A certain kind of gay identity: [s+] and contextually mediated variation in gay French and German men

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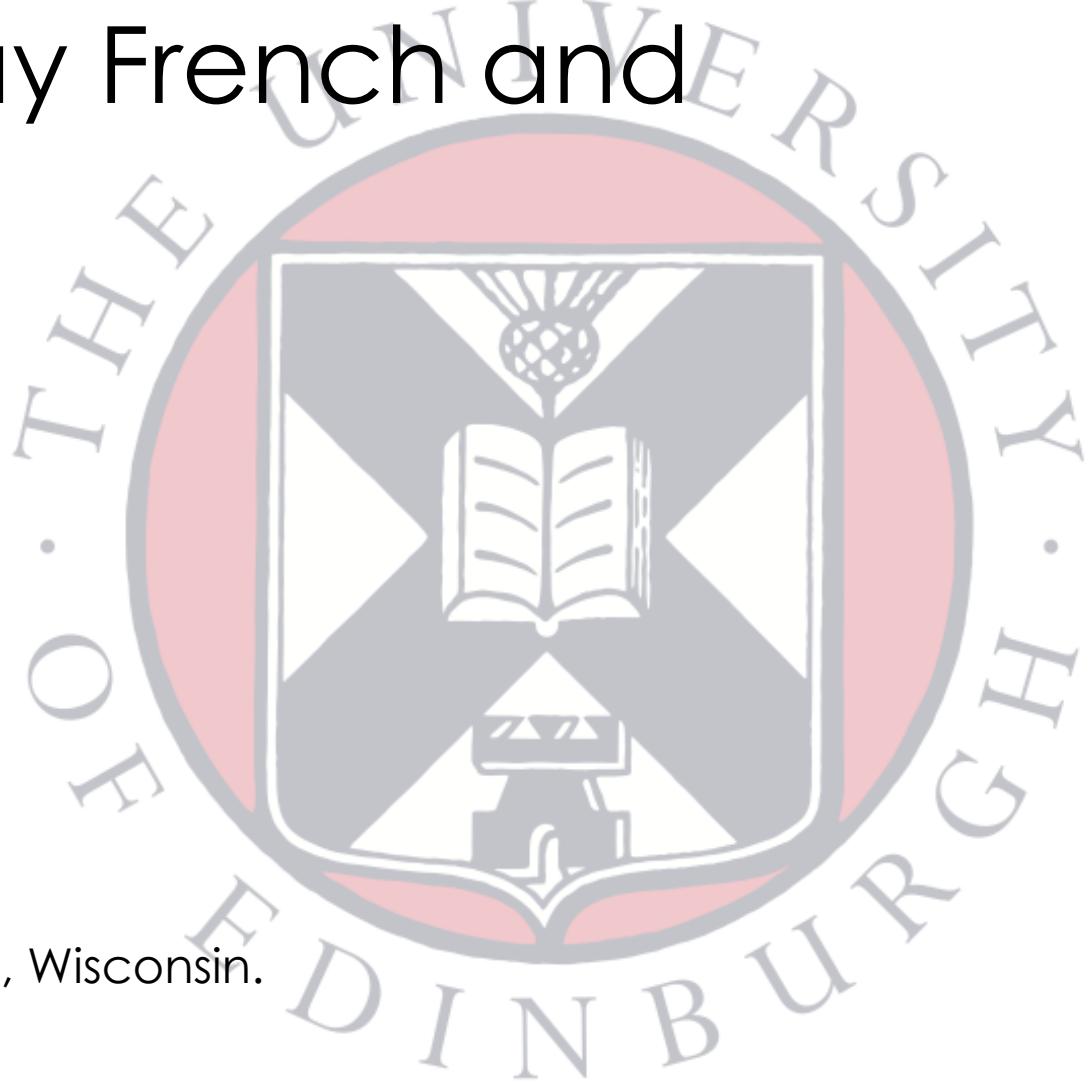


What this talk is about

- Gay Speech Style
- 'Gay Voices' and Hegemonic Masculinity

(Zimman 2013; 2015; 2017)

"The strict enforcement of hetero and gender normativity can lead to a huge variety of deviations from an idealized heteronormative masculinity to be relegated to the catch-all stigmatized category 'gay'" (Zimman 2013: 27)

What this talk is about

The current study explores sibilant /s/ variation in French & German bilingual (L2 English) gay & straight men

Sociophonetics, Gender, & Sexual Orientation

- Phonetic variation can serve as a robust cue to both speaker gender identity and sexual orientation.
  - These social meanings are indexed regardless of the speaker's actual identity (some straight men 'sound gay', etc.)
- Interestingly, some of these cues appear to be cross-linguistic.
  - e.g., sibilants, especially /s/

/s/ Variation and Gayness

- /s/ US & UK Englishes

  Campbell-Kibler 2011; Crist 1997; Levon 2007, 2014; Munson 2007; Munson *et al.* 2006; Podesva & Hofwegan 2016; Zimman 2017

- /s/ Other Languages

  Danish: Maegaard and Pharao 2015; Pharao *et al.* 2014; Dutch: Boyd 2014; Hungarian: Rácz and Papp 2015; Spanish: Mack 2010; Walker et al. 2014

- Compared to straight men, gay men's /s/
  - Higher Centre of Gravity (CoG) (Niebuhr *et al.* 2011: 10)
  - Negative Skewness (not reported today)

    (c.f. Munson *et al.* 2006; Munson 2007; Zimman 2013)

Core questions

- How do these speakers vary /s/ productions across conversation topic?

- What motivates this variation?

French and German Production

- White / Highly Educated / Middle Class / Cis-Gendered Male / Millenials (age 21-30)

- L1 French or German (19 Speakers)
  - French: 4 Gay; 4 Straight
  - German: 7 Gay; 4 Straight

- L1 & L2 English

Considerations

English Proficiency

LRT: CoG ~ Orientation + Language + Orientation:Language + (1|Speaker)

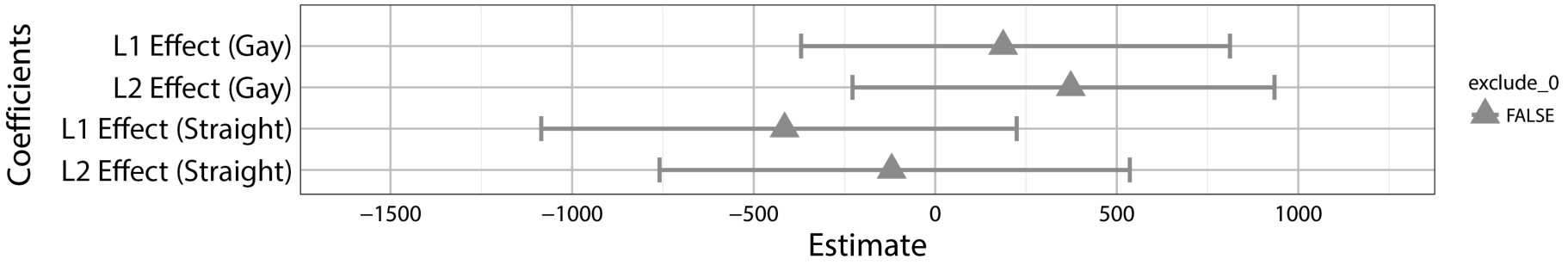
CoG ~ Orientation + Language + Orientation:Language + Phonology + (1|Speaker)

	df	AIC	BIC	logLik	deviance	χ^2	χ^2 df	p
Orientation*Language	10	264713	264790	-132346	264693			
+Phonology	11	264713	264798	-132346	264691	1.3608	1	0.2434

Considerations

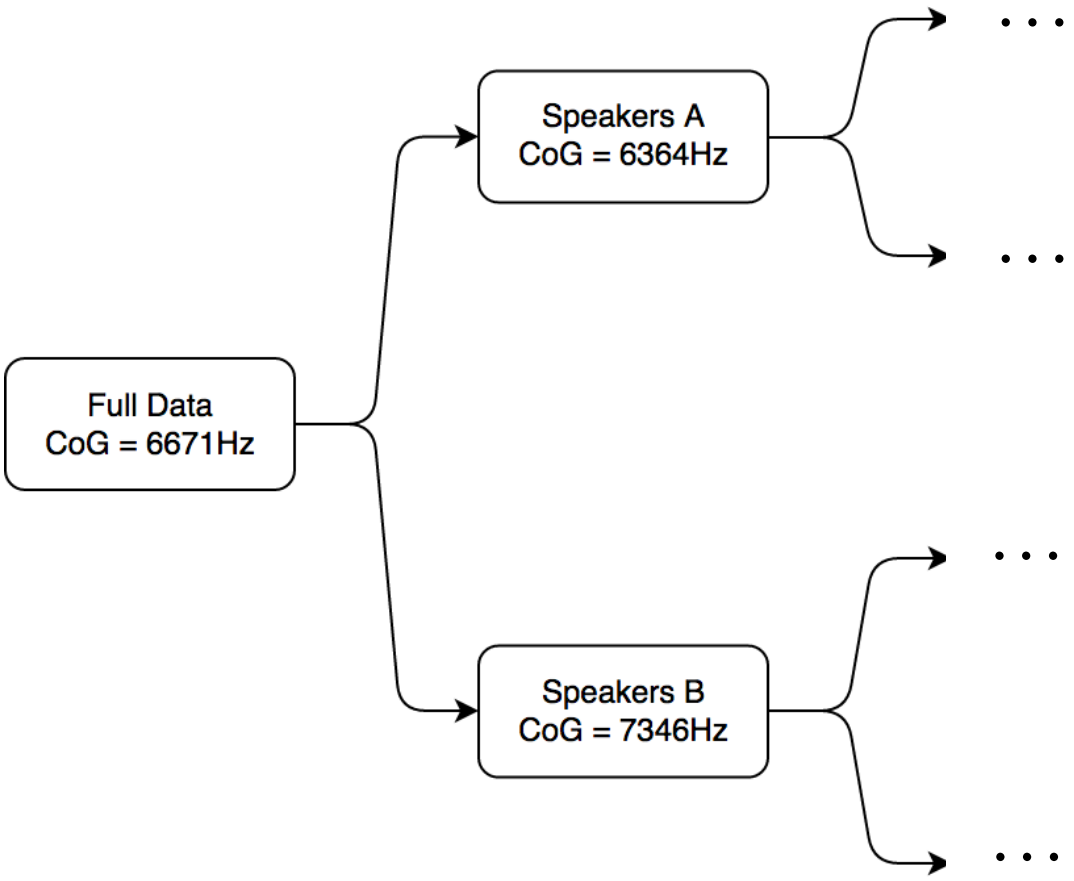
French ≠ German?

CoG ~ Orientation + Language + Orientation:Language + (1|TargetWord) + (1|Speaker)



Conditional Inference Tree:

CoG ~ Orientation + Markedness + Style + Topic + Nationality + NativeLang + Speaker (Boyd 2017)



Speakers A

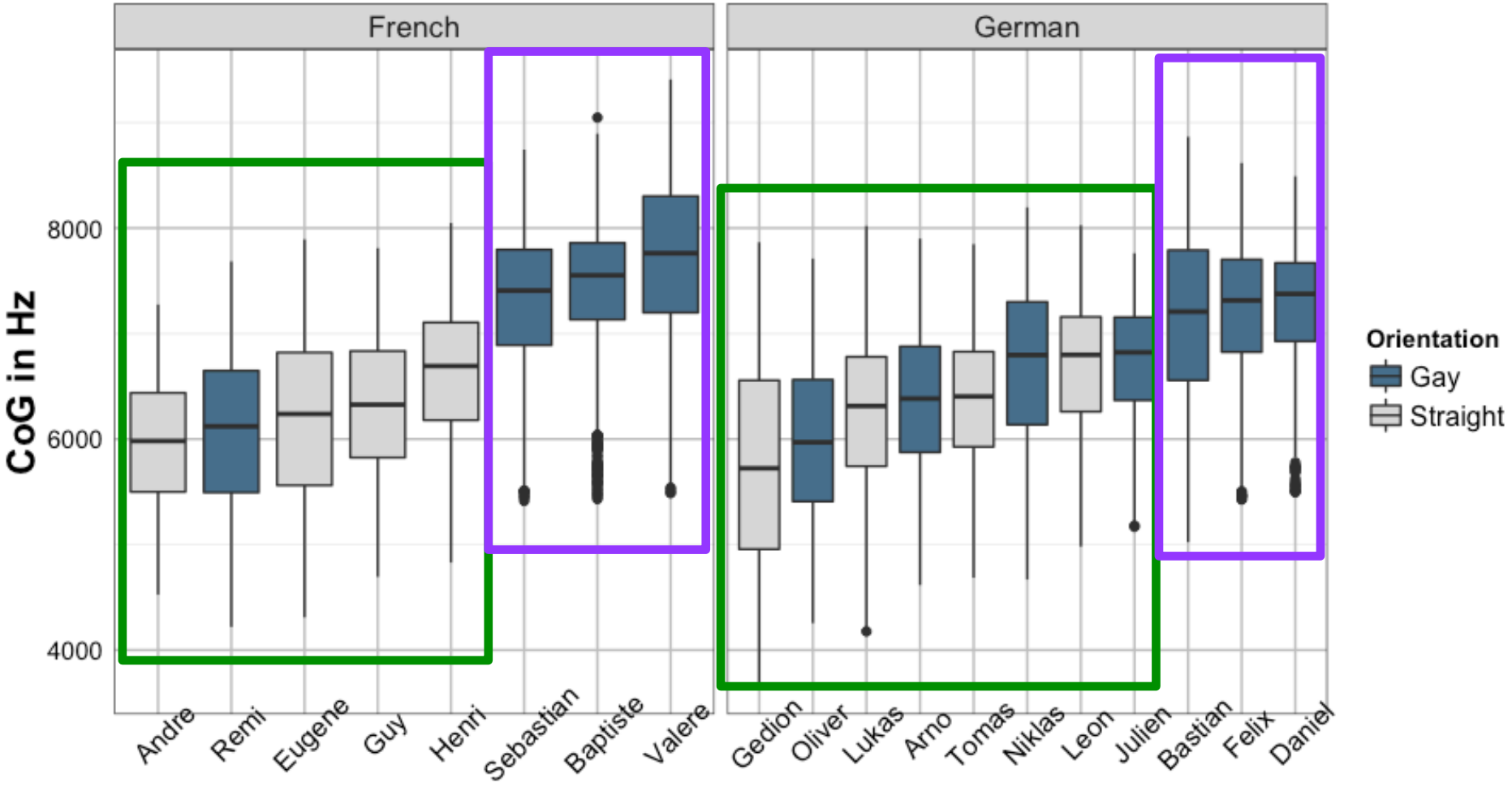
- Heterogeneous group of gay and straight men
- **[s] Speakers**

Speakers B

- Consists of only gay speakers
- **[s+] Speakers**

(*ctree* package in *R* Hathorn *et al*. 2006. See also Tagliamonte & Baayen 2012)

French & German /s/ Variation



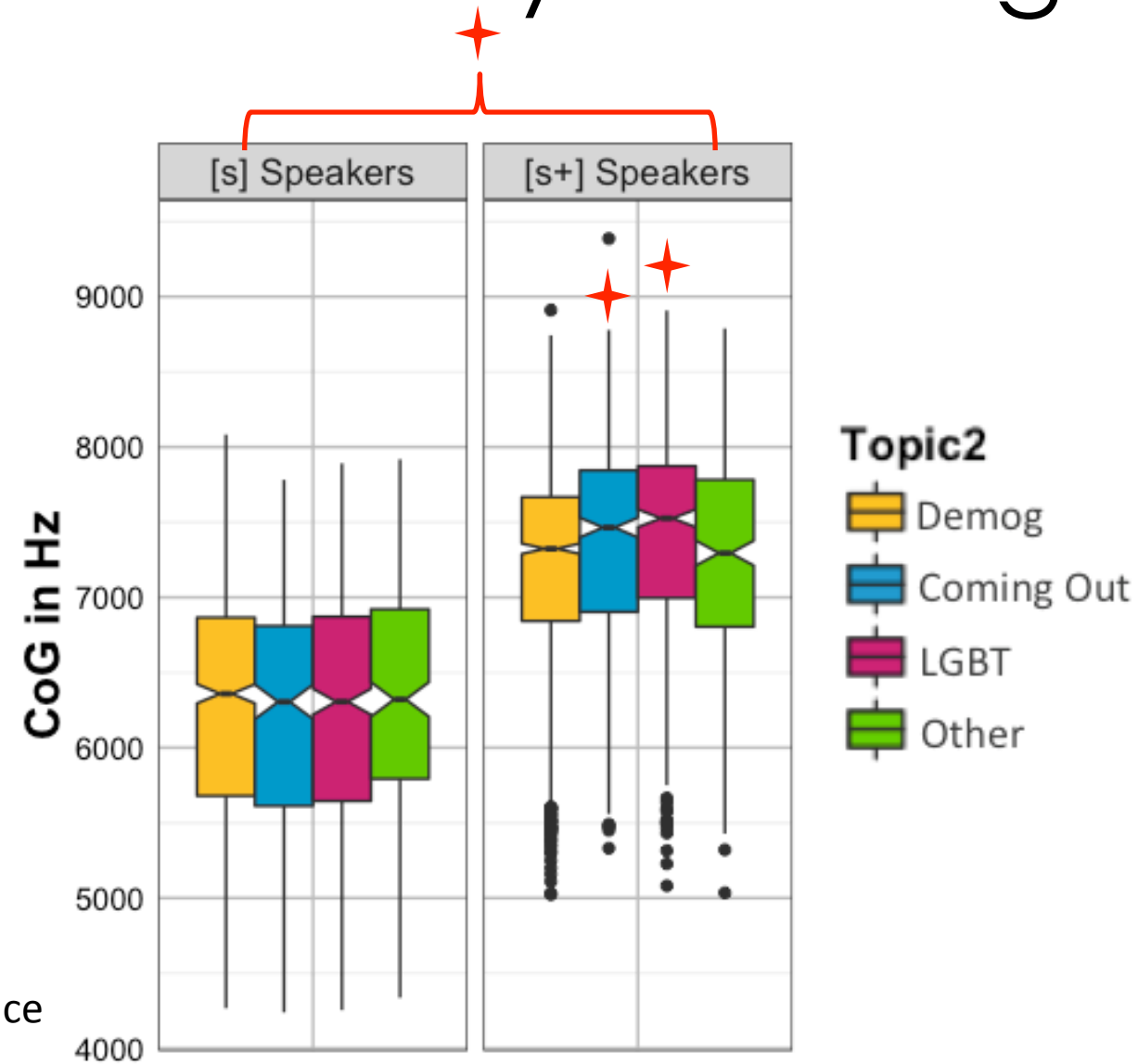
Methods

- Bootstrap LMER:
  - 5,000 Simulations to a 95% CI

CoG ~ Orientation + Topic + Orientation:Topic + (1|TargetWord) + (1+Topic|Speaker)

- FAVE Aligned (Rosenfelder *et al.* 2014)
- 7,568 Total /s/ Tokens
- Omitted tokens:
  - outliers (±2StDev w/in speaker)
  - all STR- clusters (Baker *et al.* 2011)
  - tokens <30ms

Topic Based Style Shifting



= Significance

Summary

- Overall differences between [s+] speakers and [s] speakers
- [s+] speakers show significantly higher /s/ productions when discussing coming out stories and LGBT+ involvement than demographic/interest topics.
- [s] speakers show no topic differences (no effect of sexual orientation)

French and German Production

Q: "Can you tell if someone is gay by how they speak?"

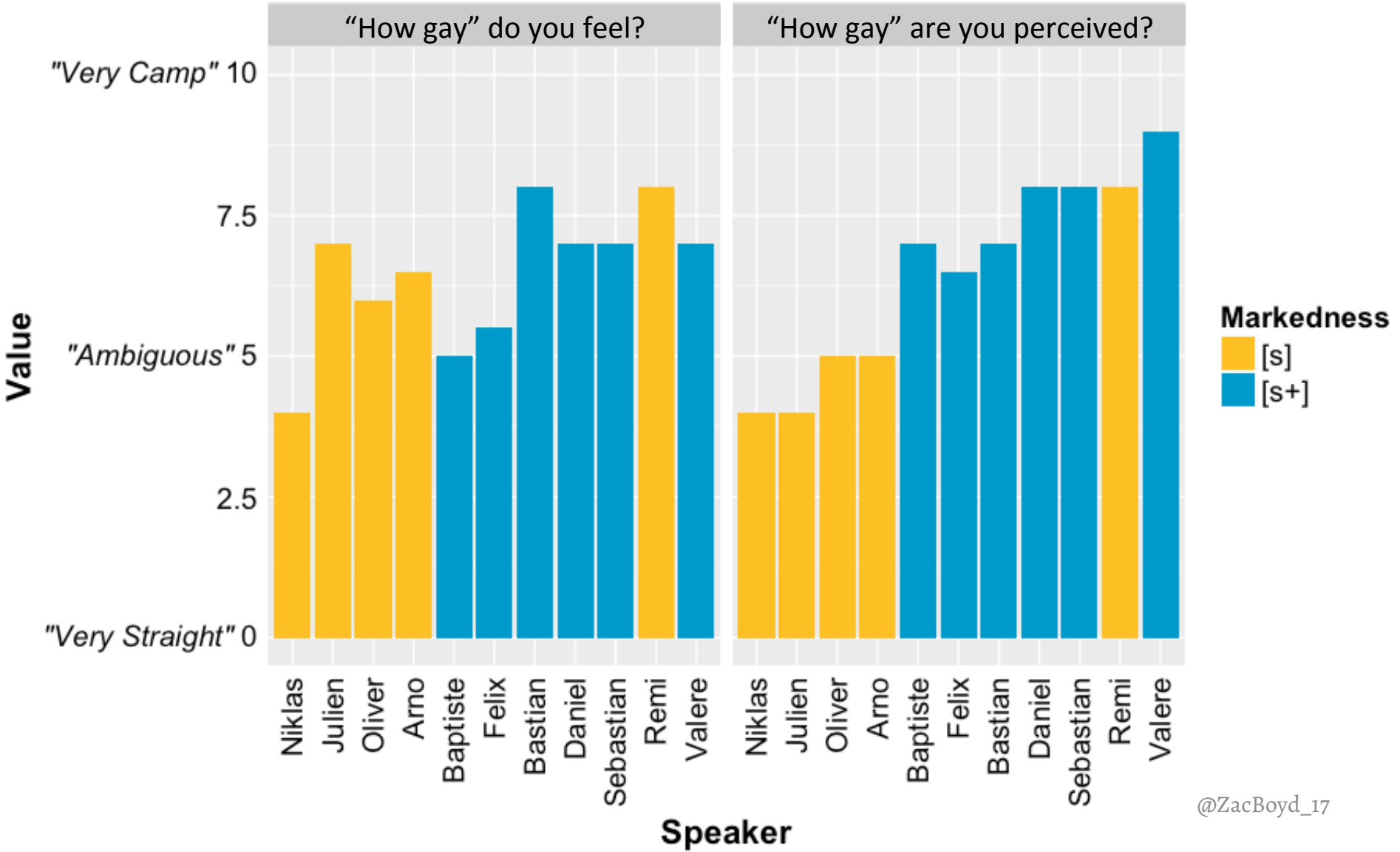
"Something in Speech"	Prosody	/s/ in English	/s/ in L1
18/19	13/19	***1/19***	***0/19***

'Oh, I've heard of [the "gay lisp"] in English, but we definitely don't have it' – Daniel; German; Gay; [s+] speaker

[s+] Perception
(Boyd, Fruehwald, & Hall-Lew 2017)

French & German listeners do *not* hear [s+] as gay or effeminate in French/German

Self-Evaluations



Facts

Things that make sense:

- Gay speakers are more likely to produce [s+] variants than straight speakers
- [s+] speakers have even fronter /s/ productions when discussing LGBT involvement and their coming out stories
- There is a correlation with self-evaluations of "how gay" speakers feel they are perceived and /s/ production

Things that do not make sense:

- [s+] is explicitly reported to *not* be a gay feature in metalinguistic commentary
- [s+] is *not heard* as gay/effeminate sounding for French or German listeners
- Reported self-evaluations of "how gay" speakers feel about their gay identity do *not* correlate with /s/ productions

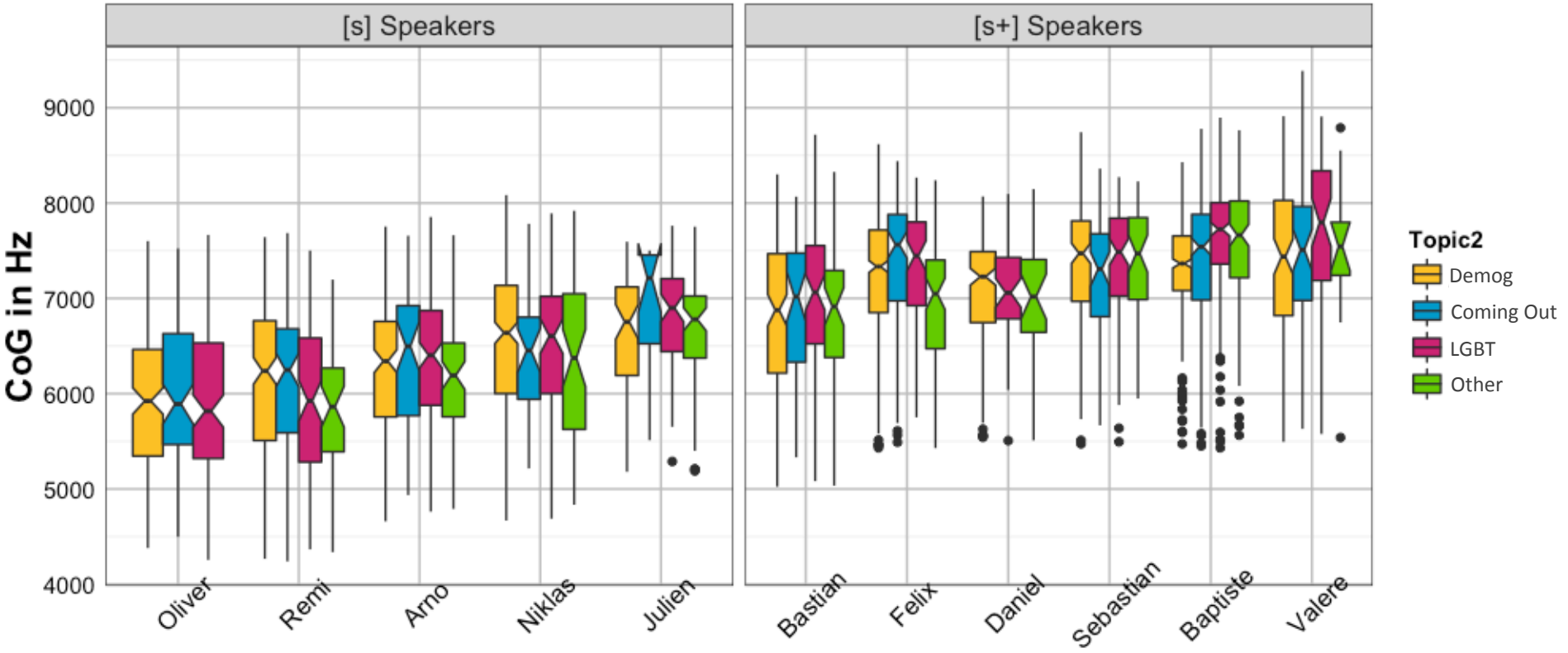
So what motivates the [s+] speakers for higher /s/ frequencies?

Speakers

- The [s+] speakers are *stereotypically* 'effeminate gay men'*
  - These speakers all convey a certain type of gay identity via language use, mannerisms, fashion choices, etc…

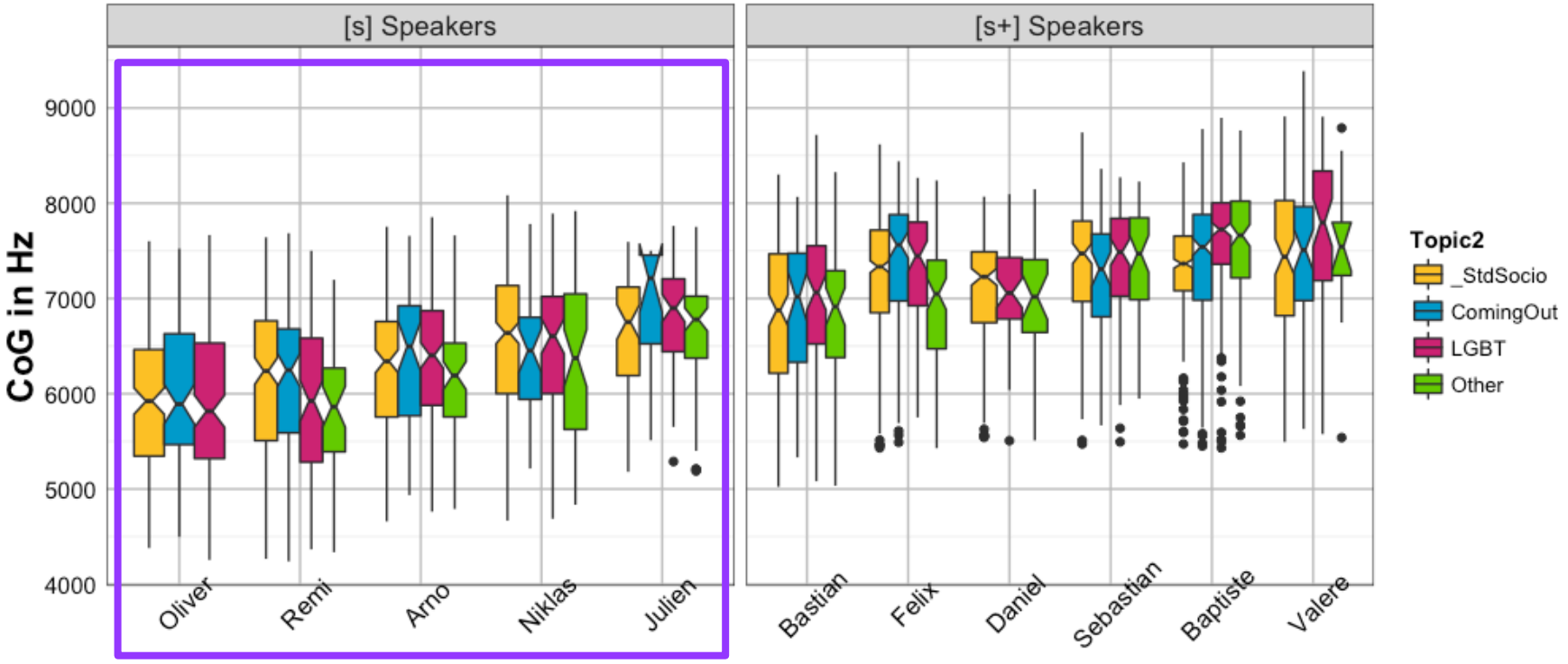
*Caveat: I'm being deliberately reductive.

Gay Speakers: Topic



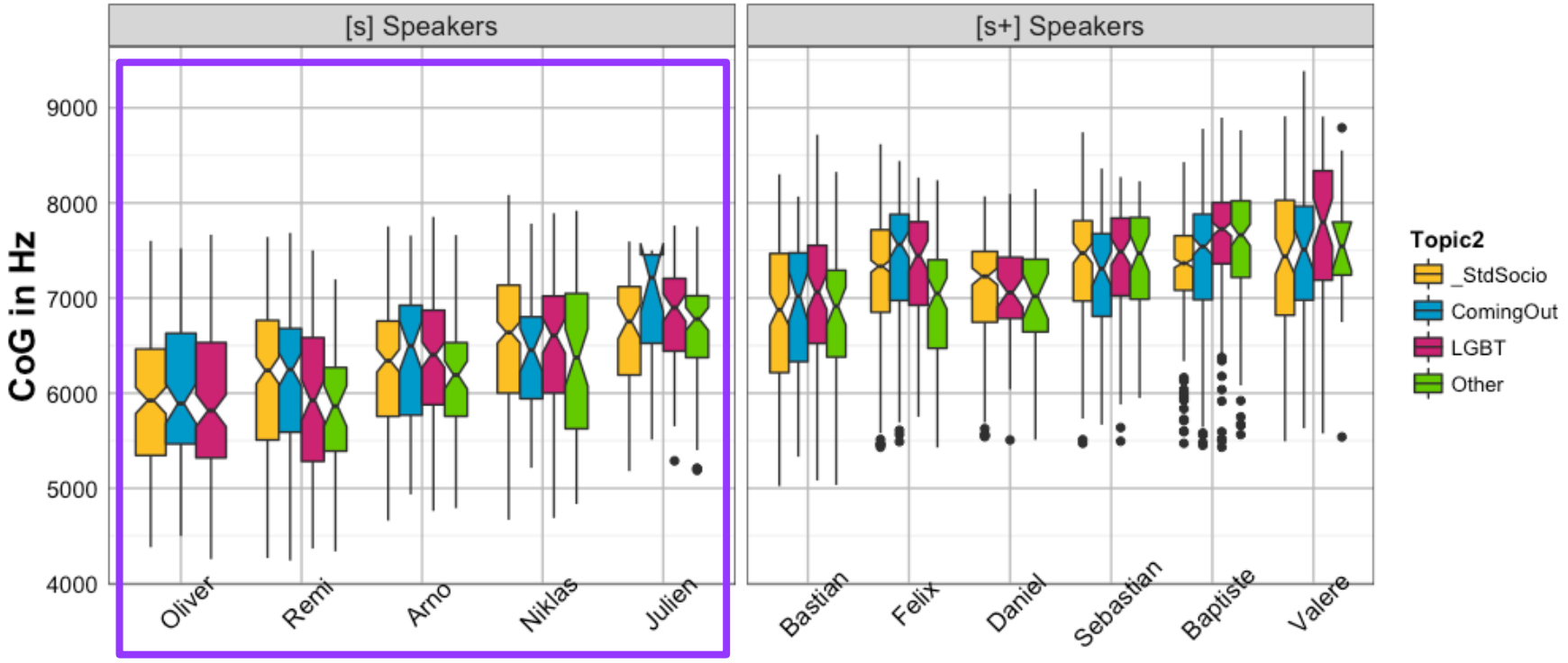
[s] Speakers

- Overall – Very few comments on how they fit into the LGBT community
- Oliver (German) – "I don't hide it, but I don't have the urge to tell everyone"
- Remi (French) – "The way I use language is very shaped by the fact that I'm French"; For him being seen as French is more important that being seen as gay.



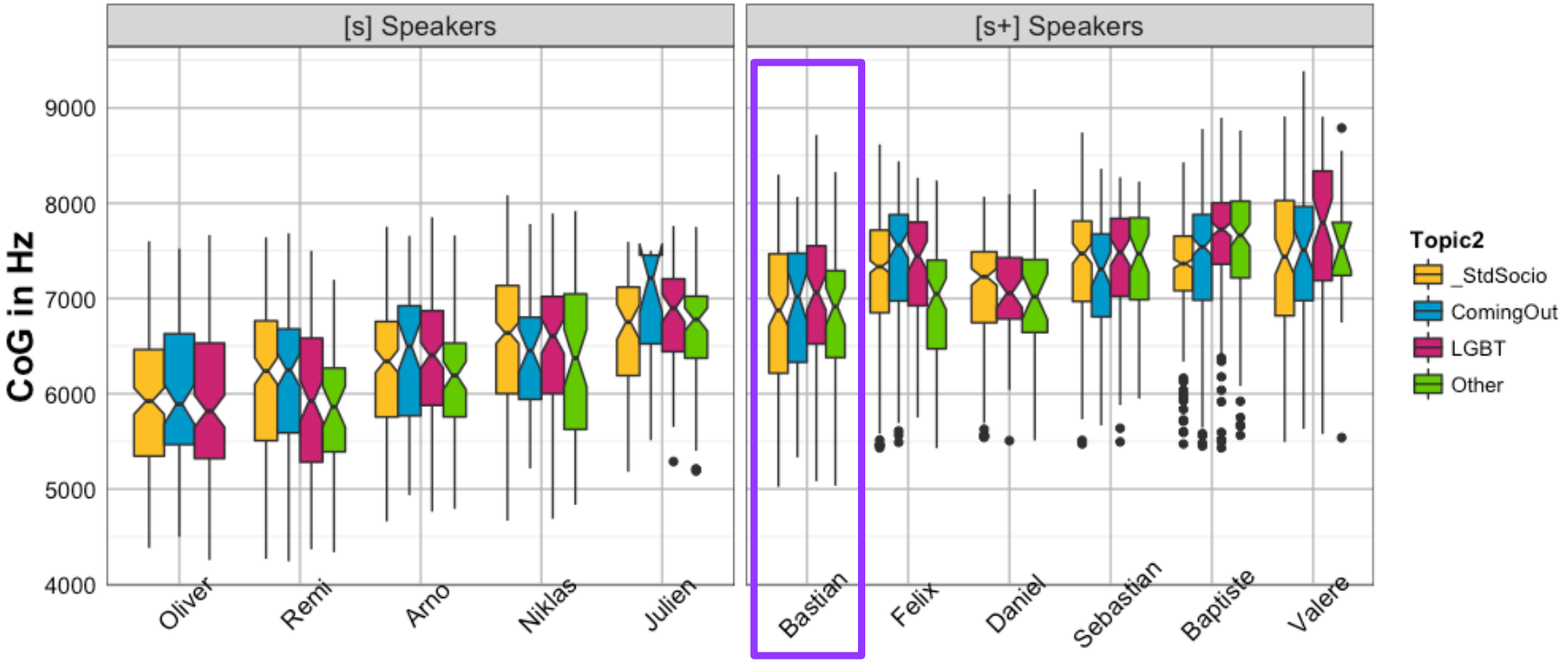
[s] Speakers

- Arno (German) – "Have you ever encountered a person being that extremely camp?... I don't know I think – uh – you would always describe it as this kind of broken wrist thing"; "*Tunte*"; tends to look down on effeminacy in gay men
- Julien (German) – "Gay man could be acting a bit weak so that they show that there are not real man [sic]"



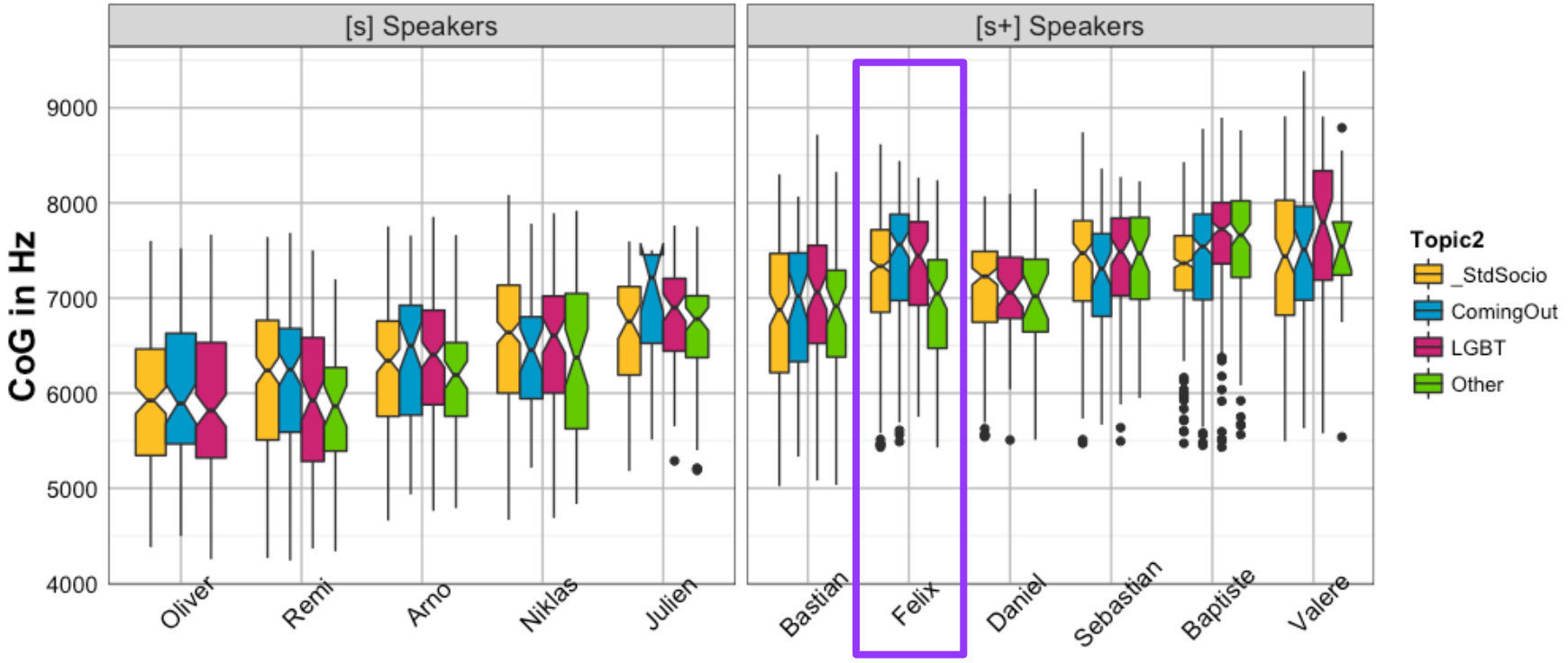
[s+] Speakers

- Bastian (German)
  - Studied fashion design
  - Being gay was his main source of identity in primary school and early Uni: "You need something to – to – yeah um – like something with that you can identify yourself and I just used my homosexuality for that"



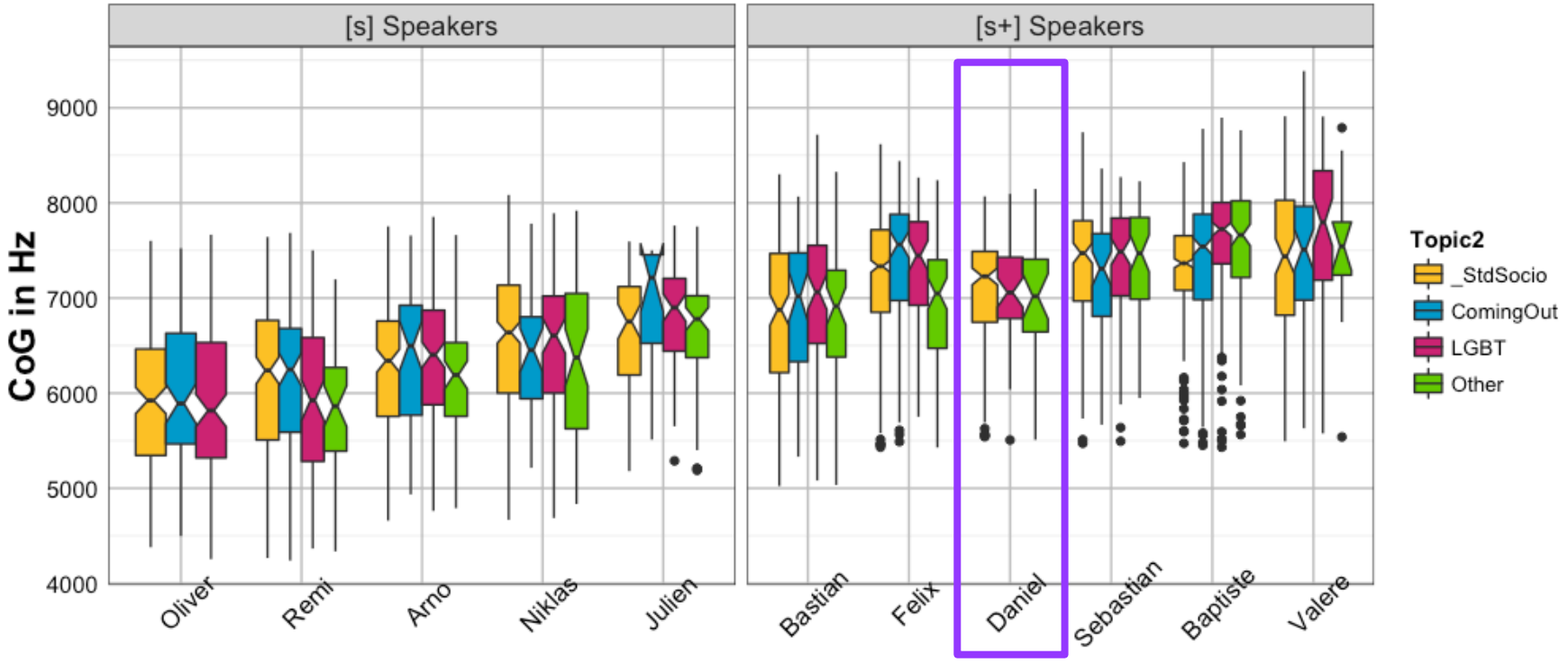
[s+] Speakers

- Felix (German)
  - Highly active in the gay 'scene'
  - Met at a Berlin drag show (had multiple friends performing, though he is not a drag queen)



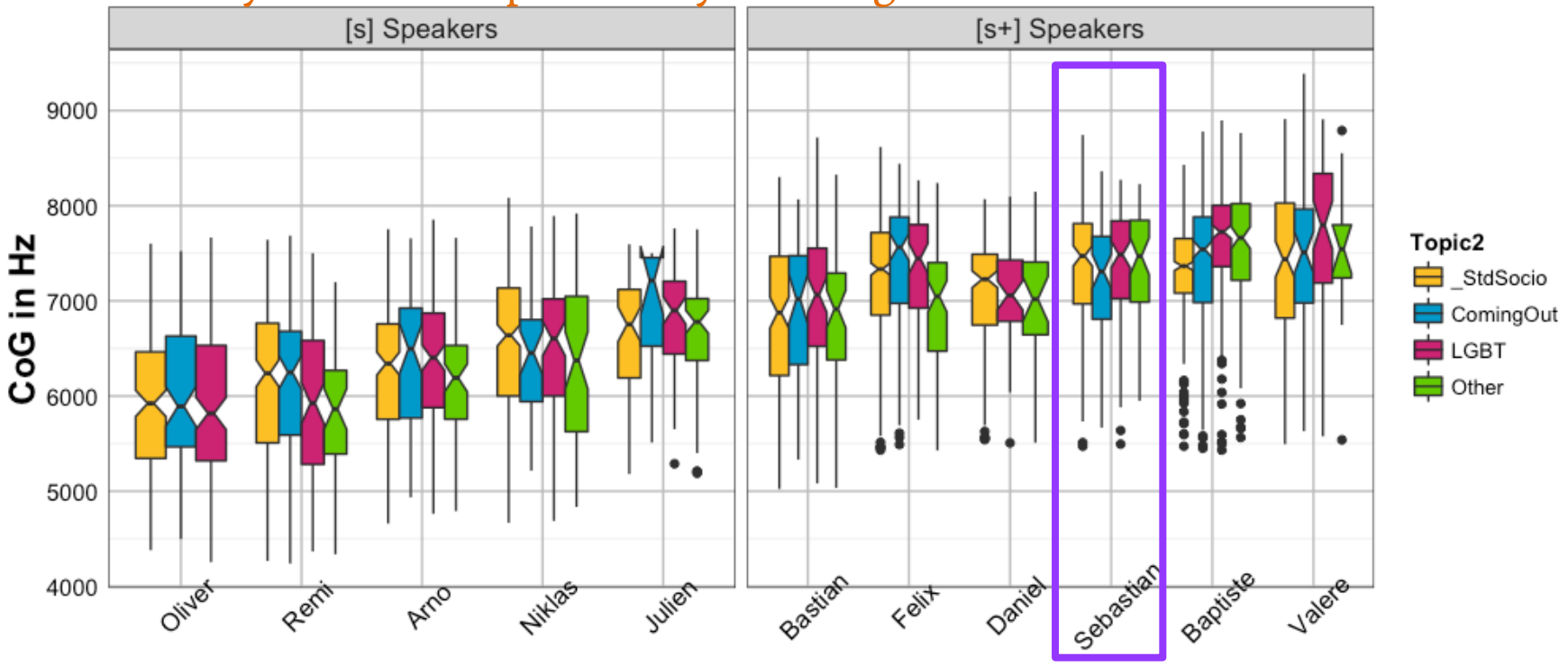
[s+] Speakers

- Daniel (German)
  - Co-organiser of the Gay Society at Uni
  - (Requested to not share more information with me, including his coming out story)



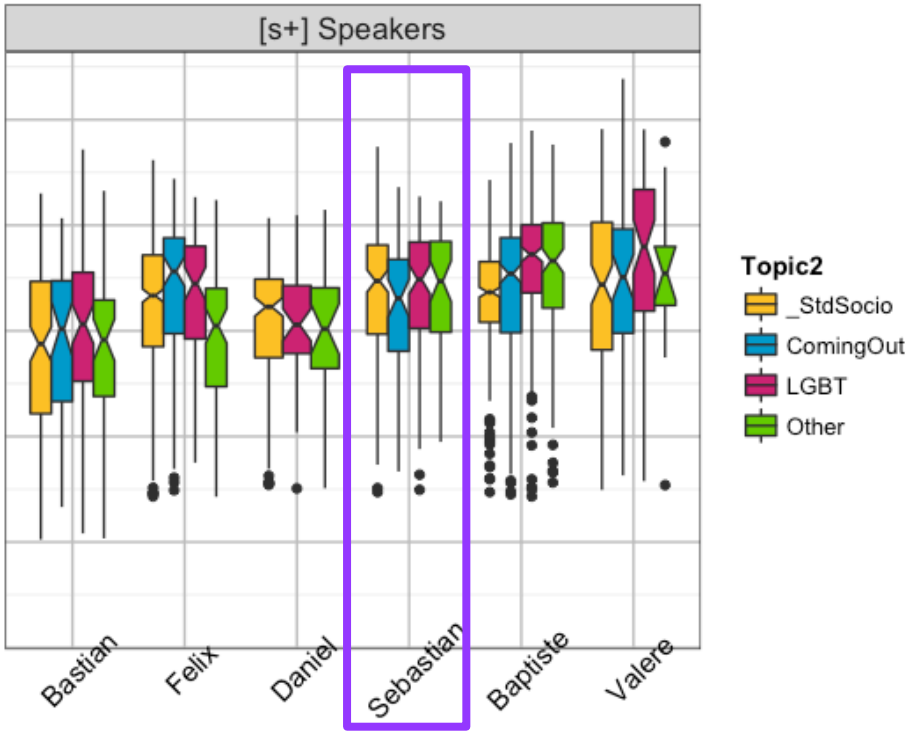
[s+] Speakers

- Sebastian (French)
  - 2 years active in one of France's largest LGBT Rights organisations
  - "I would say we [gays] have uh, like a more higher and feminine voice"; "We can use our voices, like, to be more realistic"; "Everyone on the phone says I'm a girl"



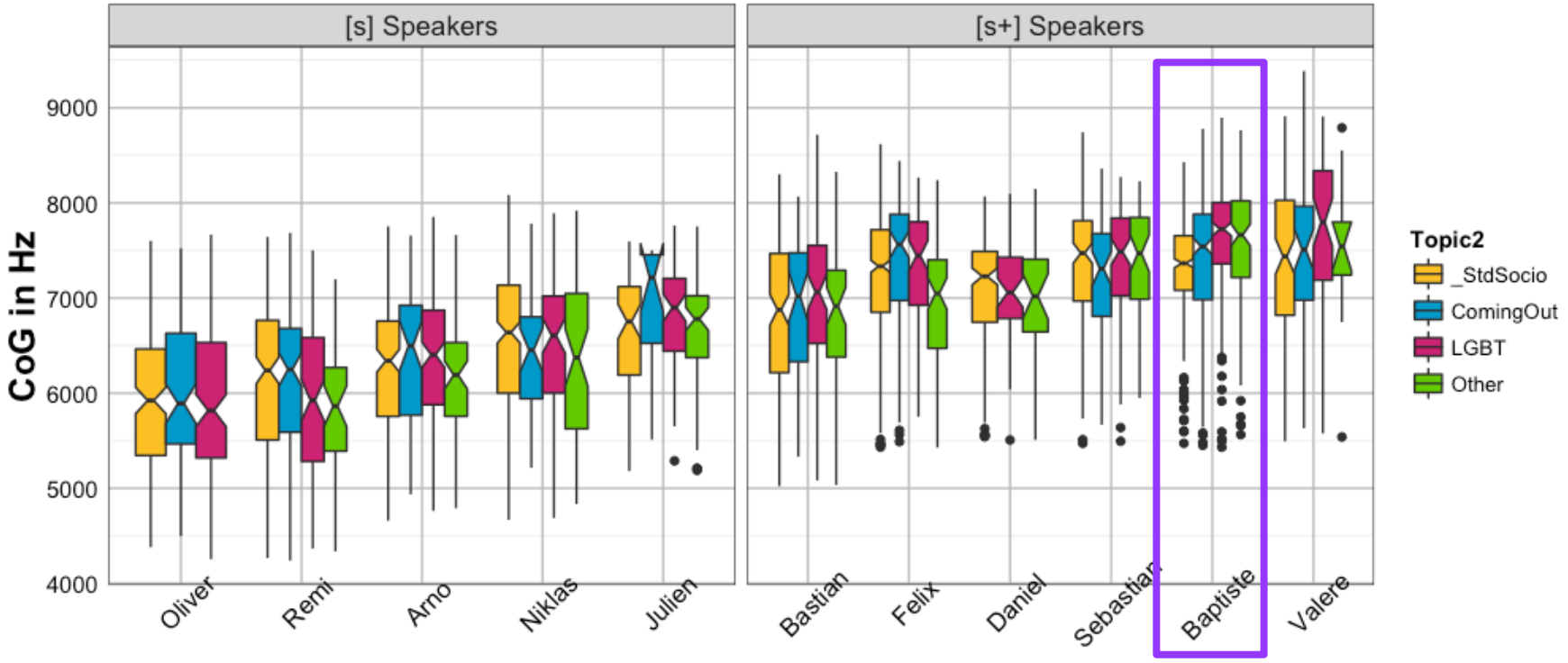
[s+] Speakers

- Sebastian (French)
  - Modeled his gay identity on Jack from Will & Grace: "I watched Will and Grace. That's how I built my knowledge on gay culture. I grew up in the countryside so I had to find something to identify myself"



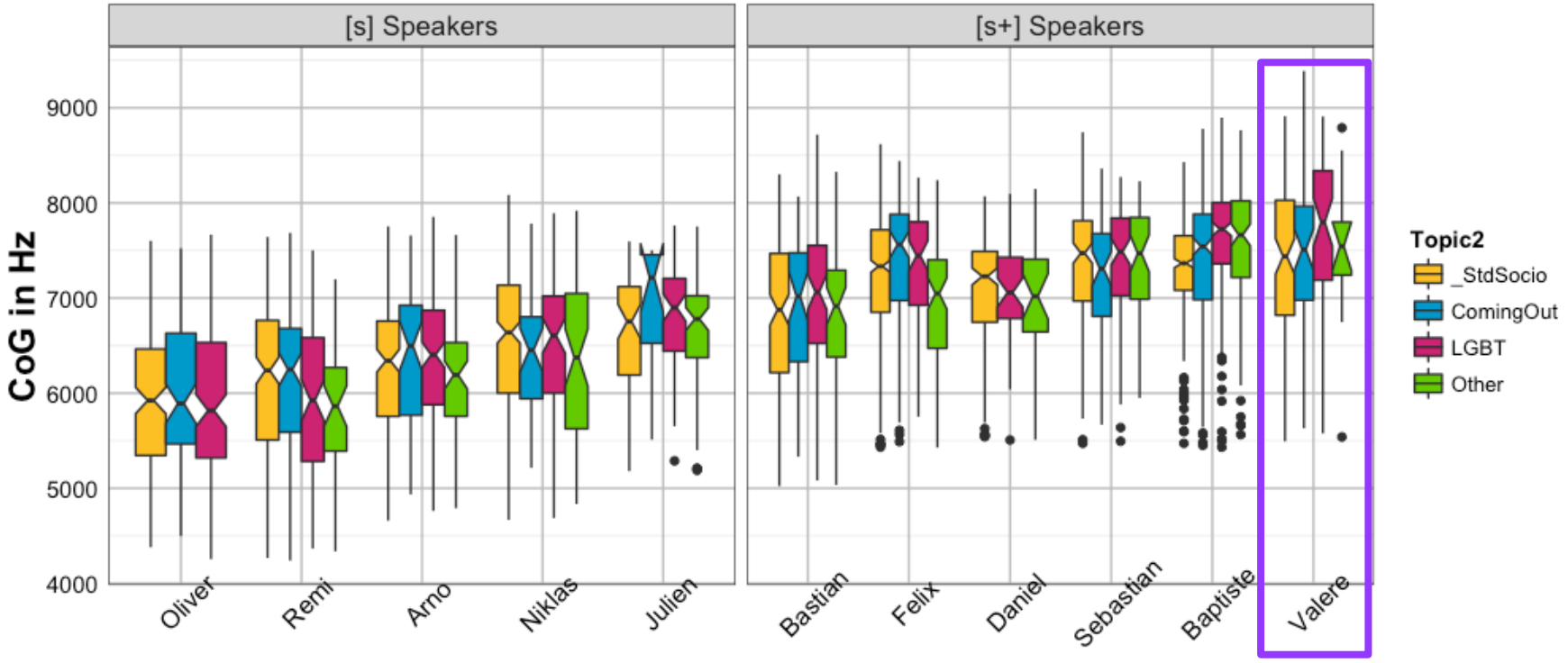
[s+] Speakers

- Baptiste (French)
  - Former President of one of France's largest LGBT Rights organisations (still actively volunteering)
  - Professional dancer in tap dance and street jazz



[s+] Speakers

- Valere (French)
  - Spends most of his time in the gay community; mostly gay friends
  - Came to interview wearing make-up
  - Meta-commentary following the interview about his effeminate mannerisms and style (including his "giant, man purse")



Discussion

- These [s+] speakers all fit outside a masculine hegemony (linguistically & otherwise)

(*e.g.* Podesva 2007; Zimman 2013)

- They use these [s+] variants in concord with other stylistic systems (e.g. *Material Style*; Eckert 2008) associated with the LGBT community:
  - [s+] is a phonetic variable employed in linguistic opposition to hegemonic masculinity
  - Higher /s/ CoG when discussing LGBT/Coming out may support this

Discussion

- Social context in which [s+] is employed give it social meaning
  - [s+] is emergent via *stylistic practice* of persona as *bricolage* (Eckert 2008; Hebdige 1984)
  - The interpretation therefore should focus not on meaning construction, but the end result:

    i.e. An effeminate, gay persona

    (and consequently a gay identity)

Discussion

"Linguistic cues are tied, not to sexual orientation, but to recognizable ways of being in the world – in other words, to styles. Sexual orientation merely represents one piece of information that may (or may not) be implicated in a stylistic performance"

(Campbell-Kibler 2011: 54)

Thank You!

- Thanks for your attention!

- Special thanks to:
  - My participants
  - Lauren Hall-Lew & Josef Fruehwald
  - Members of the *Language Variation and Change Research Group* at the University of Edinburgh

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References Available upon request

"My feeling is that for American people being gay is a bit like being French"

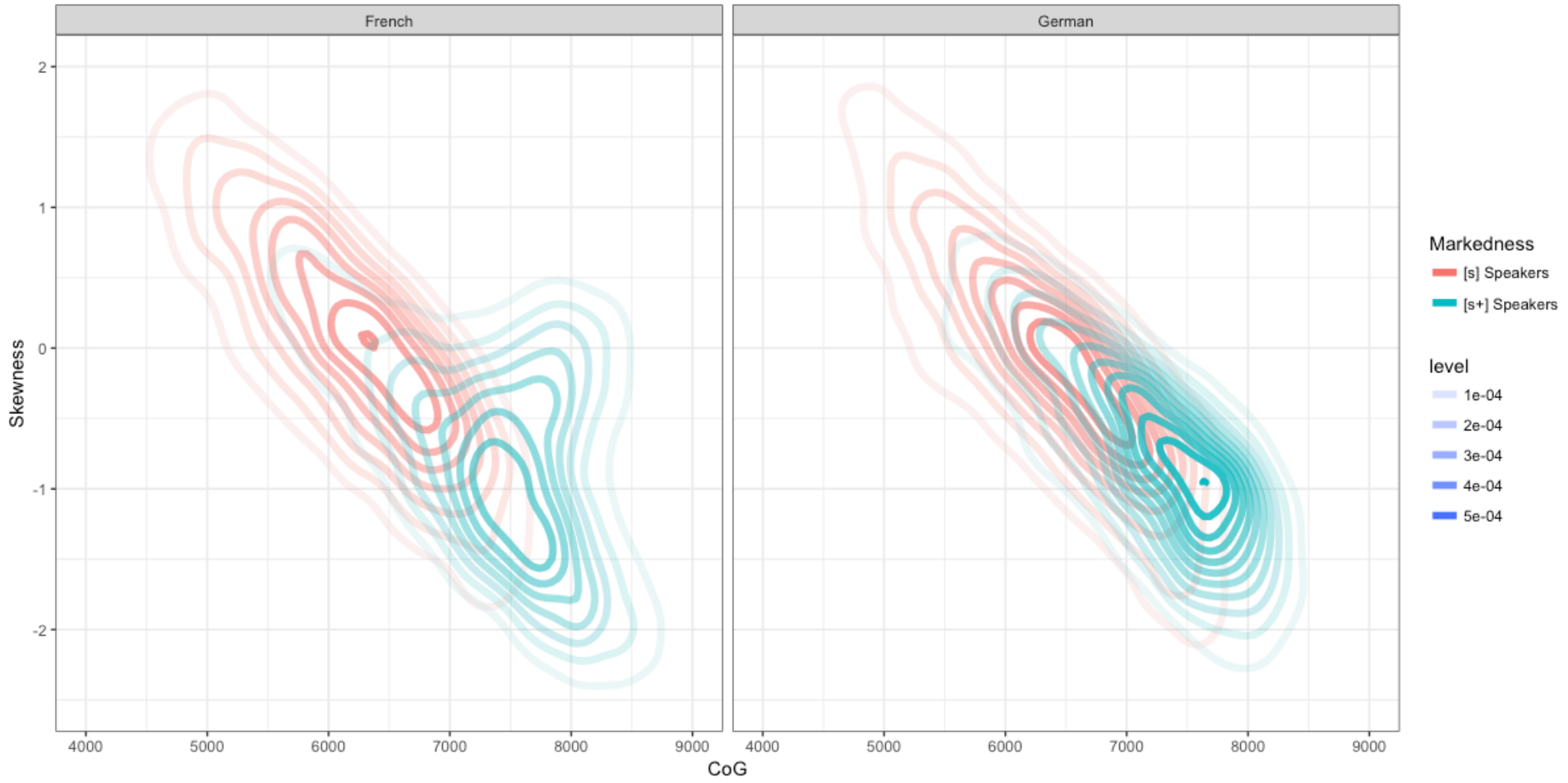
- Guy (Straight/French)

Stance? - no

"I think I'm more interested in [the label] 'homosexual' than 'gay'. I don't know why, just because I think that gay, um, means or involves a certain image of like a community or a culture and I don't feel like I'm part of anything like that, but just because I feel like I'm not part of any community at all. Like, I reject any sort of community every time someone's [sic] try -- tries to put me in a -- in a group."

Baptiste; French; Gay; [s+] speaker

CoG & Skew


French
German
Skewness
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1
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-1
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4000
5000
6000
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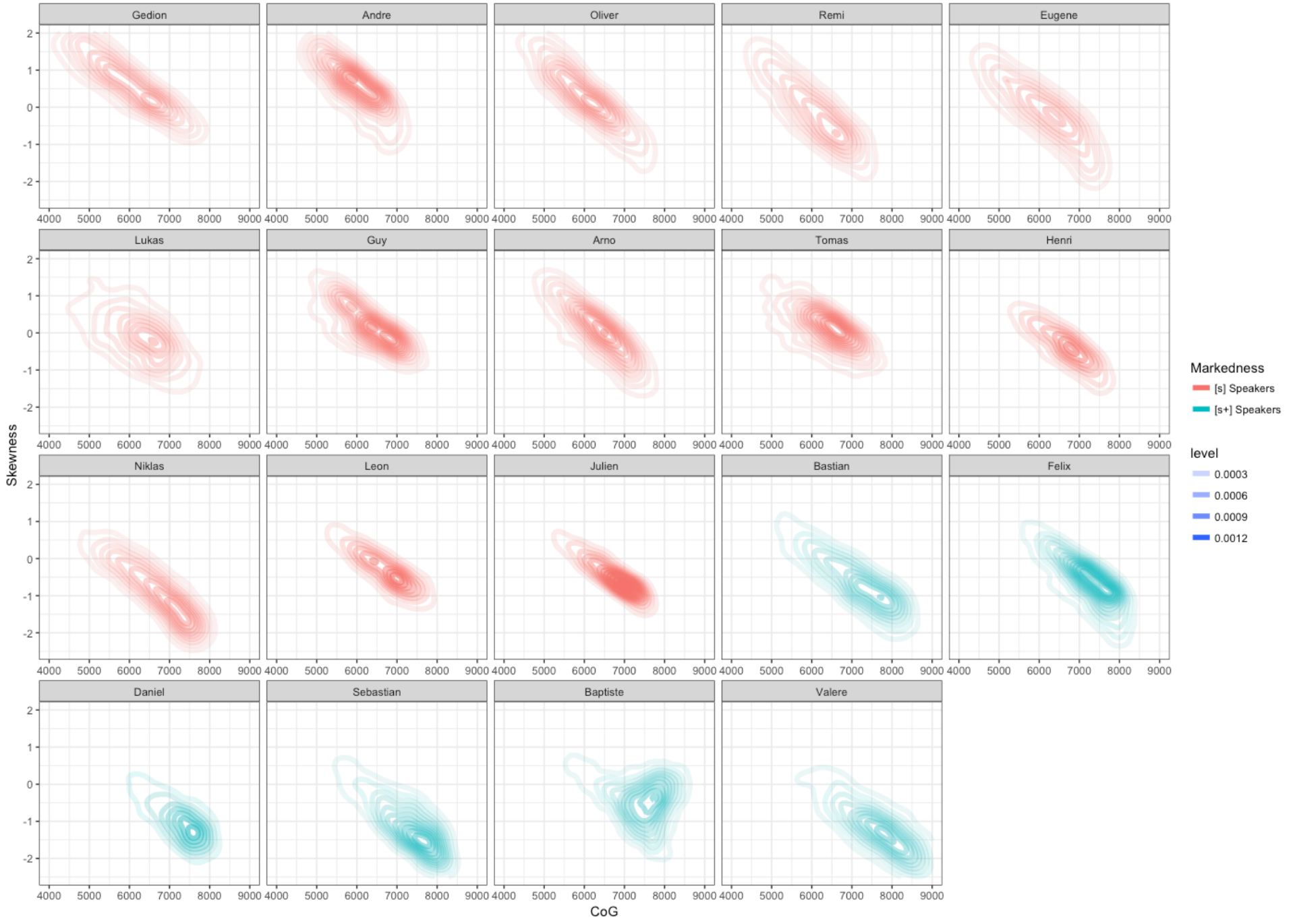
8000
9000
CoG
Markedness
[s] Speakers
[s+] Speakers
level
1e-04
2e-04
3e-04
4e-04
5e-04


Gedion
Andre
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Remi
Eugene
Lukas
Guy
Arno
Tomas
Henri
Niklas
Leon
Julien
Bastian
Felix
Daniel
Sebastian
Baptiste
Valere
Skewness
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[s] Speakers
[s+] Speakers
level
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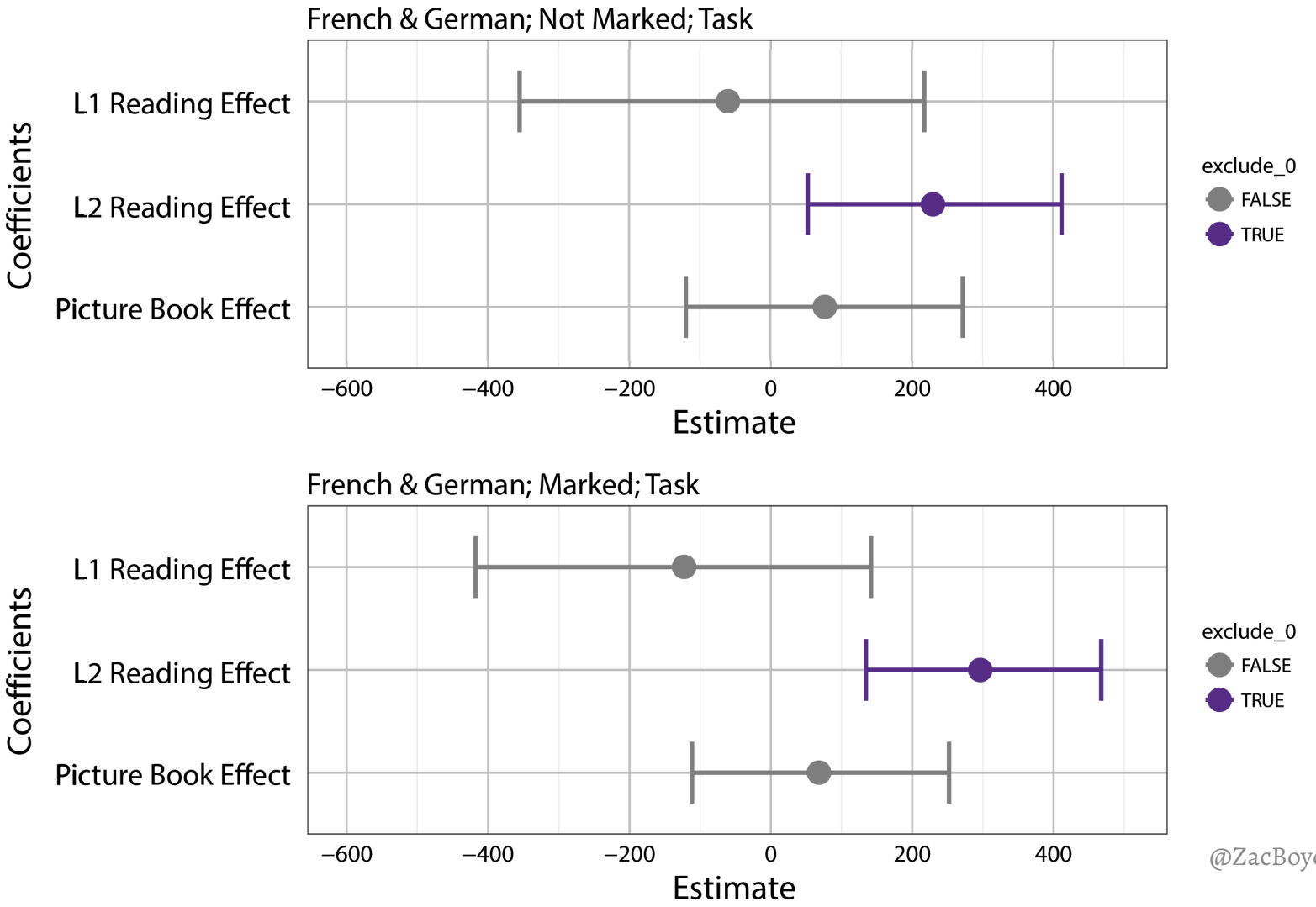
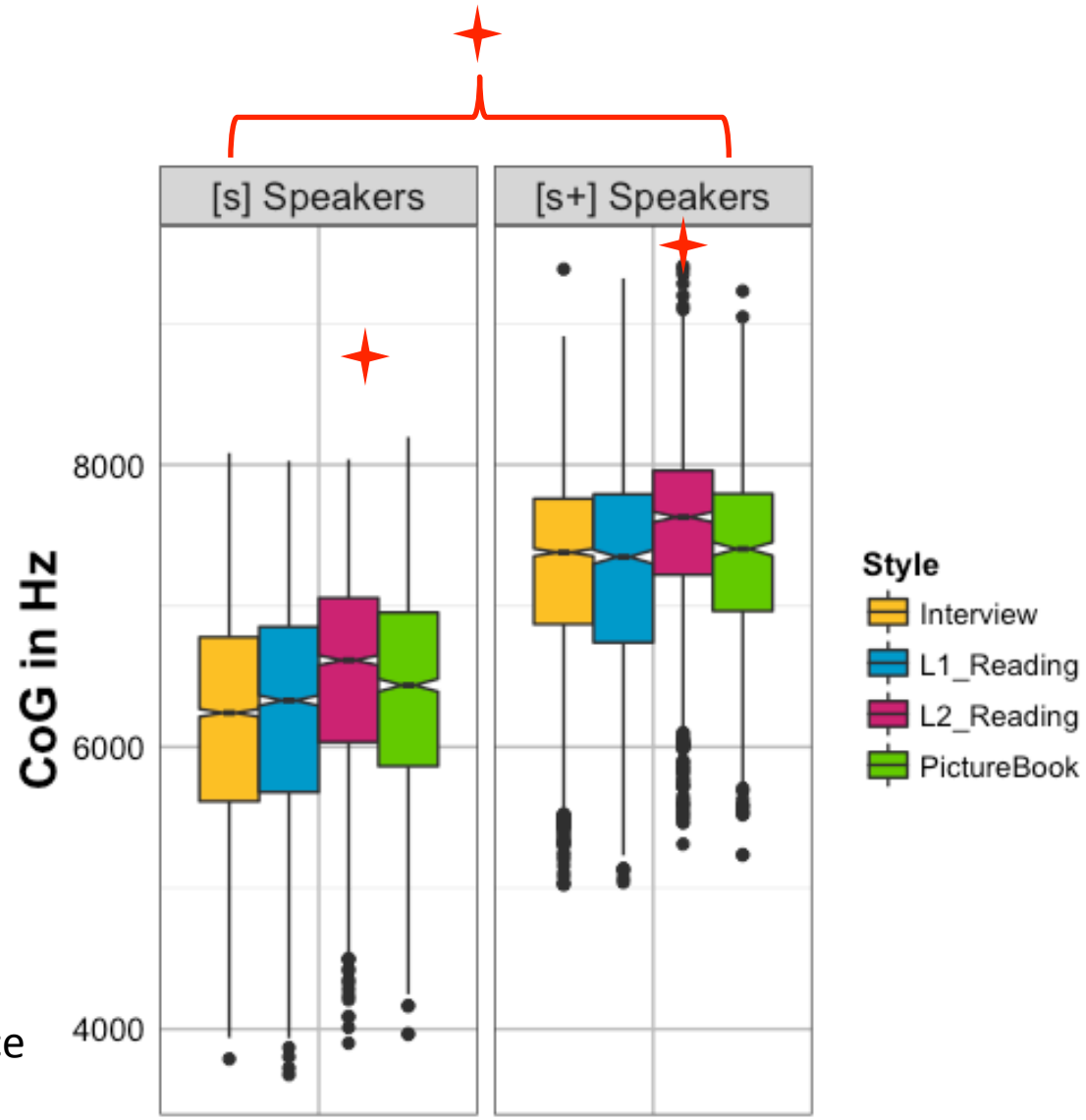
Task Based Style Shifting

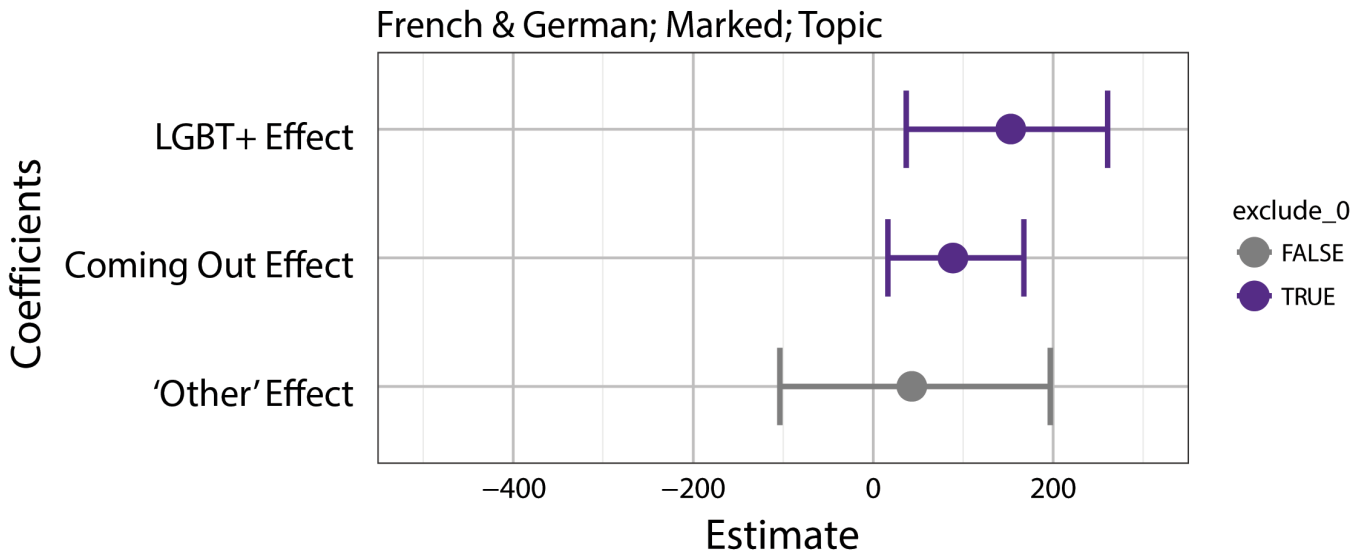


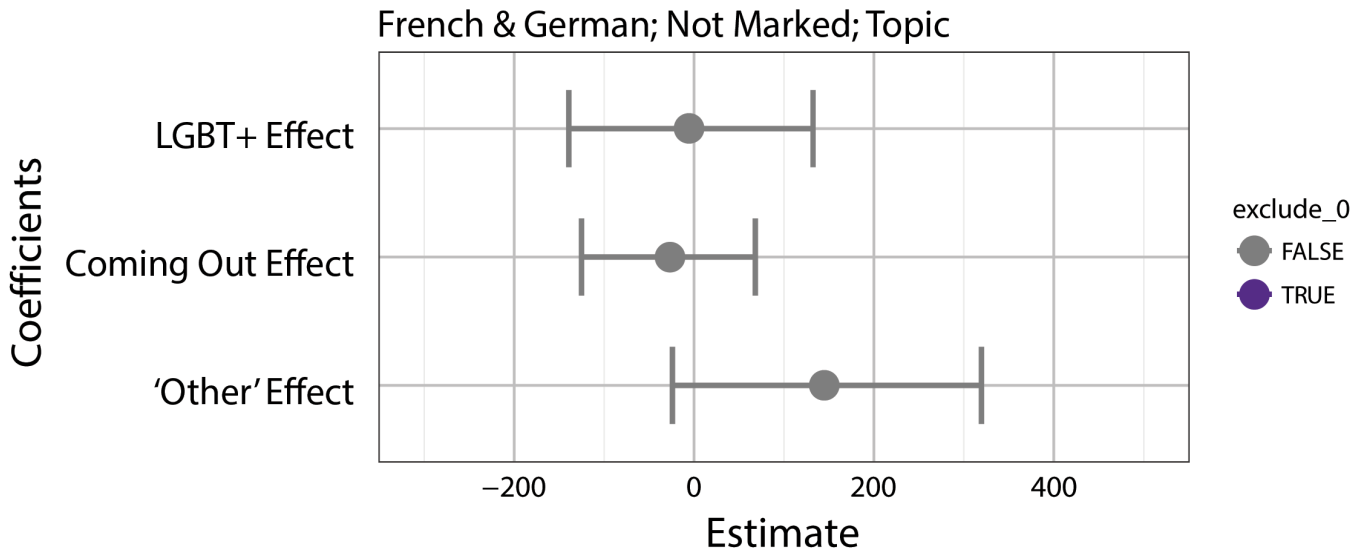
Task Based Style Shifting



= Significance

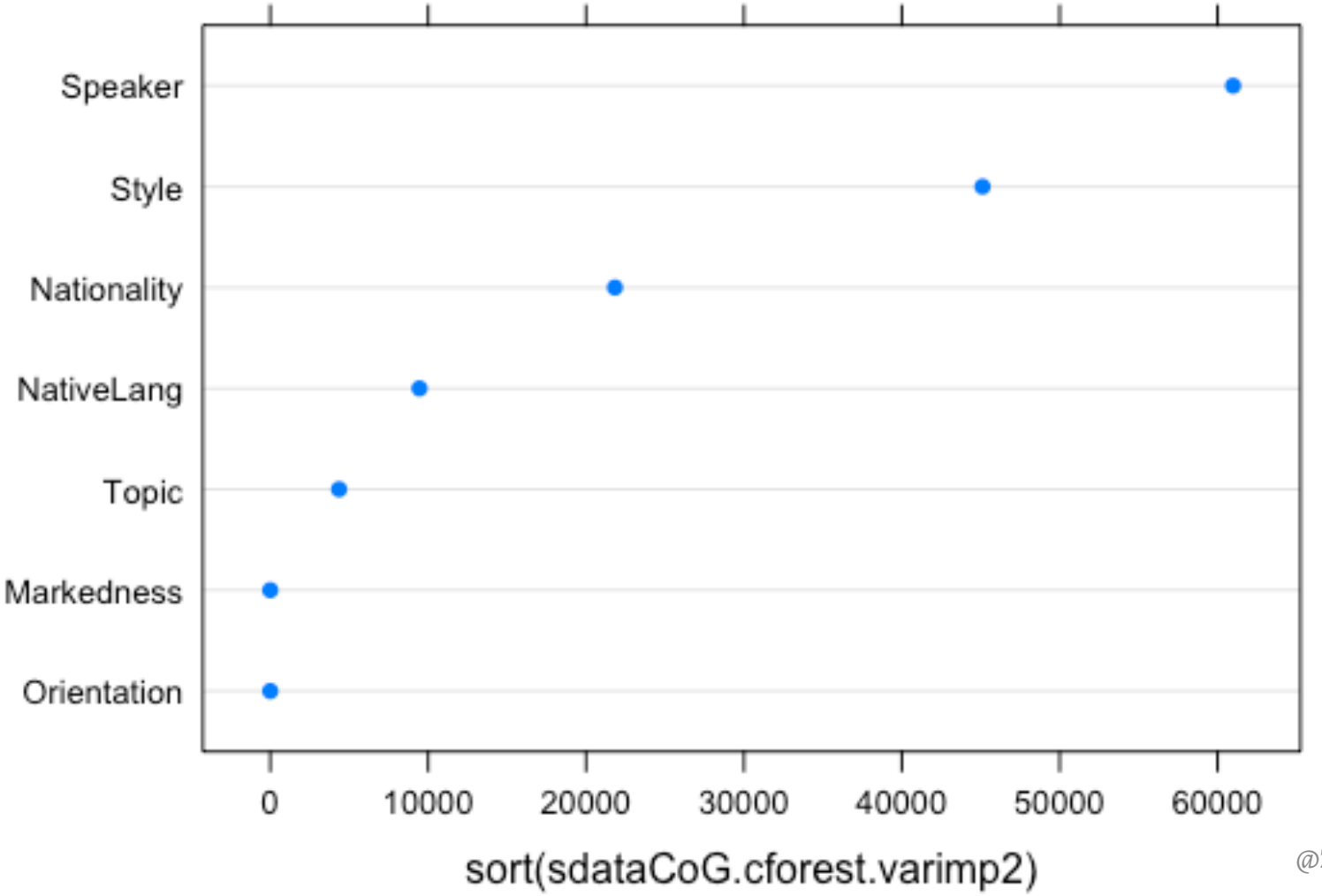
Topic Based Style Shifting





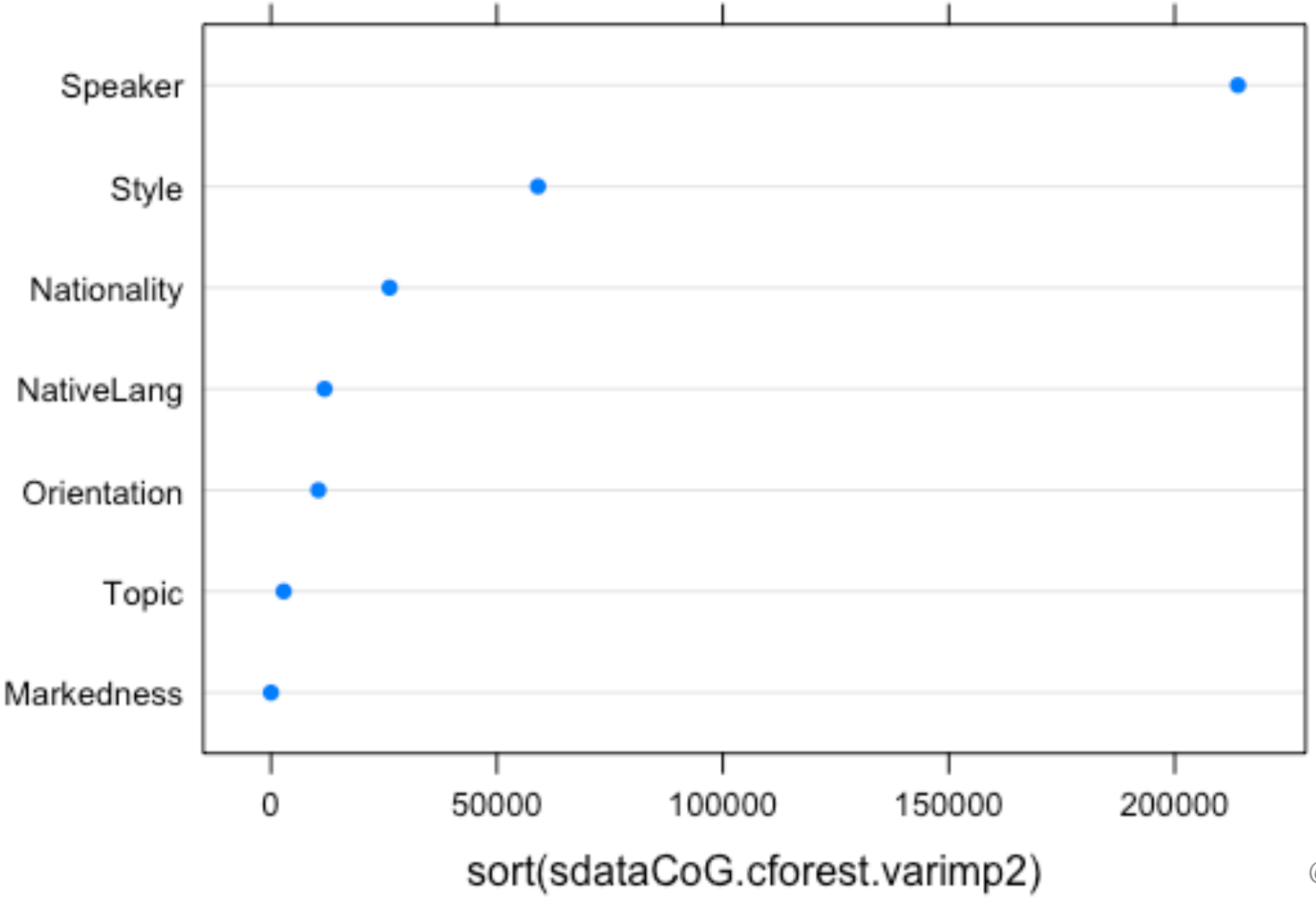
Variable Importance

[s+] Speakers



Variable Importance

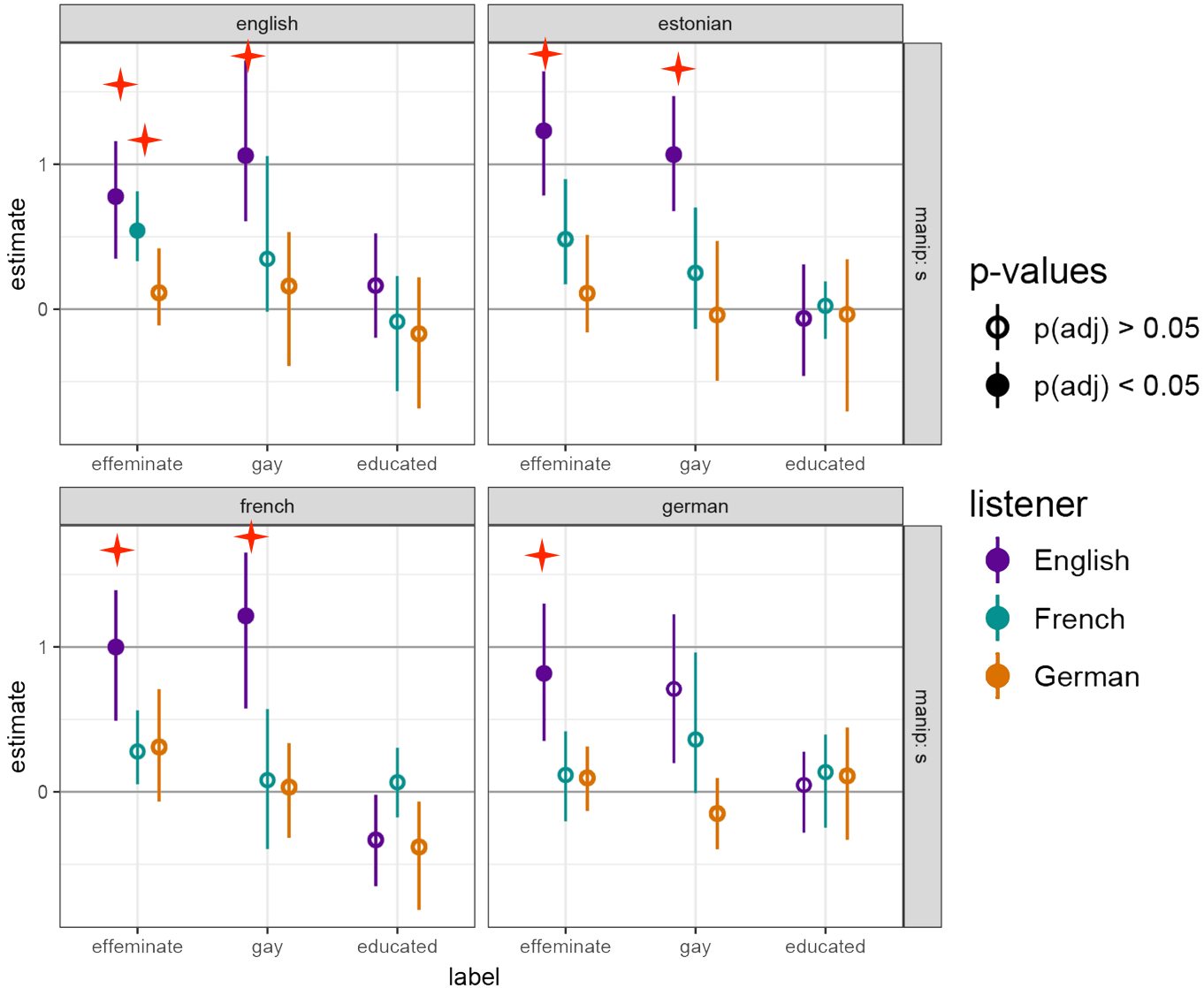
[s] Speakers



Summary: Task

- Overall differences between [s+] speakers and [s] speakers
- L2 Reading is significantly higher than L1 Reading, Interview, and Picture Book Task speech
- No differences seen between L1 Reading, Interview or Picture Book Task speech for any group

Summary: Task

- Supports work on /s/ showing differences between interview/'conversational' speech and read/'clear' speech (e.g. Maniwa et al. 2009; Tucker et al. 2016; Hall-Lew & Boyd forthcoming)
- Indicates L2 "conversational speech" may approximate to L1 "clear speech"
  - Difficult to make strong claims without L1 "conversational speech" data

[s+] Perception
(Boyd, Fruehwald, & Hall-Lew 2017)