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Although anyone can be assumed to engage in style-shifting to construct a persona (e.g. Podesva 2007b, Eckert 2008), in the case of drag performers it can be argued that style-shifting results not in an alternate persona but in a performative identity. With this hypothesis in mind, this case study uses a style-shifting paradigm to explore the varying social meanings of phonation type and vowel quality in the construction of a drag queen identity. The speech of two gay male Hispanic drag queens (DQs) from Albuquerque, New Mexico (ABQ) was investigated in various speech situations to identify social meanings indexed by phonetic variants that emerge from style-shifting, and social constraints on their use.

DQs constitute a subset of the LGBT community. A typical component of DQ identity is an oppositional stance toward both heteronormativity and normativity (e.g. Barrett 1998). Long-term ethnographic observations of the ABQ drag community, suggest that a typical, local DQ identity involves both exaggerated female impersonations designed for audience entertainment and challenging social norms, especially heteronormativity. This motivates the choice of variables in the present study. Phonation type (falsetto vs. non-falsetto) has been shown to be implicated in displays of non-heteronormativity (e.g. Podesva 2007a). Vowel quality was chosen in order to see whether the speakers' vowel pronunciations are characteristic of California Vowel Shift (CVS) in either situation. The CVS is of interest because the sociolinguistic findings of previous work suggest that Anglo women are leading this change in the southwestern US (Brumbaugh and Koops, forthcoming), and that the speech style of the CVS is a resource available for the enregisterment of gay identity (Podesva 2011).

The results confirm and extend existing accounts of the range of indexical meanings conveyed by falsetto phonation and support the idea that speakers use phonetic variants to construct personae and identities.

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