“Variant-Centered Variation and the Like Conspiracy”

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3:00PM—4:30PM
513 Lattimore Hall

Abstract: In variationist linguistics, the central object of study is traditionally the linguistic variable. The key methodological principle of sociolinguistics, the principle of accountability (Labov 1972), foregrounds the variable specifically as the structural entity of interest: any linguistic variant is situated in comparison to the other variants with which it competes for the job of “saying the same thing” (Chambers & Trudgill 1980). Some papers in the variationist paradigm (e.g., Campbell-Kibler 2011, Aaron 2010), however, find that looking at a variant beyond the context of the alternation it participates in is necessary in order to get a full picture of its sociolinguistic role and the factors affecting its variation. The purpose of this paper is to synthesize several strands of thinking about the relationship between variables and their variants in the context of one major focus of sociolinguistic research: the variant like.

Like is a variant involved in a number of different variables, covarying in each with a different set of competitor variants— as a quotative, as a discourse marker or particle, as an approximative adverb, and others (D’Arcy 2007). But the observation that the different likes belong to different variables, however true it is, overlooks an obvious and important generalization: each vernacular function of like is increasing in apparent time at the expense of its respective covariants.

Campbell-Kibler (2010) suggests that social meaning attaches to a sociolinguistic variant independent of the variants it competes with. A matched-guise study (Maddeaux & Dinkin 2015), aimed at testing whether this can explain the parallel changes in like, involved nine guises of a two-minute narrative: eight each containing one function of like, and a control guise without like. Participants heard the control guise and two like guises, and rated each on several social dimensions. Only “vernacular” functions of like were evaluated significantly differently than the control guise or prompted participants to describe a guise as “using like a lot”—even though some “standard” functions are undergoing the same change as vernacular functions. This suggests that we may need to look somewhere other than social evaluation to explain the apparent coincidence whereby multiple functions of like are increasing simultaneously in apparent time.

The changes affecting like resemble what is called in historical phonology a “conspiracy”: several changes that are apparently structurally independent of each other, but all seemingly conspiring to bring about the same target state of the language. Crist 2001 argues that such changes have an underlying phonological cause. Taking a cue from that, we may think of the like conspiracy through the lens of change in discursive practices (Coupland 2014), inasmuch as the functions of like share a core discourse function even though they alternate with different covariants and fulfill different structural roles. I argue that the various uses of like involved in change share the discourse function of reducing the speaker’s epistemic commitment to the literal truth of the statement being made. This suggests that we may interpret the like conspiracy as a long-term change toward a particular discourse function embodied in a specific variant, and that, as implicitly suggested by Campbell-Kibler (2011) and Labov (1993), sociolinguistic change in discursive practices acts on the level of the variant rather than the variable.

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