

The weight of the voice: Gender, privilege, and qualic apperception

Archie Crowley
University of South Carolina

For transmasculine individuals who undergo testosterone therapy, a lower pitch is often one of the most desired results, both for personal affirmation as well as for how a low pitch is gendered by others. This paper explores how members from a peer support group for transmasculine individuals articulate their experiences taking testosterone. During interviews participants discussed their *apperception* of the acoustic changes in their voices (Zimman 2012, 2018) as well as the recognition of this change by others. In this paper, I explore how their apperceptions of their voices are organized around a cluster of related *qualia* of the voice (Harkness 2014, 2017) such as “heaviness”, “deepness”, “resonance”, and social “weightiness”. As their voices lower in pitch over time and they are more frequently gendered as men in social spaces, they navigate shifting positionalities of privilege, and I show how their descriptions of their voices naturalize various qualia of the voice, linking “deepness” to the social “weight”, or power, of a voice.

1 Introduction

For transmasculine¹ individuals who undergo hormone therapy, the changes in the voice, specifically a lower pitch, are often one of the most desired effects from testosterone (also referred to within the transgender community and throughout this paper as “T”). This pitch drop in the acoustic voice is one of the changes that is most frequently elaborated in reflexive narrations of taking T, because “for linguists and non-linguists alike, pitch is the most intuitive and salient gender difference in the voice” (Zimman 2018: 3). Transmasculine speakers taking T often view changes in their voice as desirable, both for personal affirmation and satisfaction as well as the impact that a lower pitch has on how they are gendered by others. Because of these personal and social factors, the voice is a salient point of discussion among transmasculine speakers.

This paper is situated at the intersection of sociolinguistic and social-semiotic approaches to discourse to explore the ways that transmasculine individuals reflexively characterize the gendering of their voice, both in acoustic and figurative senses. From a linguistic anthropological perspective, these representations can be understood in terms of *apperception*, or the mental process by which a person makes sense of an idea by assimilating it to the body of ideas they already possess. Leavitt (2010: 119) articulates how this notion emerged out of distinctions made by Boas “between the way the ear perceives a sound and the way the preformed mind (and ear) apperceives it”. Beyond a sensory perception of physical phenomena, apperception describes the interaction between the sensory perception and how people integrate those perceptions through their habitual ways of perceiving and understanding the world. As transmasculine individuals undergoing testosterone therapy navigate the world as their voices change, the sensory

¹ Like many terms in the transgender community, *transmasculine* is not an uncontested term. However, it is used throughout as an umbrella term to refer to transgender individuals who were assigned female at birth (afab) and identify as a trans man or as a nonbinary person. While not all afab nonbinary speakers necessarily identify as masculine, *transmasculine* allows for a category of trans individuals who understand their gender as somewhat masculine, or potentially to recognize some movement away from femininity.

experience of their voice is incorporated into a broader understanding of how their gender is understood, how people respond to them, and how masculinity operates in their life.

I explore how, in narrating these changes, the individuals organized these apperceptions around various qualia of the voice, “heaviness”, “weightiness”, and “deepness”. Drawing on Charles Peirce’s semiotic account, anthropologist Lily Chumley and Nicholas Harkness (2013: 3) describe *qualia* as “experiences of sensuous qualities (such as colors, textures, sounds, and smells)”. ‘Qualia’ refers to the sensory experience of these abstract qualities (Chumley 2017), and the *qualisigns* are conventionalized “qualia taken to be signs” (Gal and Irvine 2019). Further, these sensorial and somatic experiences of qualia are mediated by “qualisigns of value” that link the sensory experience to social and contextual evaluations—either positive or negative (Munn 1992). Chumley and Harkness (2013) describe the process of how value is produced and connected to various qualia:

“In processes from gardening and canoe building to marriage exchange and witchcraft, people work to produce qualities such as lightness and darkness, heaviness and buoyancy. In producing these qualities, people produce value, and in producing value they generate ‘intersubjective spacetimes’: selves, relationships, communities, and also *hierarchies and inequalities*” (Chumley and Harkness 2013: 6, emphasis mine).

It is the process of producing *qualisigns* that endows senses such as “lightness” or “darkness” with a cultural value, desirability, or lack thereof. For example, in his analysis of a classical European-style vocal lesson in Chicago, Nicholas Harkness explores what it means for a singer to “open” their voice, and how interactions between the voice teacher and student are “organized around a collaboratively achieved cultural ontology of voice as it ‘really ’is” (Harkness 2017: 30). As the teacher works to help the student achieve the contextually desirable performance voice, the teacher organizes their feedback through various qualia: representations of the voice as “open”, “closed”, “froggy”, or “big”, some of which are desirable while others should be avoided.

Transmasculine speakers in interviews describe the sensory experiences of their voices with qualia such as “deepness”, “heaviness”, and “weightiness.” As the participants discuss the acoustic changes in their voices, their apperceptions naturalize the relationship between the “weight” of one’s social influence with the “depth” of one’s voice, thus “incorporat[ing] qualia into cultural schemata knowledge” (Harkness 2017: 33). By juxtaposing and naturalizing social and physical qualities in this way, trans men and transmasculine people navigate the cultural schemata of masculinity in ways that influence their experiences of privilege and power in social settings. While they may be uncomfortable with navigating this new terrain, to some extent, their descriptions of the voice naturalize and reify the qualic link between “depth” of a lower pitch and the social “weight”, or privilege, of a voice.

2 Voice

Notions of *voice* are understandably of central interest to sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists, who have used the term to refer to either the literal, acoustic manifestation of the vocal tract or to the metaphorical, discursive force of some person, persona, or perspective (Bakhtin 1981). This paper examines how the relationship between acoustic, sensorial experiences of the voice can become linked to the discursively constructed, relational notions of voice. The first notion of *voice* is highly relevant for my participants, because a lower pitch is one of the most salient physical changes that occurs through taking testosterone. Many transmasculine individuals are highly aware of and greatly anticipate the changes in their voice (Azul 2015; Azul et al. 2018), such that they often engage in metalinguistic and folk linguistic evaluations of their own voice— not only pitch, but also resonance and speech perceptions. But interestingly, these metalinguistic evaluations also frequently include uses of the term *voice* in a metaphorical sense to refer to things ranging from contributions, opinions, and perspectives, to a recognition of power and representation within social spaces (e.g., “I don’t have a voice” or “my voice was silenced”). In these discussions, many transmasculine speakers contrast the before and after of undergoing hormone therapy,

which takes place at the intersection of physiology and social practice (Zimman 2012, 2018). Importantly, the voice is more than just a phonetic realization, it is a social construction that is mutually constituted in interaction.

When transmasculine people talk about the acoustic dimensions of their voice, they often refer to the pitch and resonance changes that they experienced due to testosterone and changes in their larynx due to hormone therapy. This in many ways reflects the belief, often held by both linguists and non-linguists, that pitch is biologically or physiologically determined. Many accounts focus on gendered differences in speech via purely physiological differences in the vocal folds or in the larynx. While there are aspects of the voice that are interconnected with a physiological reality, they are not deterministic or immutable, and our experiences of the voice are derived from complex intersubjective, interactional, and cultural processes; “people may differently encounter a single phonosonic token emanating from a single body, but they are jointly involved in its phonosonic reality” (Harkness 2017: 49). Studies that take a constructivist approach to the voice show gendered social influences on vocal qualities depending on community norms and gendered socialization practices (Sachs 1975). Zimman (2018: 6) notes that “one of the primary concerns of scholars interested in the gendered voice is the determination of what role biology and socialization play in the production of phonetic gender differences”. Some of these gendered vocal practices are socialized during childhood and create conventionalized notions of and expectations for gendered voices and production. Although the physical dimensions of the voice are often the most salient, there are many ways in which the trans participants in this project *do* recognize the social dimensions of their voices, especially in others’ gendered perceptions of and reactions to their voice, but often these interactions are ascribed to the physical properties of their voices.

Within linguistic anthropological research, the term *voice* has been taken up in various way. First, it has been used to explore linguistic *registers*, which are the “voices a speaker takes on in different social situations” (Irvine 1990: 153). The Bakhtinian sense of *voice* includes these registers and how they index “typifiable speaking personae” (Bakhtin 1981). Agha (2005: 39) notes that “the term *voice* is based on a corporeal metaphor of phonation—the friction of air over vocal chords—even though the phenomenon it names is not restricted to, and hence has no necessary connection to, oral speech”. Here, Agha is referring to the broad understating of voice to include written texts in the creation of registers or personae. Further, Agha (2003) also notes that voicing contrasts construct distinctive *characterological types*, not all of which are stereotypically enregistered. When exploring the use of the term *voice* in teaching composition, Elbow (1994) lists a “family of related meanings” in understandings of voice in text, from “a recognizable voice”, a “voice of authority” or a “resonant voice or presence”.

While these different understandings of voice emerge from distinct disciplinary genealogies, there is overlap with scholarship that explores the crucial relationship between the physical/acoustic and the social. Eckert’s (2008) notion of *semiotic style* is made up of “stances, qualities, and social types together [which] form the semiotic network that Eckert discusses as the *indexical field*” (Kiesling 2019: 20). In her examination of /t/ release, Eckert identifies an indexical field that connects (1) temporary stances, (2) perduring qualities (elegant, educated, etc.), and (3) social type. Eckert’s use of the indexical field links meta-linguistic adjectives of speaker qualia that become conventionalized as gender qualisigns. In this paper, I use a social-semiotic analysis to explore the frameworks through which quick abstract sensory based phenomena are realized as tokens (qualia) in specific interactions (i.e., how a person’s voice is apperceived and how they are gendered in response to that apperception). As these types of interactions are repeated over time, these qualia become conventionalized by hegemonic systems rendering voices in particular gendered ways according to cultural categories like “deepness” or carrying “weight”.

3 (Trans)masculinity and privilege

Masculinity is challenging to define given its situational variability across cultural contexts. Scholars have understood masculinity as inherently relational: masculinity is defined in relation to femininity, but various masculinities are also defined in relation to one another. Connell (2005), in her theorizing of masculinity, has argued for a *hierarchy of masculinities* and relations between different raced and classed masculinities

through hegemony, subordination, complicity, and marginalization. *Hegemonic masculinity* – the dominant and “currently most honored way of being a man [in a particular context]” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 832) – is commonly associated with traits such as violence, lack of emotional expression, and control. Folk idealizations of masculinity in the U.S. typically place white middle-class (though sometimes working class), hetero, cisgender men at the center. However, research has shown the ways in which hegemonic masculinities themselves are variable and may incorporate features of masculinities elsewhere in the hierarchy of masculinity. In fact, Bridges and Pascoe’s (2014: 246) notion of *hybrid masculinities* explores how “subordinated or marginalized practices are taken up and incorporated into hegemonic ideals”. Furthermore, while masculinity is a cultural construct, it often gets linked in folk discourses to the biological, through corporeal signs such as hair, muscle mass, height, and the voice.

Research on masculinity and linguistic practice has shown that displays of masculinity emerge in interactional moves that men tend to take in specific situations that reinforce power (Kiesling 1997). These displays are holistic, encompassing both language and embodiment. For example, Kiesling (2018) takes up Ahmed’s (2014) discussion of the *ease* of existing in the world as a heterosexual person to explore a *masculine ease* in which men perform low-investment stances. This ease, he argues, is constitutive of hegemonic, normative masculinities. He further argues that “ease is one part of a masculine stance that is missing in the stereotyped stance of the ‘Gay Voice’ and other non-hegemonic masculinities” (Kiesling 2018: 209).

Yet for transmasculine people, navigating masculinity is often not associated with ease – in fact, it is often treacherous, as they “risk both emotional and physical repercussions should their gender identities be questioned” (Hazenbergh 2016). Abelson’s (2019) ethnography of trans men throughout the United States explores the various types of hybrid masculinities that are oriented to by her participants and the prioritization of what she calls a *Goldilocks masculinity*. For the trans men she interviewed, the ideal form of masculinity was an “in-between masculinity that is not too masculine and not too feminine or effeminate” (Abelson 2019: 6). These men navigate their own desires to be perceived as “regular guys” while simultaneously working to avoid domineering or violent hypermasculinity. While this hybrid masculinity in some cases challenges hegemonic masculinities, Abelson argues that often this Goldilocks masculinity “reflects more of a surface than a substantive change to social relations” (2019: 28).

Previous linguistic research with transmasculine people has explored their relationship to, and construction of, various types of masculinities through the voice (Hazenbergh 2016; Zimman 2012, 2013, 2018). Hazenbergh’s study of adjectival intensification and /s/ production showed that straight trans men linguistically performed a heteronormative masculinity in order to maintain a level of safety. Zimman (2013), by contrast, explored how trans men are often perceived as “gay sounding” and argued that what it means to “sound gay” is in fact, not a singular phonetic style. Building on this existing scholarship of transness, queerness, and masculinity, I investigate how the voice is leveraged in navigating the (perceived) privilege that comes with certain forms of (perceived) normative masculinity. For some trans men and transmasculine people, being read as men is desirable and uncomplicated. However, for others, being perceived in public space as a man comes with its own set of baggage. As members of a marginalized gender group, some transmasculine individuals have trepidation around what it means to be perceived as a man in social spaces, as they may have experienced the effects of sexism, misogyny, and male privilege in their own lives (McBee 2018).

The gendered identities that transmasculine speakers claim and imagine are not necessarily directly mapped on to hegemonic forms of masculinity in the U.S. (where these data were collected). However, how their “new” voices present and are often “heard” or “interpreted” by members of the public as they can be apperceived through those lenses. In this, the apperception of the voice becomes an *ordeal of language* (Basso 2009; Rodríguez and Webster 2012) for these transmasculine individuals. Ordeals of language occur when one’s voice is affected by the presence and observation of a powerful other. As transmasculine people navigate the apperception of their voices by others, they develop a “kind of awareness [that] allows [a] subordinate subject to imagine what the dominant might think about the public display of [their] voice” (Rodríguez and Webster 2012: 306). Through navigating these ordeals of language, the speakers are made aware of how our “own speech is never entirely and exclusively our own, but always heteroglossic and

polyvocal, formed always in relation to the speech of others” (Basso 2009: 122). However, I show that the transmasculine people I interviewed worked to transform these ordeals of language in which their voice was being interpreted by others as a way to challenge notions of masculinity and use their positionality in order to, as one participant said, “lift the voices of others”.

4 Ethnographic Background and Methods

Over the course of six months in 2019, I engaged in native ethnography (Narayan 1993) by attending and participating in a peer support group for transmasculine individuals held at a community LGBT center in a mid-sized city in the Southeastern United States. During this time, I became interested in discussions of masculinity and the voice, especially as it emerged in discussions of taking testosterone. Not all of the group members, or transmasculine people generally, were interested in taking testosterone, but many were, and because of this, it was a common point of discussion in the group. Group members shared their experiences navigating the medical system and getting prescriptions, gave advice on how to administer the medication and experiences with different doses, and discussed their personal experiences of the changes they felt from testosterone. During this time, I conducted separate, one-on-one interviews with fellow group members about their experiences taking testosterone.

In the following discussion, I focus on two ethnographic interviews with fellow group members Napoleon and Joel.² Both Napoleon and Joel were active members of the local trans support group and had experienced changes in their vocal pitch from testosterone. At the time of the interview, Napoleon was 25 years old, and they had been on testosterone for seven months. They are a white nonbinary/transmasculine person and use *they/them* or *he/him* pronouns. Joel, a white trans man who uses *he/him* pronouns, was also 25 years old, and he had been on testosterone for about 4 years at the time of the interview. I had initially met both Napoleon and Joel through the local trans peer support group where we all had, at points over the past two years, attended regular monthly meetings for trans individuals, as well as a specific affinity group for people who identify under the transmasculine umbrella. In addition to shared community, I shared many identities with Joel and Napoleon: I am also a white, nonbinary/transmasculine person who was 25 years old at the time of the interview. Further, at the time of the interview, I had also been taking low-dose testosterone for about 5 months and had just begun to experience vocal changes, which contributed to our discussion as both Joel and Napoleon knew I could relate to their experiences and share my own. The interviews both took place at my home, a location intentionally selected with the hope that by inviting them into my personal space, they would feel comfortable discussing personal issues regarding gender and aspects of their physical transition.

During the interviews, which were each about one hour, I asked questions regarding each participant’s relationship with their voice and their experience with others’ shifting perceptions of their own gender, as well as their relationships with masculinity, whiteness, and privilege. The goal of these discussions was to explore interviewee’s metalinguistic evaluations of their own voices through the process of undergoing testosterone therapy, and how this related to their relationship(s) with masculinity, power, and privilege more generally. While Joel and Napoleon’s (and my own) experiences of masculinity are inextricably tied to experiences of whiteness, I explore their discussion of whiteness and privilege elsewhere (Crowley 2021). In this paper, I focus on their discussions of the apperception of their voice and argue that this qualic apperception of the voice is a key discursive space through which they understand their shifting positionality of privilege in regard to how their voice is heard and respected.

² Pseudonyms were chosen by the participants.

5 Apperception of Vocal Changes

For transmasculine speakers in my study, and in U.S. matrix culture³ (Luis 2018), the voice is a crucial element of gender expression, often focusing on the desire for a lower, more “masculine” pitch. Many transmasculine individuals who take Testosterone anticipate the lowering of pitch with great excitement and track it intentionally, creating weekly or monthly recordings that document the change in pitch over time. Because of this, there is often a high level of metalinguistic awareness around the power of the voice to convey identity in social space. Both Napoleon and Joel brought up how they documented physical transition through videos and how this helped them notice the more subtle changes in their voice.

The following examples are organized into sites of apperceiving “before” and “after” selves throughout biocultural transformations. This reflects what Horak (2014) calls *hormone time*, or tracking life through the lens of time spent on testosterone – that a certain phase of life begins the day that T begins, and everything afterwards is measured against that date. The first section explores the apperception of this change by the self, and the second section explores reflections on how this change is apperceived by others. These apperceptions address the interaction between self-and-others’ perception and construal through habitual ways of perceiving the voice as it is tied to notions of masculinity and privilege. The last section explores how, ultimately, the participants reflect on these apperceptions by others as *ordeals of language* (Basso 2009) that they hope to transform in order to (attempt to) challenge notions of hegemonic masculinity.

5.1 Apperceptions of transformation of self

Many transmasculine people who take testosterone spend the first weeks and months closely monitoring the changes that happen through photos, videos, and other types of logs. For many people on T, these changes are gradient, and decreases in pitch from one recording to the next are tracked with eager anticipation. Each person goes into the process with different physical changes they hope to experience, from body fat redistribution to vocal pitch changes. Resources about T often list how long a person has to wait before experiencing these physical changes, and people closely wait and watch for the start of these different milestones. I asked both Joel and Napoleon what kinds of changes they had hoped to see in terms of their voice. Here, Joel articulates that his goal was to have a “deeper, more masculine” (line 2) voice.

(1) A more masculine voice

Archie: 1 Going into taking T, did you have any goals around your voice, or any hopes?

Joel: 2 I just wanted it to be **deeper, more masculine sounding**.

He notes that this change was hopefully going to be in line with other physical changes, like facial hair and increased muscle mass. For Joel, the hope of experiencing this cluster of changes was crucial in his decision to start T, and something that he was greatly anticipating. Napoleon, too, anxiously awaited these changes, and took videos of themselves weekly to monitor changes. When asked about noticing changes in their voice, Napoleon describes listening to recordings that they had made around the time that they had started testosterone:

³ The concept of *matrix culture* as opposed to mainstream culture is used to discuss how alternative queer cultural formations in the U.S. still orient to hegemonic gender and racial frameworks in evaluating their own group membership.

(2) Reflections on vocal changes

Napoleon: 1 but *now* (.) listening to **my voice then** is so:: weird
 2 cause I'm like I never sounded like *tha:t*
 3 cause there are some times where I'm like
 4 yeah I'm *aware* **my voice** is much **deeper** than it was before
 5 I heard a video from-
 6 I guess I was about 6 months on T and I heard it-
 7 one month or two months or something
 8 and I was like
 9 who is *that*

Napoleon reflects on their discomfort with hearing their voice from an earlier point in taking T, that it is “so weird”, and they express surprise at what their voice used to sound like (lines 1–2). However, while their current, lower pitch, feels more authentic and aligned with their gender identity – to the point that a higher pitch seemingly cannot belong to them – they are aware (line 4) that this pitch is due to the changes of testosterone. They narrate the experience of listening to a video of themselves from when they were only one or two months on T, and their reaction of surprise at hearing how they used to sound (line 9). For Napoleon, their current voice feels so natural that hearing their old voice feels like hearing a different person, which reflects ideologies of a *true voice*. In Harkness '(2017) analysis of a vocal lesson, the *true voice* is accessed by singers through the process of specialized training; for these speakers, the *true voice* is accessed through taking T.

For both Napoleon and Joel, vocal changes were something they hoped for and anticipated through taking testosterone. The apperception of these changes for Napoleon comes through reflecting back on the audiovisual documentation of their time on T. The other way that these changes were recognized is when they shifted interactions with others.

5.2 Recognition by others of the transformation

Joel also discussed taking transition timeline videos and photos as a way to document the changes he experienced on T. Yet for Joel, the most salient moment of recognition that his voice had changed came not from his own reflection, but from how it was recognized by others. When asked when he first noticed the changes in his pitch, Joel recalls an event in which he was gendered correctly at a drive-thru:

(3) Experiences at the Drive-thru

Joel: 1 I think the first time I really noticed that people were noticing more was
 when I'd order at drive-thrus.
 2 because drive-thrus were always my downfall.
 3 because at a drive-thru, they really can't see you, they just go off **what**
they hear.
 4 and a lot of times they'd say ma'am

- 5 and then there was one day when I went and they were like
 6 okay sir, you can come around
 7 I was like oh **so maybe it is changing.**
 8 yeah (.) because they have no other visual cues
 9 because I think **my voice is dropping**

Social interactions that lack visual cues are often very difficult to navigate for trans people, because often hearers make gendered judgements based on pitch and other vocal qualities. Here, Joel describes this particular class of social interactions as marking his growing realization that other people were apperceiving his voice – that is to say, taking in their perceptions of his voice through socially constructed bodies of knowledge, specifically understandings of masculinity – in a different way after taking testosterone. His self-awareness of his pitch changes came from noticing the way it led to others ’gendering of him, which he sets up as a recurring type of social interaction (line 1 “when I’d order at drive-thrus”) that allows access to how his voice is regularly apperceived. For Napoleon and Joel, tracking the changes in their voices was an important part of their physical transitions, and it came both through personal reflection and documentation, as well as through noticing how others are reading them. Furthermore, noticing these changes was important both for the feelings of gender euphoria that it led to, as well as the (not unrelated) benefit of being gendered more correctly in social situations.

These pitch changes in their voices were important and desirable for both Joel and Napoleon, but both also discussed the ways in which vocal changes were beneficial to them (i.e., having a pitch that felt more authentic for their gender) came with other complicated social repercussions. Both Joel and Napoleon drew links between their voices and how they are treated in social spaces. Joel describes what happens when he starts talking in a group, especially if it is a group of women:

(4) Interactions in group settings

- Joel: 1 I can kind of see where sometimes **I’m listened to more than other people.**
 2 I can’t give any really great specific examples but I’ve just noticed.
 3 sometimes **I can be talking and other people will just kind of be quiet.**
 4 before if I tried to interject people would just keep talking.
 5 but I noticed if I try to interject into other people, **especially if it’s a crowd of women, they’ll kind of drop off what they’re saying.**
 6 I’m like that’s not what I was trying to do I just want to say my piece.
[Archie agrees and asks Joel to elaborate]
- Joel: 10 it’s interesting to see both sides of the coin
 11 because if you’re raised as a female in society,
 12 you’re taught certain things and you see how those things play out in public.

- 13 but then, transitioning into someone more masculine you start to see
on the other side
- 14 and you're like
- 15 oh, this is how they're looking whenever I talked before.
- Archie: 16 mmm did you think about that before you started to transition?
- Joel: 17 **not at all. I didn't even think about how I'd be perceived.**
- 18 the fact that to everyone else I just looked like a white cis hetero male.
- Archie: 19 hmm, yeah.
- Joel: 20 I was like I didn't think about how the public eye would see me
- Archie: 21 how do you feel about that?
- Joel: 22 it's honestly, it's a little uncomfortable, because I don't want to be
perceived that way.
- 23 **but at the same time I do**

In group situations, Joel notes that when he starts talking “other people will just kind of be quiet” (line 3), which is distinctly different from what happened to him before he had started taking testosterone when “people would just keep talking” (line 4). A tension that Joel is navigating is that previous strategies of getting his voice heard take on a new meaning with this shift. Many transmasculine individuals previously had to work to have their voice heard or get ideas onto the floor, and for many those instincts can remain even though the practice isn’t actually necessary anymore. While this practice of just trying to “say his piece” (line 6) is now responded to in a totally different way. He ties others’ silence to his emergent gendered privilege, noting that women now defer to him or give him the floor even though he wasn’t intending to take it (line 6), and he reiterates this qualic link between a “deeper, more masculine” (Example 1) and a voice that is “dropping” (Example 3) and the way he is listened to and respected in social settings (Example 4).

Napoleon also remarks on this relationship between the acoustic properties of the voice and privilege:

(5) A booming, lower voice

- Napoleon: 1 I think to me
- 2 in being like oh **my voice** is **booming** and that and I feel good about
that
- 3 I don't think that's intrinsic
- 4 I think it's a reaction to like
- 5 I need to have **a voice that is low**
- 6 but yeah separating that from how our society responds to **lower**
voices um
- 7 that's hard to do

They point out a specific tension between their feelings of euphoria about their newly lowered voice and the sociocultural value ascribed to voices like theirs; on one hand, they like how their voice sounds and feels (line 2), but on the other hand, they recognize that the value of the low voice derives from gender ideologies that reinforce patriarchal valorization of cisgender men and masculinity (line 5–6). Napoleon acknowledges that for them, as a nonbinary transmasculine individual, liking their low voice is complicated by the knowledge that the positive value of a low voice comes from androcentric ideologies. As Joel shows in Example 4, these ideologies are interactionally impactful, sometimes resulting in a privileging of their voice (in the metaphorical sense) in social situations. These excerpts highlight the complex relationship between the physical, acoustic voice and the social, symbolic voice. Being “heard” is more than others’ simply receiving the acoustic signal of one’s voice; it is how the voice is responded to and what properties are afforded the speaker as a result. Both Joel and Napoleon display recognition of this nuance: just as they are both aware of the pitch changes in their voice, they are also attuned to perceiving the social changes, both wanted and unwanted, that come with this vocal shift.

5.3 Platforms for transforming the ordeals of voice

Napoleon and Joel recognize the ways in which their changing voices are being heard and apperceived by others, yet this does not always line up with how they understand their own positionality in the world. As active members of queer communities that frequently critique systems of hegemonic masculinity, both Napoleon and Joel note that experiencing shifts in the social weight of their opinion or perspective is complicated. In Example 5 above, Napoleon notes that there *are* gender-affirming aspects of the changes in their voice, but they have a hard time negotiating their perceived social status derived from this change. This dissonance can be understood through the lens of *ordeals of voice* – instances in which there are “inherent contradictions in the texts-of-self one is required to perform” (Rodríguez and Webster 2012: 313). As trans people, they have themselves experienced marginalization in terms of gender, and for them, this new positionality and power should be problematized. In Example 6 Napoleon continues to reflect on how they can potentially shift this ordeal of the voice to an opportunity to use their new social privilege to help others.

(6) Carrying weight

- Napoleon: 1 yeah I think my main thing that I want to fall back on is just to
 2 use my **voice** to prop up others um especially in a group setting
 3 especially if I’m being given the floor without really having to work
 for it
 4 that I’m sharing that um
 5 I’m definitely on the lookout for ways to improve that
 [Archie asks about in what situations they want to improve this]
- Napoleon: 15 it will be interesting when I go home for Christmas because I have
 an enormous family
 16 and I am curious if **my voice** will carry more **weight** there

Similar to Joel’s anecdote in Example 6, Napoleon is discussing what it is like for them to be in a group setting where they are “being given the floor without really having to work for it” (line 3). Here, Napoleon shifts to talking about their metaphorical voice when they say “I want to... use my voice to prop up others”

(lines 1–2). Here, the “voice” refers not only the acoustic properties that they have but also to agency, influence, leverage, and social status. They are cognizant of the physical changes that testosterone brings, but they are also self-reflexive that their metaphorical voice or “opinions and perspectives” are more often deferred to in group settings.

Furthermore, they reinforce the qualic link to heaviness, as they wonder about what will happen in other group settings, such as within their family and whether their “voice will carry more weight there” (line 16) now that they have been on testosterone. We can interpret their use of this phrase to mean “my opinions/perspectives will be given more respect”, but the word “weight” invokes a physical dimension to the voice as well. Earlier in the interview, they talked about the physical feeling of their voice “booming” (Example 5) and feeling “weight” (Example 6). This weight seems to suggest a largeness, which is associated with a deep voice, a lower pitch, and booming-ness. In his analysis of a vocal lesson, Harkness illustrates how the voice teacher creates a “qualic unity” between “Santa Claus, larynxes, throats, corsets, ribcages” which all tie to “openness” as an idealized property, an abstract potentiality, a valorized quality of voice” (2017: S49). For these transmasculine individuals, the valorized quality is not “openness”, rather “deepness” and “weightiness” become the desired vocal qualities. In turn, this idealized voice is desirable both for personal gender affirmation but is also tied to interpersonal and cultural benefits (or privileges). The qualic link between a physical lower pitch with the metaphorical weight of social respect and privilege underscores the ways in which Napoleon understands their own voice, masculinity and privilege.

Later in the interview, they refer back to their point about using their voice to “prop up others” when discussing how they want to use their positionality as someone who is perceived as a man in social situations. Napoleon states that being “privileged” is like having “cake”, and as someone who is given “a larger slice of cake”, they want to figure out how to “share their cake” (line 2):

(7) What to do with privilege

- Napoleon: 1 what am I doing with it [privilege]?
- 2 how am I sharing my cake?
- 3 and that’s why I gave that example
- 4 **literally lifting up other people’s voices**
- 5 and working on those biases of mine so that I’m not embodying them
- 6 as much as I can
- 7 or as actively as I can

Napoleon then shifts to a metaphorical sense of voice for not only themselves, but also for others, when they say they want to “literally lif[t] up other people’s voices” (line 4) who do not share the same social benefits that they have. Although Napoleon understands that their voice will be apperceived by others in line with masculinity, and thus grant them a position of power in certain situations, they perceive this as an ordeal of the voice – something they don’t want to embody (line 5). Ultimately, this provides an opportunity for a transformation of this ordeal of the voice. They want to take how their voice is apperceived by others and turn that into an opportunity to help others. However, the ability to do so depends on the reification of the qualic link between a deep voice and a sense of masculinity and power that deserves respect. In some ways, this challenge of what to “do” with privilege continues to uphold the ideological link between a deep voice and power, even while expressing a critique of it.

6 Conclusions

For both Napoleon and Joel, the voice was the locus for a major shift in the perception of their gender, as with many transmasculine individuals who report that it is once their voice drops that they are regularly gendered as men in public space. Their apperception of their own pitch change comes from self-monitoring and recording as well as noting the responses and treatment from others in social interactions. Both of the interviewees tie these physical and acoustic changes to positive social shifts, such as being gendered (more) correctly by others. However, this change also resulted in social shifts that at times were unexpected or unwanted, such as being given the floor in group settings more frequently. This tension led to a thoughtful ambivalence – it's good because they get gendered in affirming ways and because their voices are heard, but bad because they are taking the floor from others based on sexist ideologies. While both participants discuss these simultaneous shifts, Napoleon specifically makes sense of these interrelated changes (physical and social) by highlighting the qualic apperceptions of their voice by themselves and others. This discursive move of naming these apperceptions by others allows Napoleon to transform ordeals of the voice, not just to make sense of the social privilege they feel themselves gaining as they pursue physical transition but also to cultivate actionable responses to this new power; that is, how they can “lift up other’s voices”. While they use this to try to find ways to counter the effects of sexist ideologies – one question that remains is whether these workarounds (“sharing their cake”) really contest these gender ideologies.

Throughout the interviews, vocal qualia of “depth” and “weight” were tied to social values of the types of people who have these vocal qualities, typically cisgender men. In current social discourses of power and privilege, evaluating whose voices get heard is regarded as essential when striving for equitable representation. These transmasculine speakers navigate the line of having marginalized non-normative gender experiences while occupying a privileged social space as white men or masculine individuals. The speakers use the qualic apperception of the voice to discursively navigate the tensions that emerge due to their specific positionality as transmasculine speakers and the power of their voice.

Acknowledgements. All my gratitude to Elaine Chun, Jennifer Reynolds, Lex Konnelly, Samantha Martin for their support and feedback through the writing process, and to an anonymous reviewer for their generative comments on this paper.

References

- Abelson, Miriam J. 2019. *Men in place: Trans masculinity, race, and sexuality in America*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Agha, Asif. 2003. The social life of cultural value. *Language & Communication* 23(3–4): 231–273.
- Agha, Asif. 2005. Voice, Footing, Enregisterment. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 15(1): 38–59.
- Ahmed, Sara. 2014. *Cultural politics of emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Azul, David. 2015. Transmasculine people’s vocal situations: A critical review of gender-related discourses and empirical data. *International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders* 50(1): 31–47.
- Azul, David, Aron Arnold, and Christiane Neuschaefer-Rube. 2018. Do transmasculine speakers present with gender-related voice problems? Insights from a participant-centered mixed-methods study. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research* 61(1): 25–39.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail M. 1981. *The dialogic imagination: Four essays*. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Basso, Ellen B. 2009. Ordeals of language. In *Culture, rhetoric and the vicissitudes of life*, ed. Michael Carrithers, 121–137. NY: Berghahn Books.
- Bridges, Tristan, and Cheri J. Pascoe. 2014. Hybrid masculinities: New directions in the sociology of men and masculinities. *Sociology Compass* 8(3): 246–258.

- Chumley, Lily. 2017. Qualia and ontology: Language, semiotics, and materiality; an introduction. *Signs and Society* 5(S1): S1–20.
- Chumley, Lily Hope, and Nicholas Harkness. 2013. Introduction: QUALIA. *Anthropological Theory* 13(1–2): 3–11.
- Connell, R. W., and James W. Messerschmidt. 2005. Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender & Society* 19(6): 829–859.
- Connell, R. W. 2005. *Masculinities*. 2nd Edition. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Crowley, Archie. 2021. ‘I don’t want to be part of that club’: Whiteness, transmasculinity, and privilege. [Conference Presentation]. Student Research Symposium, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC.
- Eckert, Penelope. 2008. Variation and the indexical field. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 12(4): 453–476.
- Elbow, Peter. 1994. What do we mean when we talk about voice in texts. In *Voices on voice: Perspectives, definitions, inquiry*, ed. Katherine Blake Yancy, 1–35. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Gal, Susan, and Judith T. Irvine. 2019. *Signs of difference: Language and ideology in social life*. 1st ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Harkness, Nicholas. 2014. *Songs of Seoul: An ethnography of voice and voicing in Christian South Korea*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Harkness, Nicholas. 2017. The open throat: Deceptive sounds, facts of firstness, and the interactional emergence of voice. *Signs and Society* 5(S1): S21–52.
- Hazenberg, Evan. 2016. Walking the straight and narrow: Linguistic choice and gendered presentation. *Gender and Language* 10(2): 270–294.
- Horak, Laura. 2014. Trans on YouTube: Intimacy, visibility, temporality. *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1(4): 572–585.
- Irvine, Judith T. 1990. Registering affect: Heteroglossia in the linguistic expression of emotion. In *Language and the Politics of Emotion*, ed. Lila Abu-Lughod and Catherine A. Lutz, 126–161. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kiesling, Scott F. 1997. Power and the Language of Men. In *Language and Masculinity*, ed. Sally Johnson and Ulrike Hanna Meinhof, 65–85. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Kiesling, Scott F. 2018. Masculine stances and the linguistics of affect: On masculine ease. *NORMA* 13(3–4): 191–212.
- Kiesling, Scott F. 2019. The ‘Gay Voice’ and ‘Brospeak’: Towards a systematic model of stance. In *The Oxford Handbook of Language and Sexuality*, ed. Kira Hall and Rusty Barrett, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Leavitt, John. 2010. *Linguistic relativities: Language diversity and modern thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Luis, Keridwen N. 2018. *Herlands: Exploring the women’s land movement in the United States*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- McBee, Thomas P. 2018. My voice got deeper. Suddenly, people listened. *The New York Times*, August 9, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/09/style/transgender-men-voice-change.html>.
- Munn, Nancy D. 1992. *The fame of Gawa: A symbolic study of value transformation in a Massim (Papua New Guinea) society*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Narayan, Kirin. 1993. How native is a “native” Anthropologist? *American Anthropologist* 95(3): 671–686.
- Rodríguez, Juan Luis, and Anthony K. Webster. 2012. Ordeals of language: Essays in Honor of Ellen B. Basso. *Journal of Anthropological Research* 68(3): 305–314.
- Sachs, Jaqueline. 1975. Cues to the identification of sex in children’s speech. In *Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance*, ed. B. Thorne and N. Henley, 152–171. Newbury, MA: Newbury House Publishers.
- Zimman, Lal. 2012. Voices in transition: Testosterone, transmasculinity, and the gendered voice among female-to-male transgender people. Doctoral thesis, University of Colorado Boulder.

- Zimman, Lal. 2013. Hegemonic masculinity and the variability of gay-sounding speech: The perceived sexuality of transgender men. *Journal of Language and Sexuality* 2(1): 1–39.
- Zimman, Lal. 2018. Transgender voices: Insights on identity, embodiment, and the gender of the voice. *Language and Linguistics Compass* 12(8): e12284.