Abstract:
The past three decades have seen an abundance of experimental sociophonetic studies of sexuality and the voice, most of which focus on sounding gay and to a lesser extent sounding lesbian (e.g., Gaudio 1994; Moonwomon-Baird 1997; Waksler 2001; Smyth, Jacobs, and Rogers 2003, Pierrehumbert et al. 2004; Munson et al. 2006a, 2006b; Levon 2006, 2007; Campbell-Kibler 2007, 2011; Van Borsel et al. 2013; Zimman 2013; Barron-Lutzross 2015). Bisexuality is conspicuously absent from this body of literature. When bisexual speakers are included in such studies, they are typically grouped with lesbian and gay speakers a priori (though see Pierrehumbert et al. 2004 for an exception). In this talk, I attend to two key research questions: (1) What does it mean to sound bisexual? and (2) Is a broad LGB category empirically justified? I report an acoustic analysis of bisexual speakers’ productions of the voiceless alveolar fricative /s/ relative to their lesbian, gay, and straight counterparts. Linear mixed effects regression models indicate significant differences between how bisexual and lesbian women produce /s/, such that bisexual women produce /s/ with the tongue closer to the teeth than lesbian women. In addition, the statistical models suggest that bisexual women and men produce significantly shorter /s/ tokens than lesbian, gay, and straight speakers. Both the place of articulation and the duration of /s/ have been linked to sexuality in past studies (e.g., Crist 1997; Linville 1998; Hazenberg 2016; Calder 2019). I couple the statistical analyses with a qualitative analysis of post-test participant information surveys that asked participants about gender stereotypicality. The surveys suggest that bisexual women and men orient to gender normativity, and by extension its intersection with sexuality, in distinct ways. In short, bisexuals do not consistently pattern with lesbian, gay, or straight speakers, or even with each other for any measure in the statistical and qualitative analyses, bringing an a priori LGB category into question. Moreover, the results underscore the influence of ideologies of sexuality and gender at multiple levels of the research paradigm. Ultimately, I argue that a consideration of bisexuality renders explicit the ideologies that inform linguistic research on sexuality and that what it means to sound bisexual is complex and distinct from other sexual identities.