The Like Conspiracy: Avoiding Accountability

Aaron J. Dinkin, University of Toronto
ajd@post.harvard.edu

The linguistic variable is the core object of study in sociolinguistics:

- "a class of variants ordered along a continuous dimension" (Labov 1966:31)
- a set of "ways of doing or saying the same thing" (Chambers & Trudgill 1980:50)
- "in the derivation, the speaker reaches a decision-point" (Wallenberg 2013)

Methodology is based around the principle of accountability (Labov 1972):

- a variant is studied in relation to the variants it competes with within one variable.
- This "places the paradigmatic relationship of the variable at the heart of the variationist enterprise" (Campbell-Kibler 2011).

But: is the variable always the correct unit of analysis?

Campbell-Kibler (2011) finds the variant to be the object of sociolinguistic evaluation:

- the social meanings of -in’ and -ing are not just inverses of each other,
- even though they exist as forms competing with each other within the variable (ing).
- Thus the principle of accountability is not necessarily a good model for social meaning!

Campbell-Kibler’s conclusion is very similar to the Interface Principle (Labov 1993):

- "Members of the speech community evaluate the surface forms of language but not more abstract structural features."

In this model, -in’ and -ing themselves are surface forms, subject to social evaluation;

- that they are exponents of the same variable is just an abstract structural feature.

Centering the variable as the unit of analysis may thus cause us to miss generalizations that would be clearer under a variant-centered analysis.

**Like:** a single variant that instantiates several different variables (cf. D’Arcy 2007);

- at least 5 have been the subject of variationist analysis:
  - **Quotative:** I was like, “How are you doing?”
  - covaries with say, go, etc.
  - **Approximative adverb:** I waited like 20 minutes.
  - covaries with about
  - **Comparative complementizer** (Brook 2014): It seems like it’s going to rain.
  - covaries with that, as if, as though
  - **Discourse marker:** Like, I don’t know what you want. 
  - clause-initial: covaries with well, I mean, etc.
  - **Discourse particle:** I’m, like, still waiting.
  - clause-medial: covaries with kind of, etc.

Standard variationist approach exemplified by Ferrara & Bell (1995):

- study factors affecting the choice between like and other variants within one variable;
- any other is "an altogether different variable which… is not the subject of this study".

D’Arcy (2007) rebuts the like is just like myth:

- a popular belief that vernacular like is a single linguistic unit,
- debunked by the fact that like instantiates several distinct variables.

But the existence of this popular belief is evidence for Campbell-Kibler (2011)’s thesis:

- the variant, not the variable, is subject to sociolinguistic evaluation.
- Dismissing it as a "myth" overlooks this sociolinguistic fact!

These 5 functions of like are all increasing in apparent time!

(D’Arcy 2007, Brook 2014, López-Couso & Méndez-Naya 2012, and many other studies)

From a variable-centered standpoint, these must be five different changes, but it’s probably not just a coincidence!

Can there be a single process acting on the variant like and targeting it for change, across multiple structurally distinct variables?

Aaron (2010) suggests looking outside the envelope of variation to explain change:

- “excluding tokens which do not form part of the variable context” would “discard a tremendous amount of explanatory power”.

**Variable future temporal reference** in Spanish:

- this is changing toward the periphrastic variant, away from the inflected future.
  - inflected (IF): contar ‘I will tell’
  - periphrastic (PF): voy a contar ‘I am going to tell’

Aaron argues: change within this variable context is explained by a change outside it:

- IF is gaining a function of indicating non-future epistemic modality.
- This analysis has the structure of a chain shift:
  - as IF gains a new function, its old function is taken over by a new variant, PF.
  - Thus a single process of change has effects both inside and outside the variable context.

Changes affecting like resemble “conspiracy” patterns from phonological change—

- multiple, seemingly distinct changes all leading to the same targeted linguistic state:
  - “modifications of the phonological pattern… implemented not by a single change, but by a number of phonologically quite different processes.” (Hock 1991)

Example: sound changes eliminating Indo-European onset *j from Greek (Crist 2001):

- metathesis: *anj > ain
- fortition: *j > t / p... *j > zd / #
- deletion: *j > / V... *V
- affrication: *tf > *ts > s / #

These (and other changes!) have little in common except the result of eliminating onset j.
The Greek */j* conspiracy is quite parallel to *like* in its variationist structure: several variables in different variable contexts, with one variant in common, all changing in a parallel direction to bring about a target state of the language. Crist (2001) gives an Optimality Theory account of conspiracies:
caused by top-down change in constraints on preferred phonological output, which affects multiple phonetic variables as a single causal process.
This is a change in the structural system in which variation is embedded, not principally a change in the variables themselves.

D’Arcy (2012) gives another example of change in the embedding system as an explanation for changes within an envelope of variation:
The range of discourse functions of quotatives has broadened over the past 125 years—from reporting literal speech only, to thoughts, attitudes, non-verbal sounds, etc.—and with that change in function has come changes in the choice of variants used.
That change in discursive practice (cf. Coupland 2014) toward broader use of quotatives could not itself be discovered by a study within the variable context!

Different functions of *like* share discourse function of signaling “vague literality”:
• discourse particle: marks “non-identical relationship between utterance and thought”, utterance possibly not to be taken literally (Andersen 2001)
• comparative complementizer: that is favored by literal clauses, as if by metaphorical; but *like* is not sensitive to the literality of the subordinate clause (Brook 2014)
• quotative: *like* is compatible with both quotation of speech and paraphrase of thought: *I said, “Gross.”*; *I was like, “Gross.”*; *I thought, “Gross.”*
Be *like* is ambiguous regarding literality of quotation (cf. Buchstaller 2013).
• approximative: Siegel (2002) claims *like* is compatible with both exact and approximate quantities.

So perhaps the changes toward *like* are motivated as a change toward vague literality as a discourse practice—targeting the variant that indexes it, across multiple variables. Thus changes in multiple variables are united as results of a single top-down change.

The point of this paper: underlining the value of variant-centered analysis to complement variable-centered.
The sociolinguistic work a variant does isn’t dependent on the variables producing it; keeping analyses within the envelope of variation can miss the forest for the trees. *Like* seems ripe for such an analysis.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to the students in my winter 2014 “Deconstructing the Linguistic Variable” seminar at the University of Toronto: Hannah Couter, Shyana Gardiner, Ruth Maddeaux, Marisa Brook, LeAnn Brown, Claire Childs, and Derek Denis, whose stimulating discussions in class spurred much of the thought behind this paper.

References: