

Cross-Linguistic Queerness: A Phonetic Study of how Bilingual Mandarin-English Speakers Index a Sapphic Identity

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Abstract

This paper investigates how bilingual Mandarin-English speakers use creaky voice to index Sapphic (Queer female) identities beyond hegemonic models of gendered vocal stereotypes. While prior work often links Queerness in women's voices to lowered pitch (Zimman, 2018), this study argues that creaky voice operates as a more nuanced acoustic resource for producing and perceiving Sapphic identity. Drawing on production and perception data, I show that bilingual Sapphic speakers both deploy and recognize Queerness through specific acoustic contexts rather than through a single vocal cue.

Using a Matched-Guise test, the study examines how listeners evaluate vocal features used by bilingual speakers and how these features shape judgments of Sapphic identity. Results reveal a meaningful distinction between types of creak: Queer/Sapphic voices are associated with aperiodic rhythm and reduced vocal fold vibration, whereas stereotypical "vocal fry" is perceived as characteristic of straight women's speech. These findings demonstrate that creak is not a uniform feature, but one that is socially nuanced and identity-specific.

By centering bilingual speakers and cross-linguistic repertoires, this research highlights the role of non-English linguistic resources in Queer expression. The paper ultimately challenges monolithic models of Queer voice and shows how Sapphic identities emerge through cross-linguistic acoustic differentiation.