

Off-Pitch? Linguistic Discrimination and Perceptions of Female Football Commentators

Sociolinguistic research has shown that listeners have expectations about how speakers with particular identities will and should sound. These expectations influence how listeners evaluate voices (Campbell-Kibler, 2009) and specific linguistic features (Niedzielski, 1999). In particular, there is a degree of evaluative consistency in the evaluation of *gendered* voices, with listener expectations guided by their stored stereotypes of gender typicality, with women typically paying a higher price for deviating from gendered speech norms relative to men (Strand, 1999).

In the current study, we explored the dynamic of gender typicality in a specifically gendered context, namely football commentary. Despite the increasing visibility of women in football, professional football in the U.K. remains a bastion of traditional masculinity. This is evident in negative reactions from prominent figures to a recent increase in female commentators in top-level games. This includes the specific critique that women's voices are "too high" (Mail Online, 2018; The Independent, 2018). With this critique in mind, we conducted a social perception experiment using voices artificially manipulated for pitch, with a view to improving our understanding of the interaction of pitch and gender stereotypes, a dynamic already known to affect the perceived sexuality of male voices (Levon 2006).

Using a matched-guise task (Lambert et al, 1960) with a between-subjects design, participants (N = 50) listened to an 'amateur commentator auditioning for a new role'. In reality, the commentator was one of two voice actors, one man and one woman, who had recorded the commentary by matching the original, including for intonation. Each recording was artificially manipulated in Audacity to create pitch-manipulated versions for each speaker; the woman's voice was lowered two semitones, while the man's voice was raised two semitones. These recordings were layered over the original video footage. Participants heard the commentary in one experimental condition, before evaluating the commentator using Likert scales (1-8) depicting a selection of relevant characteristics, including *knowledgeable*, *formal*, *competent* etc, as well as other attitudinally relevant characteristics such as *attractive* and *fashionable*.

Table 1 – Experimental conditions

Voice	Manipulation
Man1	No manipulation
Man2	Voice raised 2 semitones
Woman1	No manipulation
Woman2	Voice lowered 2 semitones

Using *lmer* models with by-participant random intercepts and pairwise comparisons with a Bonferroni correction, we find that reactions to the different conditions are largely driven by the gender of participants, with gender typicality a more relevant dimension for men than women. While female participants' responses were unaffected by stimulus manipulations or even speaker gender, male participants rated the unmanipulated woman's voice as significantly more *attractive* than the pitch-lowered version ($p < 0.001$); they also rated the unmanipulated man's voice as more formal than the unmanipulated female voice ($p < 0.05$). These results suggest that, contrary to the male-centred meta-discourse surrounding female football commentator's higher pitch, this acoustic manipulation has no bearing on perceived competence. More broadly, these results may further underline findings which suggest that men are more readily primed to evaluate women's voices along primarily gendered dimensions such as *attractiveness*.

References

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