants, and other people who are in a socially un(der)privileged position. The questions that get asked are "why do gay people/women have to talk like that?" or "why can't blacks speak (what we consider) proper English?" instead of "why do straight people/men have to talk like that?" or "why don't whites know how to speak (any variety of) African American English?", etc. There is no logical reason why we should ask the questions like the former two and not questions like the latter two.

2. There's no single "natural" way to speak

Not only is it inaccurate to label minorities as the only ones who convey their identities through their speech, it also perpetuates a misguided belief that there is a "natural" way to speak, or a way to speak that has no "styles". This concept of "naturalness" or "authenticity", which came up many times in your interview, assumes that only some people (i.e. minorities) are adopting "styles", deviating from "natural" speech in order to convey their identity. This myth comes up all the time with another



linguistic feature brought up in the interview, “vocal fry”. This type of voice quality, which linguists call “creaky voice”, “glottalization”, “laryngealization”, or a host of other terms depending on the specific acoustic characteristics, appears to index a number of social categories in American English: younger age, urban background, and (lately in the popular media) a sort of femininity. Ms. Sankin’s technical description of the voice quality was not incorrect (it does involve a slow vocal fold vibration with often incomplete closure), except for the part where she said it is harmful or unnatural.

Endless popular articles and podcasts (and your interview) describe “vocal fry” as a deviation from a natural voice quality, that it can be physiologically harmful to the vocal folds, that it grates on the ears, that it’s a “style” coming from singers of pop music, and that it should be avoided in order to be successful in life. None of these claims has any basis in reality. In truth, these voice qualities are used extensively in languages like Danish, Vietnamese, Burmese, Hmong, and many indigenous languages of Mexico and Central America (such as Zapotec, Mazatec, and Yukatek Maya), far more than they are in English – and as you might imagine, speakers of those languages do not suffer from medical problems in the throat any more than speakers of other languages. (I have no idea where Ms. Sankin got the idea that this is causing medical problems in the US; that’s simply untrue.) Those languages are just as “natural” as English is, and the voices used by speakers of those languages are just as “natural” as those used by English speakers.

I could, but won’t (for brevity) get into detail about how Ms. Sankin’s claims about upspeak, filler words, and New York City vowels could be subjected to the same criticism I just provided for vocal fry. But when you step back and think about all the things that are identified as deviations from “natural” speech—vocal fry, upspeak, filler words, dentalized “s”, a wide pitch range, etc.—you notice that there’s only one thing that these features have in common: these are the things that are not traditionally associated with straight white educated male speakers of American English. And there we have it: what gets categorized as “natural” is just how people in power speak. And any feature that deviates from that is given labels like “unnatural”, “uneducated”, or just a “style”. Any sociolinguist could have said that in a second, but Ms. Sankin only provided this stigmatizing view instead.

3. This harms our community

Beyond the inaccuracies and the propagation of linguistic myths, the part that disturbed me the most in the interview was that your program is highly influential and well-respected (for good reason), and thus people across the nation will hear these opinions with a seriousness and receptiveness that they frankly do not merit. Interviewing Mr. Thorpe, a member of a minority group, to talk about how he is disgusted by features associated with that group, how he underwent therapy to try to rid himself of such features, how it is a part of his “self-loathing”, or how his disgust can be justified by the even more stigmatizing opinions of Ms. Sankin, is the wrong message to send to gay people, parents of gay children, members of any stigmatized minority, or the public at large. No matter what strides have been made in the past few decades, LGBT people are far more likely to be estranged from their families, suffer from depression, and attempt suicide. Hearing that self-loathing feeling inside them justified on an intellectual radio program can only be harmful. This will strengthen a narrow-minded view that gay men (and other minorities) are going out of their way to just sound that way, implying that even in their speech, their behavior is unnatural and undesirable.

4. Why not talk to the experts?

It’s unfortunate and disrespectful to those who actually do research on these topics that no linguists or speech scientists were interviewed to provide an informed, objective, and non-stigmatizing analysis. Robert Podesva (Stanford University), Benjamin Munson (University of Minnesota), LeAnn Brown (University of Manitoba), Fabiana Piccolo (Nuance), Erez Levon (Queen Mary University of London), Ron Smyth (University of Toronto), Robin Queen (University of Michigan), Birch Moonwomon (Sonoma State), Lal Zimman (UC Santa Barbara), and Greg Jacobs (York University)

are among many researchers who have studied the acoustics and perception of what is typically considered “gay men’s speech” and related varieties of American English. In the future, I would hope that these would be people you would invite to give an informed opinion.

I hope that through my criticism, I have remained respectful. I know your program to have high standards, and I only want these topics that are so close to me to be subject to the same standards you give to other topics in your interviews. I very much appreciate your time to read this.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sameer ud Dowla Khan". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial 'S' and a distinct flourish at the end.

Sameer ud Dowla Khan
Assistant Professor of Linguistics
Reed College