

## The *Like* Conspiracy: Avoiding Accountability

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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). Change in progress is conceptualized as a change in the frequency of one variant or another as a percentage of instances of a given variable. 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. D’Arcy (2007) offers a catalogue of the manifold functions of *like* (as a quotative, as a discourse marker or particle, as an approximative adverb, and others) with the aim of rebutting a popular myth that “*like* is just *like*”—i.e., that the vernacular functions of *like* constitute a single linguistic entity. 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, as D’Arcy demonstrates using data from Toronto. Brook (2014) shows that the same is true of *like* as a comparative complementizer, a function not examined by D’Arcy. These changes resemble what is called in historical phonology a “conspiracy” (cf. Crist 2001): several changes that are apparently structurally independent of each other, but all seemingly conspiring to bring about the same target state of the language (in this case, a high frequency of use of the word *like*). Although a synchronic or diachronic link between various functions of *like* is hardly a novel observation (cf. Andersen 2001, Romaine & Lange 1991, *inter alia*), to date there has been little discussion of the implications of the existence of such a conspiracy for the general theory of language variation and change.

Campbell-Kibler (2011) suggests that the sociolinguistic evaluation a variant receives is not necessarily derived from its contrast with other variants of the same variable. This is reminiscent of an argument by Labov (1993) that only surface features of language, not the grammatical structures in which they are embedded, are subject to sociolinguistic evaluation. The *like* conspiracy suggests a generalization of these two arguments: an individual variant can be a target of linguistic change, irrespective of the fact that the variant may be participating in two or more structurally distinct variables. From this perspective, the particular variable or variables that a variant instantiates is part of the abstract structure immune to sociolinguistic evaluation. To the extent that a change is driven by sociolinguistic function, then, Labov and Campbell-Kibler predict that it is the variant that will be targeted, rather than its role as a member of a specific variable.

D’Arcy (2012) suggests that the rise of quotative *like* and other innovative quotatives is part of a long-term change in the discursive functions of quotation, not just

*like* competing with *say* for a fixed pool of quotatives. 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. The quotative *like* differs from more standard quotatives in that it can be used to quote both spoken utterances and unspoken internal monologue—thus the use of the quotative *like* allows the quoter to avoid overtly committing to one or the other interpretation of the quotation (Romaine & Lange 1991, *inter alia*). Brook (2014) reports that *like* as a comparative complementizer is more ambiguous between concrete and metaphorical ostensibility than traditional complementizers such as *that* and *as if*. The approximative function of *like*, covarying with *about*, manifestly indicates a lack of direct commitment on the speaker's part to a specific quantity. And Andersen (2001) describes the function of discourse-particle *like* as indicating “non-identical resemblance between utterance and thought.” Each of these uses of *like* thus shares 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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