The *Like* Conspiracy: Avoiding Accountability

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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-é*   '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: *$j > 0 / V\_\_V$
  • affrication: *$tj > {}*ts > s / \#\_\_$
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

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