

# How's Your Gaydar?

Spotting a gay man by the way he speaks isn't as straight up as it seems. By Cynthia Brouse

THINK YOU CAN spot a homosexual by overhearing the animated conversation in the next banquet? If so, a couple of Canadian linguists suggest you think again.

Henry Rogers and Ron Smyth of the University of Toronto, and their late colleague Greg Jacobs of York University, tested two stereotypes: 1) you can tell a gay man by the way he talks and 2) one of the ways you can tell is that gay men's voices are higher-pitched and have more varied intonation than straight men's. To that end, they recorded 25 Canadian English-speaking men—two-thirds of whom said they were gay—and asked 46 listeners to guess the speakers' sexual orientation on the basis of how they sounded. Then they used sophisticated acoustic measurement software to find out what it means, in phonetic terms, to “sound gay.”

(Rogers admits their study had its problems. Some of the speech captured on tape came from stories the subjects told spontaneously, in which the content gave the game away. “If a man said, ‘Harold and I were down at Ashley's picking out china,’ we couldn't use it,” says Rogers. So they relied on samples in which their subjects read a passage with neutral content—though, curiously, the passage dealt with rainbows.)

As it happens, the infamous gay lisp isn't a lisp at all, but a tendency to prolong *s* and *z* sounds slightly longer than average, coupled with a “higher peak spectral frequency.” Basically, this means a man who sounds gay does fancier things with his tongue than one who sounds straight. And men with “gay” voices make the sounds *p*, *t* and *k* with more aspiration—the tiny puff of air that can accompany those consonants.

The tongue also performs minor contortions for a “gay” *l*, which is pronounced with the back of the tongue farther from the soft palate than usual (as in “like, totally”). Finally, some “gay” vowels are uttered for a slightly longer time, and some are “more peripheral”—here, as in women's speech, the tongue moves closer to the limits of the space inside the mouth where the vowels are produced. Listeners usually identify this feature as typical of more careful—in other words, prissy—speech.

But being gay doesn't always mean sounding gay—or vice versa. Leaving aside whether the subjects of the study were honest about who they liked to sleep with, Rogers says, “Our hunch going in was that even if you sound straight, you may be gay.” The results bore that out—and a few of the men who *did* sound gay said they were straight. The listeners agreed strongly and consistently on who was gay and who wasn't, but overall they were right only 62 per cent of the time. As for the chestnut that has gay men speaking like Dame Edna Everage: pitch (how high a voice sounds) and intonation (how much the pitch varies) didn't correlate with sexual orientation.

Why the discrepancy? Rogers and Smyth point to the trend in sociolinguistics to look at speech variants not as deterministic elements that everybody in a given cultural group displays but rather as tools that a person can choose to use—or not—to signal that he or she belongs to the group. But no one knows for sure why some men choose behaviour that can still result in social stigmatization. As a next step, the researchers are looking into how gay-sounding speech compares with that of females—on the

theory that gay boys model their style of talking on the women and girls around them—and whether lesbians sound different from straight women.

The professors' work has been noticed by those concerned with representations of homosexuals in popular culture. Rogers, Smyth and Jacobs received a small grant in 2001 from the U.S.-based Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation to analyze the voices of the two principal gay male characters on NBC's Emmy-winning *Will & Grace*: Sean Hayes's Jack McFarland and his pal Will Truman, played by Canadian actor Eric McCormack. Though McCormack and the sitcom have received awards from GLAAD, audiences are divided on whether Hayes's campy dilettante and McCormack's straighter-acting lawyer are innovative standard-bearers or lame stereotypes. Rogers, Smyth and Jacobs analyzed the characters' “peak spectral frequencies” and “aspiration durations.” Their conclusions were less than earth-shattering—Jack does, indeed, sound gayer than Will, though, interestingly, they both became more gay-sounding from one season to the next.

Of course, they're TV characters played by actors—McCormack is a straight man who's married and has a son. Still, Rogers and Smyth would

not be surprised to know he's been quoted as saying: “People thought I was gay in the second grade. I think a lot of guys I went to school with are now going to be saying, ‘You see, honey, I told you he was gay!’”

## CULTURE

### Canada Saves the U.S.

FEW PIECES OF PAPER in history have been so heavily guarded as the parchments bearing the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States. During the Second World War both documents were removed from the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., and stored at Fort Knox for safekeeping. In 1952 they were escorted from the library by two light tanks and four servicemen carrying submachine guns to their new home at the nearby National Archives and Records Administration, where they joined the Bill of Rights and together form the American Charters of Freedom. Enclosed in helium-filled, bullet-proof conservation cases, each night (as dramatized in last year's Nicolas Cage action movie *National Treasure*) they are hydraulically lowered with the push of a button into a steel and concrete vault nearly seven metres beneath the floor, capable of withstanding a nuclear explosion.

On July 5, 2001, the documents were lowered one last time before

