

“Um, I need to show you the real me”: Hesitation markers and gender performance

This paper investigates gender performance (Butler 1990) through quantitative analysis of how drag queens on the TV reality show *RuPaul's Drag Race* change their speech as they transition from male personae to full drag. We study a variable previously shown to be implicated in gender: discourse hesitation markers, as in examples 1-5 (Acton 2011, D'Arcy 2007, Koczogh & Furkó 2007, Laserna et al. 2014). We focus on *um* (5), which Acton (2011) shows is more frequently used by women.

- (1) But ***I mean*** we were all being terrible. (AT5)
- (2) As you can see, ***uh***, there's just drag everywhere. (RG)
- (3) I've been there done that, ***you know***, I am Cher, bitch. (CM)
- (4) my accent was ***like*** really strong. (NF)
- (5) ***Um***, I need to show you the real me. (SN)

Discourse markers used by the top three contestants on all six seasons of *Drag Race* were exhaustively extracted and supplemented with interview data (to permit a discussion of style shifting). All tokens (N=903) were coded for drag status (in drag, out of drag, transitioning into drag), season of show, age of performer, and source (show vs. interview).

Our multivariate analysis reveals a statistically significant monotonic correlation of *um* use and drag status: lower rates out of drag, slightly increased rates during transition, and greatly increased rates when in drag. This increase comes partly at the expense of *uh*, as Acton's research would suggest, but much more so at the expense of discourse *like*. *Um* also correlates with style, with higher rates in the interview situation, rather than the televised segments of the show.

We conclude that the sociolinguistic resources available to drag performers include not only salient markers of feminized speech (Barrett 1998, Mann 2011), but also features closer to the edges of salience, such as discourse markers.

References

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