



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



Matthew Hunt, Louis Strange and Sophie Holmes-Elliott



Language Attitudes

Listeners primed for different regions recalled different vowel productions despite hearing the same tokens

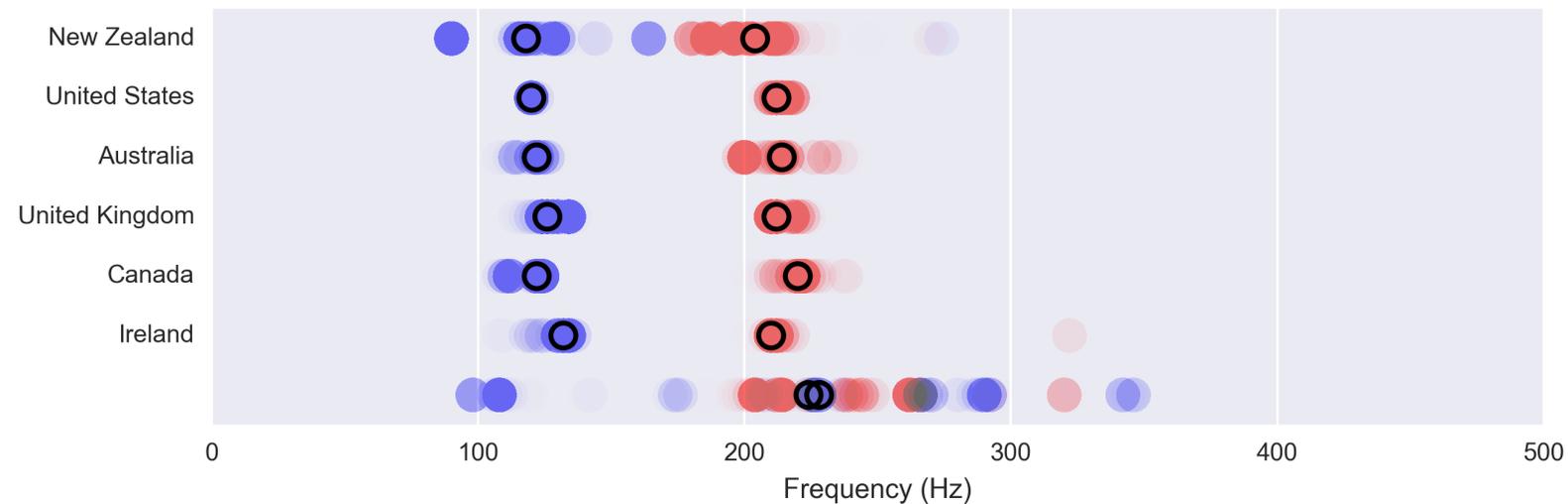
- Language evaluation sensitive to a range of factors...
- **Speaker and listener** identity characteristics:
 - **Gender** (Strand, 1999; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003)
 - **Ethnicity** (Pharao et al., 2014)
 - **Region/nationality** (Bourhis & Giles, 1976; Niedzielski, 1999)
 - **SES/education** (Campbell-Kibler, 2009)
 - **Age** (Giles, 1970; Drager, 2011; Levon et al., 2021)
- **Contextual** characteristics:
 - Standard accents receive more positive ratings in professional contexts (Levon et al., 2021)

Gendered Expectations and Context

- Gender primes perception and evaluation:
 - Strand (1999): gendered expectations guide phoneme categorization
 - Hunt & Acton (2022): speaker gender influences social evaluation of spousal reference
- Interaction of speaker identity and gendered context (Levon and Ye, 2020):
 - **Gender neutral frame:** uptalk showed no gender effect in medical malpractice trial (both men and women's credibility downgraded equally)
 - **Gender relevant frame:** uptalk resulted in more positive ratings for male defendant in rape trial context, but not for female complainant

Pitch: A Gendered Feature

- Physiological basis: on average, women > men (Simpson, 2009), **but...**
- Change and variation in pitch (= social basis)
 - Female pitch lowering over time, in multiple varieties (Berg et al., 2017)
 - Language- and dialect- specific gender norms



Pitch: A Gendered Feature

- Pitch evaluations related to gender typicality (speaker*listener*gender)
 - **Men:** lower pitch rated more positively (by women)
 - **Women:** higher pitch rated more positively (by men)

(Xu et al, 2013; Chattopadhyay et al., 2003)

- Sensitive to relevance of specific personality traits, as well as context:
 - Pitch preference in women's voices is context-dependent
 - Low pitch preferred for men's voices irrespective of context

(Krahé & Papakonstantinou, 2020;
Oleszkiewicz et al., 2016; Tsantani et al., 2016)

Men's Football and Gender

- Men's football in the U.K. remains a highly-gendered domain
- Traditional gender roles prevail:
 - Hegemonic masculinity for (most) men
 - Hyper-femininity for (most) women

(e.g. Cleland, Pope & Williams, 2020;
Forbes, Edwards & Fleming, 2015;
Jones & Edwards, 2013)



Female Football Commentators

Sport > Football > World Cup

Former Chelsea footballer Jason Cundy says women's voices too 'high-pitched' to commentate football matches

Piers Morgan brands ex-footballer 'sexist pig'

Maya Oppenheim • Monday 25 June 2018 16:15 • [Comments](#)



Jason Cundy he prefers men's voices for football commentary over women

Are female football commentators a 'breath of fresh air' or a 'PC token gesture'? Woman's Hour heaps praise on 'insightful' Emma Hayes on ITV - but critical viewers say they'd rather 'watch the game on mute'

- Emma Hayes has been hailed for her refreshing voice on commentary in Euros
- Won praise from many ITV viewers, with many calling her 'a breath of fresh air'
- However others questioned whether female commentators are 'tokenistic'
- [Find out the latest Euro 2020 news including fixtures, live action and results here](#)

Highly-gendered context

- Is it gender, or gender typicality? Or both?
- Is the general typicality finding* affected by a highly-gendered context?

- *
 - **Men:** lower pitch rated more positively (by women)
 - **Women:** higher pitch rated more positively (by men)

(Xu et al, 2013;
Chattopadhyay et al., 2003)

Research questions

- Gender: **How are commentator ratings affected by...**
 - Speaker gender?
 - Listener gender?
 - Interaction of speaker and listener genders: do men and women rate similarly across conditions?
- Gender typicality: **How do pitch manipulations affect commentator ratings?**
 - Do men and women show similar preference for neutral or lowered woman?
 - Do men and women show similar preference for neutral or raised man?

Experimental Stimuli

Original Male



Original Female



High-pitch Male



Low-pitch Female



Possible Outcomes: Ratings of Speakers

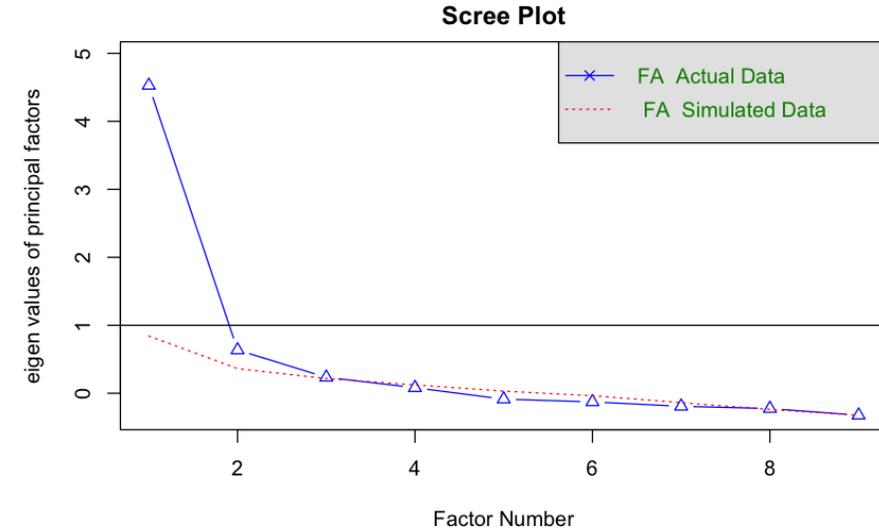
- 1) **Gender-based preferences:** listeners rate male voices more favorably than female voices
- 2) **Pitch** – listeners prefer lower voices (irrespective of gender)
- 3) **Gender typicality** – listeners prefer lower male voices but higher female voices
- 4) **Interaction** – interaction between listener gender and ratings of speaker (e.g. male listeners more sensitive to pitch manipulations than women)

Methods: Sample and Procedure

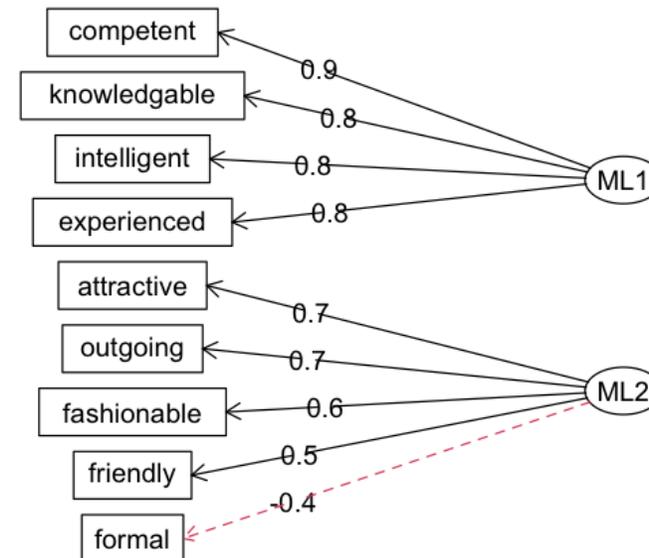
- 145 participants
 - Balanced for: gender; level of education; age range (18-75 years); region
- Conditions: man/woman, manipulation/no manipulation
- Likert scale dimensions
 - Knowledgeable, Formal, Competent, Attractive, Fashionable, etc.
- Ambivalent Sexism Index (ASI) (Glick & Fiske, 1996)
- Evaluation: Would you hire this person for the role?
- Open ended comments
 - evaluation of voice;
 - suitability for alternative role

Factor Analysis

- For Experimental Responses, 1 factor identified:
 - Competence, Knowledgeable, Intelligent, Experienced: **status**
 - Others did not exceed threshold - remaining factors modelled separately
- Full models stepped:
 - Response ~ speaker_gender * condition * participant_gender + age + education + Ambivalent_sexism
 - Post-hoc emmeans

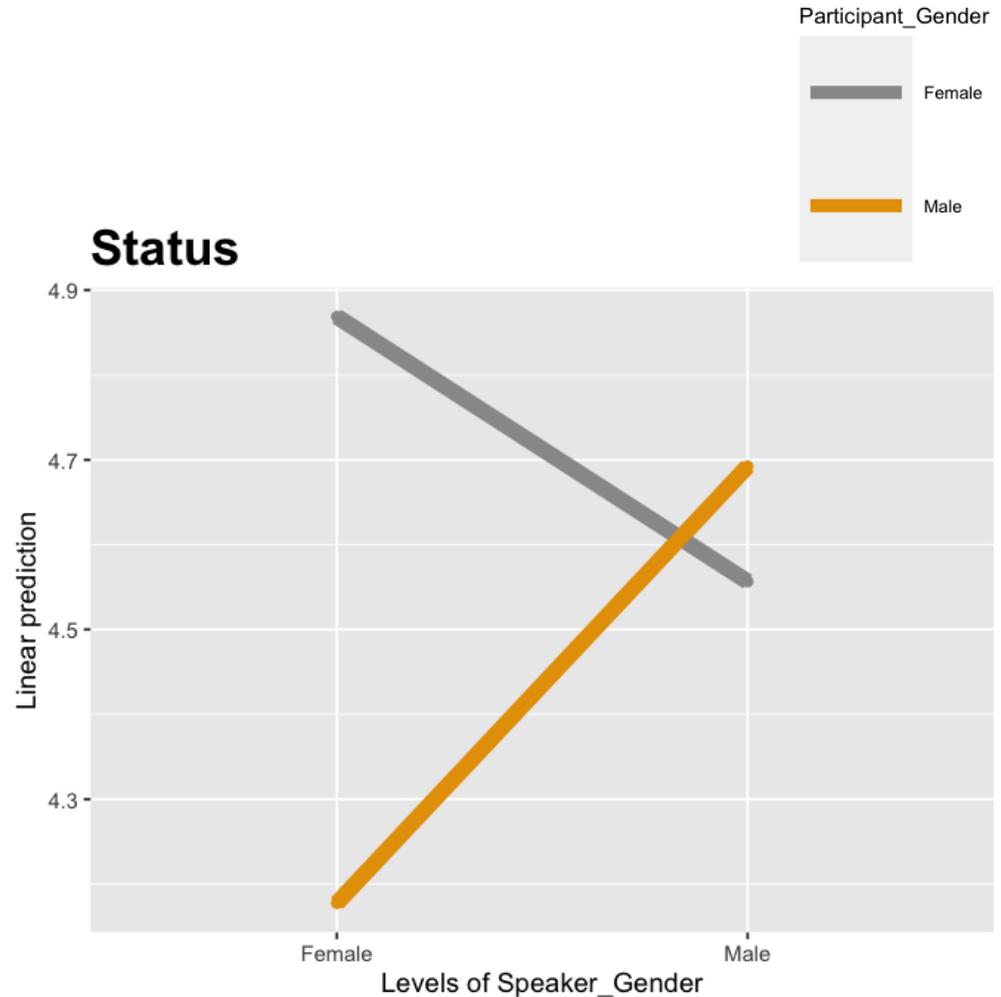


Factor Analysis



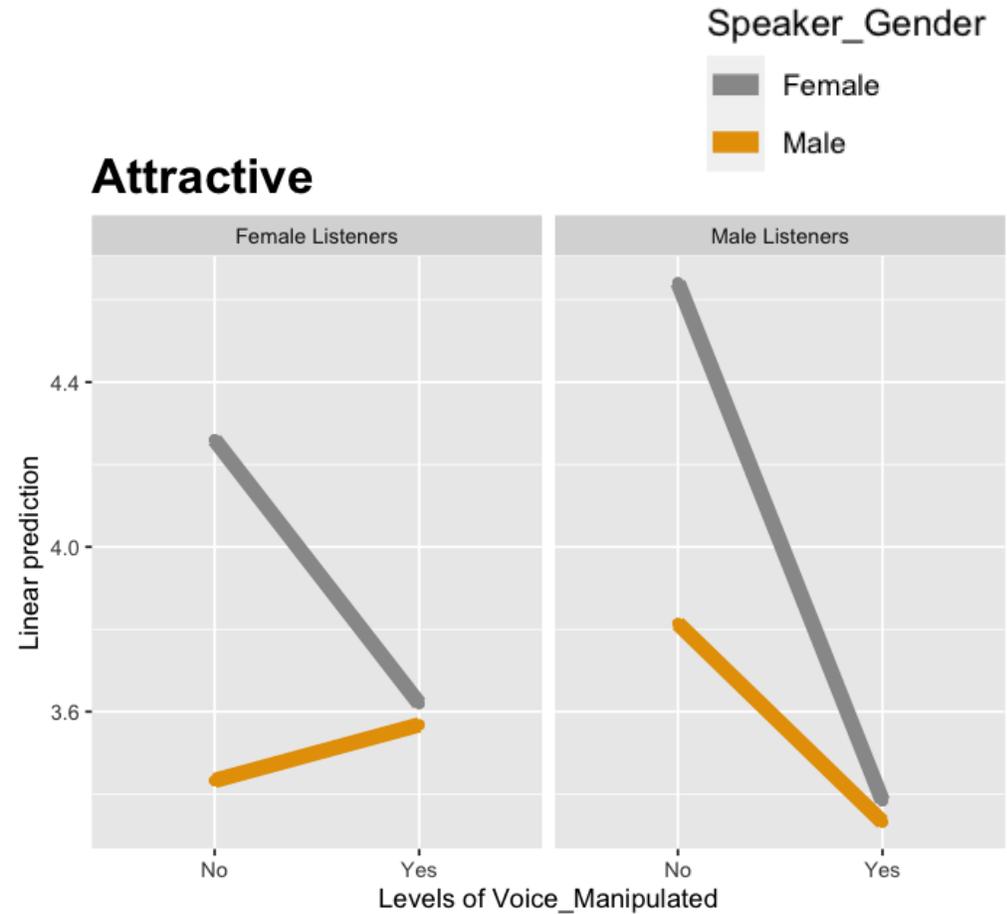
Status (factor)

- For status ratings, male listeners rate men's commentary higher, women rate women's higher ($p < 0.05$)
- **No effect for manipulation condition**



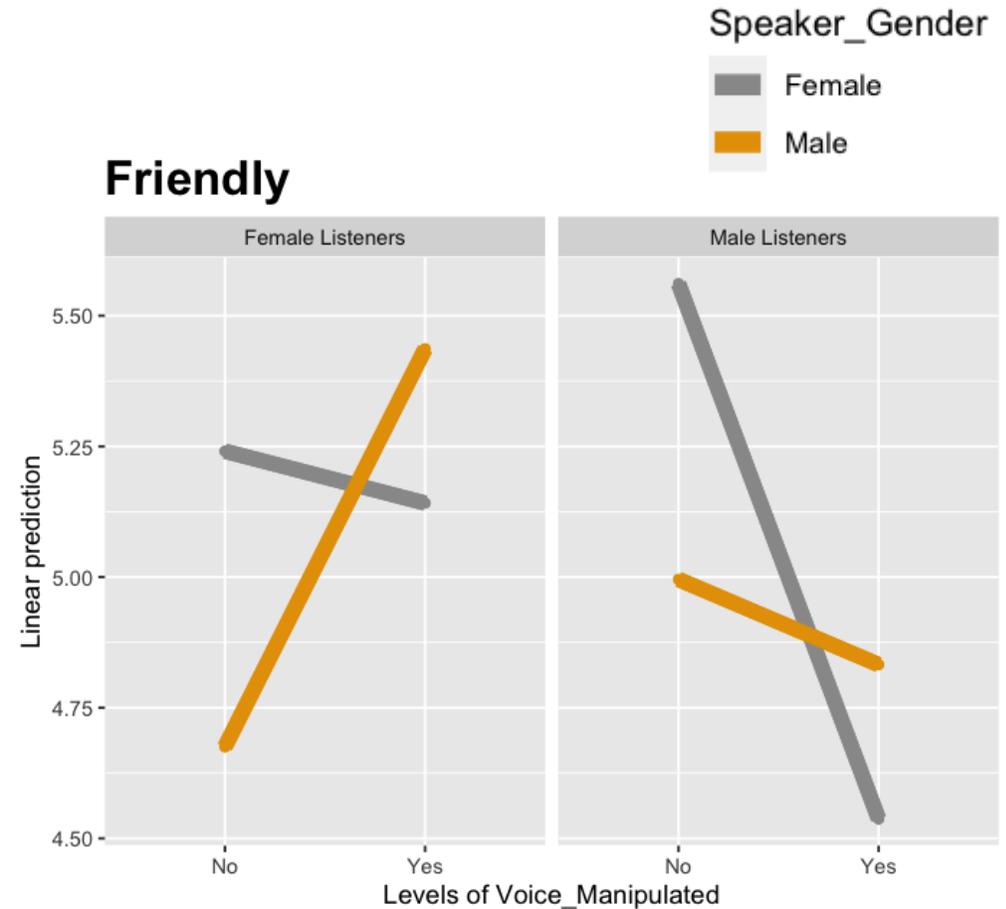
Attractiveness

- Lowering female voice made her unattractive across men and women ($p < 0.01$)
- Men dispreferred manipulations to originals overall ($p < 0.05$)



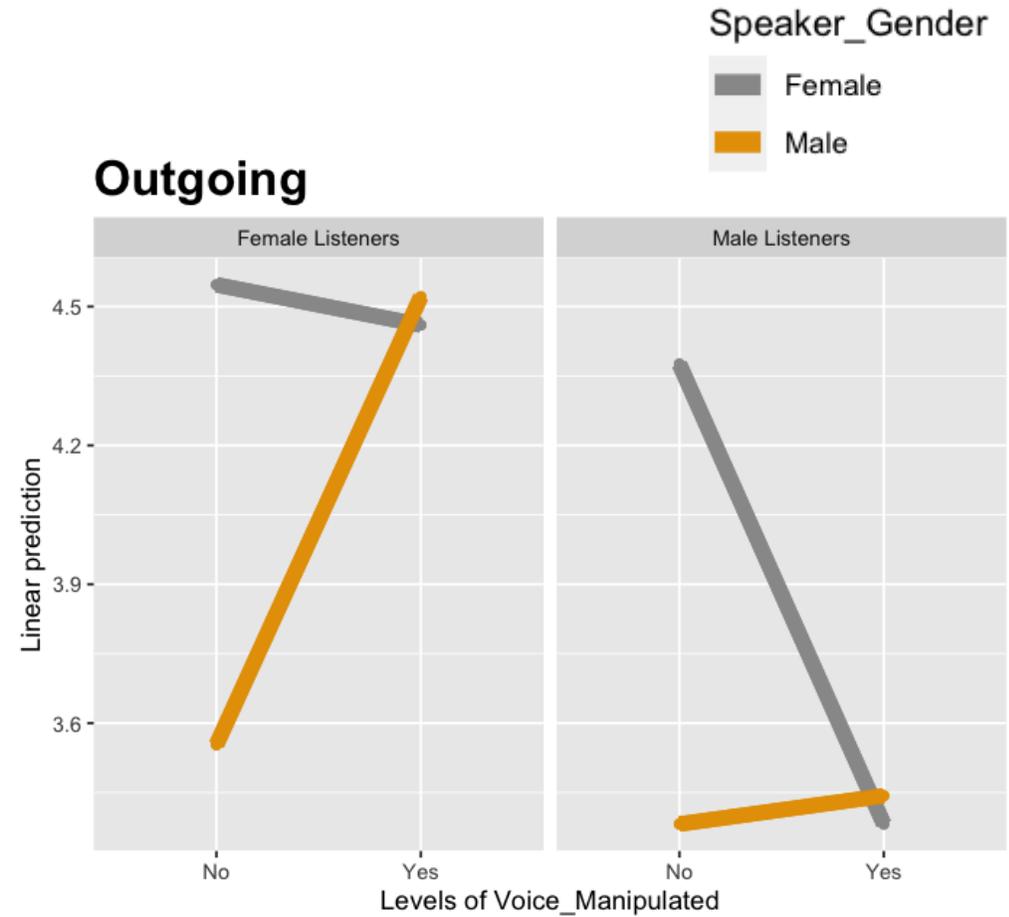
Friendly

- Women rate raised pitch man as more friendly ($p < 0.05$)
- Men rate lowered woman as less friendly, compared to female raters ($p < 0.05$)



Outgoing

- Women rate raised pitch man as more outgoing ($p < 0.05$)
- Men tended towards rating lowered woman as less outgoing



Gender or Gender Typicality?

- For *competence/status*, it appears to be gender (augmented by listener gender)
 - Men think men are better; women think women are better
- For *attractiveness*, it appears to be gender typicality (for women speakers)
 - Lowered woman penalized by both men and women, ratings of men consistent across conditions
- For *friendly* and *outgoing*, gender typicality has an asymmetrical effect across genders
 - Men rate **original** (typical) woman as more friendly and outgoing
 - Women rate **raised** (atypical) man as more friendly and outgoing

Post-experiment Comments

1) Evaluation of Voice:

- Major negative themes in comments:
 - 1) Lack of enthusiasm (28 comments)
 - 2) Monotone (15 comments)
 - 3) Lack of fluency (14 comments)

2) Alternative Profession:

- Suggested alternative professions:
 - “news reader”, “presenter”, “pundit”
- Particularly negative suggestions include:
 - “anything else”
 - “talking clock”
 - “Shop assistant”
 - “Receptionist”
 - “Undertaker”

All for lowered female voice

Discussion

- If the Jason Cundy effect is right, we should have seen higher ratings for lower pitch voices, regardless of gender...
- ... but in fact, we see – if anything – the opposite!
- Listeners rated the lower-pitched woman **more harshly** than the higher-pitched woman guise
- Quantitative analysis of ratings supported by qualitative analysis of comments



Discussion

- Double-Bind:
 - Women penalised for being too feminine...
 - ... but also for not being feminine enough!
- Men's football (in the U.K): a bastion of misogyny...?
 - **Yes:** people feel they have (more) licence to make misogynistic comments
 - But also **no:** we see these attitudes everywhere
 - Broader picture of male domination: our results reflect findings from less highly-gendered contexts
- Women's voices might change the conversation:
 - If more women were watching (and commenting in the media on!) men's football, the conversation around female football commentators might be different



Next Steps

- Further experiments with different manipulations
 - Lowered male and raised female guises
- Further social psychological metrics and demographic data:
 - 1) Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (used in Levon & Ye, 2020)
 - 2) Motivation to Control Prejudiced Reactions (used in Levon et al., 2021)
 - 3) Football viewing practices
- Corpus-assisted discourse analysis follow-up study:
 - High-profile critiques of female football commentator's pitch in print/broadcast media
 - How prevalent are arguments/justifications focused on "pitch" in "bottom-up" conversations between fans?

Thank you!

Thanks for listening and feel free to get in touch with comments or questions!

- Matthew Hunt
(he/him)



m.c.hunt@soton.ac.uk



@MCHuntLinguistics

- Louis Strange
(he/him)



louis.strange@glasgow.ac.uk



@louis_strange

- Sophie Holmes-Elliott
(she/her)



s.holmes-elliott@qmul.ac.uk



@LithesomeToll



Women's Football and Gender Norms...

- Heteronormative gender roles mirrored in women's football...?

Men's Football and Gender

- Policing of women's language within this context...

 **Lord Digby Jones** @Digbylj

Enough! I can't stand it anymore! Alex Scott spoils a good presentational job on the BBC Olympics Team with her very noticeable inability to pronounce her 'g's at the end of a word. Competitors are NOT taking part, Alex, in the fencin, rowin, boxin, kayakin, weightliftin & swimmin

6:44 PM · Jul 30, 2021

[Read the full conversation on Twitter](#)

4.9K Reply Share

 **Alex Scott MBE** @AlexScott

I'm from a working class family in East London, Poplar, Tower Hamlets & I am PROUD 🙌

Proud of the young girl who overcame obstacles, and proud of my accent!

It's me, it's my journey, my grit.
(1/3) 🙌

 **Lord Digby Jones** @Digbylj

Enough! I can't stand it anymore! Alex Scott spoils a good presentational job on the BBC Olympics Team with her very noticeable inability to pronounce her 'g's at the end of a word. Competitors are NOT taking part, Alex, in the fencin, rowin, boxin, kayakin, weightliftin & swimmin

12:52 AM · Jul 31, 2021