"I Grew Up Knowing How to Talk Female:" Transgender Men's Reported Communicative Changes in Their Post-Transition Lives

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1. Introduction

This is a qualitative analysis of how six transgender men explain the relationship between their language and their gender identities, and examines the ways that they report making changes to their communication styles in order to present their gender identities. In this article, I aim to expand the scope of sociolinguistic research to better include people with non-normative gender identities, as there is a shortage of research on the language use of individuals who do not conform to or identify with the gender assigned to them at birth.

I examine how transgender men view specific communication styles and linguistic features as indexing masculinity or femininity, and analyze how these beliefs about language led them to change certain aspects of communication and linguistic features. I focus on the construction of masculinity in communication among individuals who previously lived their lives presenting as women before transitioning to living their lives presenting full-time as men. I interviewed six transgender men for analysis. The changes in communication that they reported to be salient included: the use of address terms, asserting opinions, challenging others in conversation, intonation, voice, topics of conversation, swearing, leadership in public discourse, emotion in communication, and embodied communication. I will analyze how several of these patterns of reported changes relate to existing literature on women's and men's communication.

1.1. Terms and Definitions

I have adopted definitions developed by the National Center for Transgender Equality as well as Lal Zimman, a sociolinguist, to use as guiding definitions for this paper. *Gender identity* is defined as one's "internal sense" of their gender, and is not necessarily something that is visible to others (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2014). One can identify as a man or woman while not presenting that way openly. *Transgender* is

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defined as "a term for people whose gender identity, expression or behavior is different from those typically associated with their assigned sex at birth." *Cisgender* is conversely defined as a term for individuals whose gender identity corresponds with the gender assigned to them at birth. The subjects of this study are *transgender men*, also known as *FTMs* or *female-to-males*, who are people who have transitioned from female to male, meaning that they were assigned female at birth but identify and live as males. It is important to note than transgender men still fit the gender binary in that they present as men and as males. The terms *transgender men* and *transgender males* will be used interchangeable throughout this paper. The term *transition* is used to refer to "the time when a person begins to live as the gender with which they identify rather than the gender they were assigned at birth, which often includes changing one's first name and dressing and grooming differently." The individuals in this study were considered to have begun transitioning when they began presenting full-time as men. Zimman (2012) states that a transmasculine person is someone who was assigned female at birth, but "who self-identifies as a man or with some other masculine gender category" (p.1). Transgender men are thus also transmasculine, because they identify within a masculine gender category. However, some transmasculine people may not be transgender men because they identify outside of the gender binary, not as men.

3. Literature Review

I will first provide a brief overview of the study of language and gender and then give a brief review of related linguistic research involving transgender men and transmasculine individuals. In my analysis section, I will review findings related to each linguistic phenomenon that I discuss.

The study of language and gender relies on the foundational principle that gender is a socially-constructed concept, utilizing the definition of gender as the assignment of social meaning to biological sex. Maltz and Borker (1982) conducted a survey of research, finding that boys and girls are socialized by same-sex peer groups to value different forms of interactions and relationships, which leads to the development of different forms of communication among men and women. Goffman (1977), and Tannen (1994) following him, argued that interactions are framed in a way that is "sex-class-linked" meaning that certain linguistic usages may be associated with the "class" of men or women, but that people are not necessarily representative of gendered speech patterns on an individual basis. A vast range of studies demonstrate that women and men differ with respect to their uses of many linguistic features (e.g. Coates, 2013; Holmes, 1995; McConnell-Ginet, 1978).

People with non-normative gender identities have been largely excluded from sociolinguistic studies, perhaps because they pose a challenge to the binary thinking upon which this field has been built. There are, however, a few studies that have examined transmasculine participants, demonstrating that many linguistic characteristics are salient in the presentation of gender among transmasculine people, including voice (Zimman, 2012), lexicon (Zimman, 2014), conversational topics (Van Borsel, Cayzeele, Heirman & T'sjoen, 2014), and intonation (Hancock, Colton & Douglas, 2014). These studies demonstrate that the manipulation of these linguistic phenomena can impact how these individuals construct their masculinity, how they perceive their masculinity, and how it is perceived by others.

4. Methodology

Data collection was carried out in the form of interviews with six transgender men that were each about 30-45 minutes in duration. It is important to note that participants were self-reporting their own information. This type of data is not always reliable, but is a good starting point for understanding how individuals view their patterns of communication. Each interview was recorded using a digital audio recorder.

To start the interview, I asked participants about their gender identities and how they have changed their lives in order to present as the gender with which they identify. This line of questioning designed simply to ensure that they fit the demographics for the study criteria. Questions about age and race/ethnicity were also asked in order to obtain basic demographic information about these individuals in case it should be used for later analysis. Next, I asked general questions about how the interviewees view their language use as related to their gender identities, and whether they are aware of anyone else's views of how they speak and communicate. And finally, I asked if they have made any conscious changes to their communication styles since transitioning in order to present their gender identities in a particular way. This included questions about communication in various contexts, such as interactions with men, women, family, friends, and in public. This also included questions about specific communication styles and linguistic usages, such as the use of humor, intonation, and making requests. I asked open-ended questions in order to obtain as much information as the participants were willing to share and not push participants too far about potentially sensitive information. It is important to note that participants self-selected for this study, and therefore may be more comfortable discussing their gender identities and communication styles than others who did not participate.

Five of the participants placed great importance on identifying and presenting as solely male rather than as transgender, while one participant placed great emphasis on his transgender identity and intentionally makes himself socially visible as a transgender man. The range of time for full-time presentation as male for all participants was between three and five-and-a-half years. This ensures that they had a significant period of time to establish coherent views on their language as related to their gender identities, and that they also had time to develop their communication styles and make conscious changes to linguistic features. All participants had undergone some form of physical transition process, and all had undergone hormone therapy, which caused the pitch of their voices to drop to a male vocal range. All participants reported that they pass well as male, and four do not reveal their transgender identities to people who do not already know. Each of these men differ from each other with respect to how they perform their masculinities, and also vary their gender presentation based on their immediate circumstances and audiences, as will be described below. Thus although these men are analyzed as a group, their individual experiences vary.

All participants were native English speakers. Four attended four-year colleges at the time of the interviews and their ages ranged between 20-22 years old. The remaining two were 25 years old and 50 years old and work at full-time careers in education. Five out of the six participants identify as white/Caucasian, while one identifies as Hispanic. Five of the individuals interviewed were from or had been living in Massachusetts for an extended period of time, and the remaining participant was from Maryland. None of the participants had received language training or coaching, and none were familiar with language and gender studies. All participants are given pseudonyms and all personally-identifying information is withheld in order to protect their privacy and confidentiality. The

participants will be referred to as: Stephen, Andrew, William, Kyle, John, and Patrick. Participant demographic information can be found in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Participant information

Participant	Demographic Information
Stephen	22 years old, Hispanic, college student from Massachusetts, identifies as male, began transition 4.5 years ago
Andrew	50 years old, Caucasian, administrator at a high school in Massachusetts, identifies as male, began transition 3 years ago
William	25 years old, Caucasian, staff member at a college in Massachusetts, identifies as transgender man, began transition 3 years ago
Kyle	22 years old, Caucasian, college student from Massachusetts, identifies as male, began transition 4 years ago
John	20 years old, Caucasian, college student from Massachusetts, identifies as male, began transition 5.5 years ago
Patrick	22 years old, Caucasian, college student from Maryland, identifies as male, began transition 4 years ago

5. Data and Analysis

All six men shared that they believe they have made many changes to their communication styles since beginning their transition to presenting full-time as men. Each revealed that he believes he has made some changes that are very intentional, while he believes he has made other changes that he considered to be "unconscious." Participants shared that their perceived changes to their communication styles were based primarily on various beliefs about how men and women speak. These men hold common beliefs about men and women's language and that these beliefs have helped shape their reported interaction patterns. I will discuss several communicative changes that the men reported to be salient in their formation of male identities, including changes to how they assert opinions, challenge others in conversation, make requests, use intonation patterns, and the role of voice. I will discuss each of these aspects of communication targeted for change by the transgender men, and describe how each type of change relates to related literature.

5.1. Navigating Hierarchical Social Structures

Scholars generally agree that women tend to use communication to build and to maintain personal relationships, and to foster community, whereas men tend to use communication to exchange information and navigate social hierarchies. Many pieces of research demonstrate that men are "socialized into a more competitive style of discourse, while women are socialized into a more cooperative style of speech" (Coates, 2013, p. 209). Holmes (1995) finds that men's communication is carried out in order to maintain status in hierarchical social structure, and that men use fewer politeness strategies in their talk than women because they are negotiating for status with others.

All six of the transgender men demonstrated that they believe they have adopted more competitive speech styles that contribute to fostering dominance within hierarchies after they began to transition. This is especially interesting because this means that even though these individuals were raised and conditioned to speak as women, they have now within a few years of transitioning adopted male discourse patterns related to social order. Several participants said that they believe that men's communication patterns display more

dominance, and that they have felt a need to display dominance and power in their communication as men. Participants reported that they have altered their communication styles to be more assertive and sometimes more aggressive, taking on a more competitive nature. All six participants reported that they had made changes to their communication styles that were more competitive in nature, demonstrating that since presenting as men they have adopted the competitive speech style that linguists have found to be characteristic of men's communication styles. The interviewees reported that they have changed the way that they assert opinions, challenge others, and make requests in conversation. Each of these changes is discussed below.

5.1.1 Asserting Opinions

Coates (2013) finds that men's discourse is viewed as the standard for public interactions, explaining that it is viewed as "assertive" and "confrontational" (p. 210). Lakoff (2014 [1973]) posits that women's speech is designed to prevent the expression of strong statements (p. 51). Coates (2013) and Holmes (1995) both observe in their studies that women avoid the use of strong statements through the use of politeness strategies. Coates, among other researchers, has observed that men have a tendency to take the role of the expert in conversation, while women use more cooperative speech to be inclusive of all participants, such as in her 1987 study of conversations among a group of three men and a group of five women, in which men discussed topics aligning with their own areas of expertise, and women discussed topics that were based on the personal experiences of all interlocutors.

All of the men in this study claimed that since transitioning they have become more likely to assert their opinions in conversation. Andrew said that this has only slightly changed for him, while all others cited that their level of comfort with sharing opinions and making statements in conversation has greatly increased since they transitioned. John attributed this newfound comfort in being assertive to his belief that "it's more masculine to be comfortable asserting opinions." Participants found that they now speak "with greater conviction" (as William phrased it) and find that they are more likely to share their opinions in conversation without negative consequences. Three of the participants grounded their newfound willingness to be assertive in what they experienced when they presented as women. John shared that it is still difficult for him to be more assertive because he was "socialized as a female" to be less opinionated. Stephen and Patrick both discussed their views that women are viewed negatively for being too opinionated or assertive in conversations, and therefore as men they now are much more willing to share opinions in conversation and feel they have greater rights to do so. Patrick explained, "As a girl you have to pick and choose your battles a lot more because you don't want to come off as bossy or pushy, and to be mindful to not risk coming off poorly...being a guy your threshold for coming off as a jerk is a lot higher."

The men's statements represent that they were socialized as women not to use strong statements, for fear of negative consequences. This aligns with findings that women avoid using strong statements or assertions in their speech, and provides evidence that part of the reason for this is negative consequences for doing so. The reported changes of the participants that they have become more assertive also supports Coates' (2013) findings about men's discourse.

5.1.2 Challenging Others in Conversation

Holmes's 1995 work argues that women tend to use linguistic devices to "soften disagreement" (p. 64) more than men because they "seek agreement to a greater extent" (p. 60), whereas men are "more willing to disagree baldly" (p. 64). The reported experiences of the participants support Holmes's findings that men are more confrontational, as they have said that they have become "less agreeable" in their interactions with others.

Several of the participants reported that they developed a greater willingness to challenge others in conversation since beginning to present as men, although I did not directly ask any questions that would elicit responses about challenging others. Four out of the six participants said that they have become more likely to "call people out" when they disagree with something that has been said or how the conversation is moving along. For instance, Stephen claimed that he is now "not as likely to back down" when a point he has made is challenged and is "not afraid to be less agreeable." He also stated that when he presented as a woman he would try to get along and agree with everyone. William finds that he now challenges people more often because he feels like his male privilege positions him "in a place where [he] can hold people to a standard" for their behavior, while he was unable to do so as a woman. All of the four participants who claimed that they felt more comfortable challenging people in conversation stated that they do so more with men. For instance, Patrick shared his view that "when you're a guy you're stacking yourself up against guys and the social category of dominance has changed." This conceptualization of interaction as competition supports Tannen's (1990) claim that men view conflict as a "necessary way to negotiate their status" (p. 150).

Kyle also demonstrated the importance of challenge and competition in his interactions with men through a change in his use of humor with men and its purpose. He claimed that since he began presenting as a man, he has begun using more "verbal jabs" with men in conversation and finds that he very commonly situates himself in male-to-male interactions by "poking fun" at other guys in conversation. Kyle may be using humor in this case to express solidarity with men and fit into male dynamics that embrace this form of competitive speech. This aligns with Kiesling's (2007) finding that men use different discursive strategies, including telling jokes, in order to reinforce their power in the status quo and also to relate to one another (p. 335-336).

5.1.3 Making Requests

The men differed in how they have changed making requests since transitioning. I framed "making requests" as asking for any help, favors, or advice from other people. Although responses varied with regard to willingness to make requests, the men's responses regarding making requests demonstrate that they use communication to navigate hierarchical structures. Tannen (1990) argues that in hierarchical structures, the person who gives information or assistance is framed as more powerful in the social dynamic than the person who is positioned to receive information or assistance (p. 62). She thus finds that men are less likely to request help or ask for information.

Stephen, Andrew, and Patrick shared that they intentionally make fewer requests now as men than they did when they presented as women. These three men all noted that they believe men ask for help and advice less than women do, and that they think that they make fewer requests in order to present as more masculine. They also shared that they have feelings of vulnerability in making requests as men, and stated that they believe it is

expected that they take care of themselves more and do more on their own now as men than when they presented as women. Stephen and Patrick both used the same words to describe how they view asking for help from others: an "admittance of defeat." They both reported that they try to do as much as possible on their own to avoid making requests. Stephen gave an example of how he might frame a request that displays his reluctance to make requests and his use of the demonstration of knowledge power when he has to make a request: "Well I already tried to do it this and this way, and so I'm coming to you because *maybe* you'll think of something I haven't already thought of."

On the other hand, William found that he has become more likely to make requests since transitioning, and that he also is more direct in how he asks for things. He attributed his heightened willingness to make requests to taking advantage of the privilege of being male; he now believes that people are more willing or feel more compelled to do things for him as a man, and so he feels comfortable asking for more. However, he did claim that his acknowledgement of this privilege has caused him to become very deliberate in how he forms requests because he is aware that people are more likely to comply with what he asks, and that he wants to be as conscientious of this as possible. Kyle also shared that he takes his male privilege into account when forming requests, trying to make them "as polite as possible," and cited examples of requests he would make that each contained a form of hedging to emphasize politeness. However, he says he has not changed how often he makes requests and does not feel more or less willing to make requests since transitioning.

William and Kyle's responses therefore demonstrate that unlike the three participants described above, they view making requests as imposing negatively upon the people from whom they are requesting something. They also try to act more courteous while making requests because of their view that requests impose upon others. The awareness that these participants have of their male privilege is perhaps especially unique to transgender men, as they have previously lived presenting as women and the privilege that they have received is something that they have come into recently in the past few years. They say that this unique view of privilege in hierarchical relationships has caused them to become politer in framing requests than when they presented as women, an interesting finding in keeping with popular findings that men's speech is less polite than women's (Coates, 2013). The remaining sixth participant did not discuss his use of requests before or after transitioning. The three men who stated that they have intentionally decreased the amount of requests that they make since transitioning thus do so in order to maintain their statuses in social hierarchies, which is demonstrated by their shared attitude that asking for help is an "admittance of defeat." This supports Tannen's (1990) argument that men perceive doing things independently as a "prerequisite for self-respect" (p. 62) and that they will make fewer requests in order to prevent themselves from appearing "inferior" (p. 63).

5.2 Changes to Voice

All six participants stated that they had made changes to their voice when interacting with others. They reported changes to intonation patterns as well as intentional manipulation of pitch in social circumstances. Many of the men stated that this was closely tied to their desire to present their gender identities and to also present their sexualities.

Zimman (2012) performed a sociophonetic study of 15 transmasculine speakers in order to examine the relationship between voice and gender. He examined three linguistic features commonly associated with gender difference in the voice: fundamental frequency, vowel formants, and the acoustics of the sibilant consonant [s] (p. 1). He found that the

transmasculine participants used a range of phonetic styles in order to display different types of masculinities. He therefore argues, "gendered phonetic styles are not determined by sex, nor by childhood socialization" (p. 209) and that "individuals' voices not only reflect but also partially constitute their relationships with masculinity" (p. 210).

5.2.1 Intonation

It has been empirically demonstrated that women use a greater range of intonation (Linneman, 2013), and that this use of intonation is perceived by listeners to reflect a speaker's femininity (Hancock, Colton & Douglas, 2014). McConnell-Ginet (1978) observed that physiological differences between males and females do not account for the differences between the variations of pitch ranges and loudness (intonation) between men and women, and argues that this demonstrates that differences in intonation patterns are in part "a product of our 'learning' to sound like women and men" (p. 548). Hancock, Colton, and Douglas (2014) examined the intonation of 20 transgender speakers (six men and 14 women) and 24 cisgender speakers (12 men and 12 women). Participants described a Norman Rockwell image, and then outside individuals listened to the recordings of these participants and rated them as sounding male or female. The researchers found that "speakers with a larger percentage of upward intonation and a large semitone range were perceived as female by listeners," (p. 203). They further argued that this demonstrates that intonation influences gender perception.

All participants discussed a change in their intonation patterns since transitioning. Five reported that they have intentionally decreased their pitch ranges while speaking and now use speech styles they described to be more "monotone" or "flat." Kyle, on the other hand, stated that he uses a greater pitch range in his speech now because he is more comfortable with his vocal range since his voice has dropped from hormone therapy and he enjoys using his full range more often. The five participants who discussed using decreased pitch ranges cited several reasons for doing so. First, a monotone voice was discussed as a way to maintain a lower pitch in conversation and prevent the voice from cracking. Second, four of these men stated that they believe using extreme shifts in intonation is a feminine speech trait, and claimed that they intentionally limit how much they vary their pitch ranges because they fear that using frequent shifts in intonation or terminal rising intonation will make them appear "off" (as Stephen phrased it) or will make them appear gay. William said that he intentionally uses "less intonation" (meaning less variation in pitch) specifically when speaking with women because he wants them to perceive him as straight and worries that if he shifts his pitch too much they will think he is gay. Similarly, John stated that he uses more pitch variation when he is present with women because he identifies as gay and wants to relate to them in liking men, while when he is present with men or in public he will intentionally use a much "flatter" voice to present as more masculine. Both William's and John's experiences with manipulating their intonation patterns demonstrate that they believe that this linguistic feature is tied to both femininity and sexuality.

The men's beliefs about intonation as a feminine speech trait align with studies that demonstrate that women use more variation in pitch and volume than men. The participants have reported changes to their intonation patterns that reflect these beliefs about femininity. Therefore, that these transgender men report intentionally using fewer shifts in intonation patterns to "sound less gay" indicates that they are aware that gay men use greater patterns of intonation, and that this awareness/belief guides them in making

communicative changes to present their identities. This aligns with Podesva's (2011) findings, which demonstrate that gay men employ different pitches and patterns of intonation in order to project specific aspects of their identities. Podesva's study also concludes that intonation has been targeted as a linguistic feature that can be manipulated in order to display a specific type of identity. The reported changes to intonation that the men in the present study have made demonstrate that intonation is a linguistic feature that may be manipulated not only to display a sexual identity, but also a specific gender identity.

5.2.2 Pitch

All six participants reported that they manipulate the pitch of their voice so that they intentionally use a lower pitch more frequently now than when they presented as women. Several participants reported that they placed much greater focus on dropping the pitch of their voice when they began transitioning because a high feminine voice is a main "tell" that they are not cisgender men. All of the men have now undergone hormone therapy for years and have developed male vocal ranges, yet they still manipulate their voices to be lower in specific contexts. Five out of six of the men explained that they use a lower pitch in public because they are less comfortable and feel a greater need to perform masculine identities, and four of them stated that at times this drop in their voice is unintentional. Five also specifically stated that they use a lower pitch when speaking with men. This too was tied to level of comfort in the conversation, as they shared that they are less comfortable when conversing with men (some due to safety concerns in being outed as being transgender), and that they feel a greater need to display their physical male traits when interacting with men. Three of the men discussed that they unintentionally find themselves speaking with a higher pitch when they are more comfortable with the people with whom they are interacting. One of Stephen's remarks highlights the relationship between his level of comfort with presentation of gender identity and the manipulation of pitch:

> Any time I'm out and about talking to people I don't know, I speak in a lower register because I am male and I want them to perceive me as being male...I tend to fall into a bit of a higher pitch when I'm in more comfortable situations because I know that they know I'm male and I don't need to try as hard, so to speak, to pass, and I don't need to put that focus on it. So when I'm out and I think I don't know what's going to happen, I think that just happens.

The intentional manipulation of pitch among participants to present as more masculine in specific contexts supports Zimman's (2012) findings. Participant responses in this study indicate that the manipulation of pitch is directly tied to the level of comfort that transgender men experience in various situations. Pitch was reported to be manipulated to be lower when the men feel less comfortable, and pitch was reported to be "allowed" to be higher when they are in more comfortable social settings. The relationship between comfort levels and pitch should be further explored in future studies.

6 Discussion

In conclusion, the responses of individuals in this study demonstrate that they use manipulations of discursive strategies and voice in order to present their gender identities. The changes that these men reported they have made to their communication styles, as well as their shared beliefs about gendered communication, align with existing research on

how men and women speak, demonstrating that these beliefs about gendered language and expectations for men and women's communication styles permeate society and influence how people communicate. The individuals in this study had all begun making these changes within at most a few years of their transitions, demonstrating that they were able to perceive and adapt to male standards of communication fairly quickly.

This study is limited in that I only interviewed six individuals and the data come from self-report. Future studies should observe more speakers (transgender men and women) and examine how they talk in real interaction, ideally comparing their talk pre- and post-transition. My findings demonstrate the gendered nature of speech in American society, while serving as a stepping stone for future sociolinguistic research on how transgender individuals shape their communication styles in order to present their gender identities. The experiences of transgender individuals as communicators who have crossed the gender binary could provide invaluable information to linguists on conceptions of how men and women speak and how social conditioning for gendered speech is motivated.

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