

## Linguistic mythbusting: The role of the media in diffusing change

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Minority status and linguistic isolation are said to constitute barriers to mainstream change (e.g. Britain 2004; Milroy & Milroy 1985; Trudgill 1997). But Quebec anglophones, who not only represent a dwindling minority, but are also highly bilingual in French, show the opposite effect. We illustrate this with a variable involved in perhaps the most dramatic change in progress in the recent history of English: the spread of quotative *be like*, as in (1).

- (1) When we actually saw the knee, we *were like* "Okay, call the ambulance right now!"  
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Systematic analysis of thousands of quotatives in spontaneous speech (Dion & Poplack 2005) reveals that young Anglo-Quebecers have acquired not only the form *be like*, at rates strikingly similar to those of mainstream speakers, but also the grammar underlying its use. Because this variable is absent from the speech of older generations, these could not have been acquired through direct transmission. Rather they must have diffused through expansion, though in the absence of immediate contact with mainstream speakers, the mechanism by which this could have come about remains unclear. A stock explanation is that innovative forms such as *be like* are transmitted through the media. There is surprisingly little empirical support for this assertion, however. And although there is increasing agreement that 'off-the-shelf' changes (involving a sound or a form) can diffuse easily, it is generally accepted that the transmission of complex linguistic variables, along with their associated frequency and (socio)linguistic conditioning, requires face-to-face contact.

To ascertain the potential role of the media in the diffusion of change, we assembled and analyzed a corpus of popular television shows and top-grossing movies aired during the period the Quebec English data were collected, retaining those most likely to contain reported dialogue and to target an audience under 35. Each instance of reported speech was extracted and coded to permit comparability with our community studies.

Results show that quotative use in the scripted media, which constitutes the bulk of the airtime, diverged wildly from the community norm (of Quebec and elsewhere in the English-speaking world [Blyth, Recktenwald & Wang 1990; Cukor-Avila 2002; Ferrara & Bell 1995; Tagliamonte & D'Arcy 2004, 2007; Tagliamonte & Hudson 1999]), not only in terms of rate, but more important, in both linguistic and social conditioning. The unscripted material provides a much more accurate representation of actual speech. But both genres contain too few occurrences of *be like* to serve as a model. Moreover, because both frequencies and conditioning of variant choice vary according to genre, any such model fails to provide a clear target for adoption.

Although the precise mechanisms underlying the diffusion of this, and most other changes, remain unresolved, our results provide important evidence that linguistic conditioning of variability can be acquired in the absence of direct contact.

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