

Variant-centered variation and the *like* conspiracy

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The conventional methodology of variationist linguistics foregrounds the variable as the object of study: each variant is situated in the envelope of variation against the other variants it competes with. This paper argues that it is necessary to look beyond the context of the alternations a variant participates in in order to get a full picture of the factors affecting variation. The multi-functional variant *like* is used as a case study to illustrate the value of a variant-centered analysis: the fact that several distinct variables are all simultaneously changing toward the variant *like* suggests that a variant can be targeted for change across multiple variables, paralleling Campbell-Kibler (2011)'s model of the variant as the carrier of sociolinguistic meaning. It is conjectured that the set of changes toward *like* can be explained as a top-down discursive change targeting *like* as an indicator of vague literality, a function it retains in multiple distinct variable contexts.

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1. Variables and variants in variationist theory

The central object of study in variationist linguistics is traditionally the linguistic variable – a fact that is less tautological than it sounds. The concept of the variable was formalized by Labov (1966:13) as “a class of variants which are ordered along a continuous dimension and whose position is determined by an independent linguistic or extra-linguistic variable”, but articulated much more loosely in its most general formulation by Chambers & Trudgill (1980: 50) as “socially different but linguistically equivalent ways of doing or saying the same thing”. Implicit in both of these definitions is a model of how linguistic variation is produced: the speaker begins with some “thing” that they wish to linguistically do or say; and various social, stylistic, and internal factors probabilistically influence their choice between the several possible variants that constitute the “equivalent ways” of doing so. The fundamental methodological principle that defines the

study of the variable is the principle of accountability (Labov 1972): in order to study the factors that condition variation, we must enumerate not only all tokens of the *variant* of interest, but also all tokens of the other variants with which it competes, in order to accountably calculate how frequently speakers use one variant when they *could* have used a different one, and thus what factors influence the choice between variants. As Campbell-Kibler (2011) notes, this principle “places the paradigmatic relationship of the variable at the heart of the variationist enterprise.” Language change, in the variationist tradition, is conceptualized as a change in the frequency of one variant or another as a percentage of instances of a given variable – i.e., as a change among *which* of the “equivalent ways” are to be used for “saying the same thing”.

It is widely noted (e.g., Lavandera 1978, Dines 1980, Buchstaller 2009, Pichler 2010) that the principle of accountability is more challenging to apply to variation in discourse-pragmatic elements than to low-level phonological or morphological variation, chiefly because it is more difficult to delimit the set of alternative variants that the variant of interest competes with. While alternate phonological realizations of a single morpheme, or phonetic realizations of a single phoneme, can be regarded fairly concretely as multiple ways of saying the same thing, a discourse element may have a wide spectrum of semantic, pragmatic, and grammatical functions; two discourse elements may overlap in some of those functions but not in others, making it difficult to determine to what extent or in what contexts they instantiate ways of “doing or saying the same thing”. However, accountability of some sort is still necessary for a variationist analysis of discourse-pragmatic elements, quantitatively reckoning the frequency of use of some variant in comparison to the set of instances in which it could have been used but wasn’t. Pichler (2010) outlines various ways this has been undertaken in different studies: for example, two elements or constructions may be identified as representing the same variable if they just share the same semantic or pragmatic function, or they may also be required to conform to a common structural template. When it is not feasible to “close the set” of variants in this way, researchers may simply calculate the frequency of a variant of interest per, for example, thousand words of speech; but this is recognized as a substitute for variable-based accountability.

A recurring theme in variationist linguistics is the exploration of what the nature of the choice between variants is – where in the grammar (or outside of it) such choices are situated, and how they relate to each other. Wallenberg (2013) spells out the object of study in this research program very concisely: “at some point in the derivation, the speaker reaches a decision-point”; research on this topic focuses on establishing when in the derivation this takes place, and exactly what the nature is of the options that the speaker is choosing between. For example, Rickford et al. (1991) explored the empirical and methodological bases for

the hypotheses that deletion, contraction, and retention of the copula in African-American Vernacular English are three variants of a single variable – i.e., a single choice made between three variants at a single point in the grammatical derivation – or two variable processes that feed or bleed each other in one order or another; Guy (1991) conceptualized (TD)-deletion as a phonological process that operates at specific points in the phonological derivation. More recently, Tamminga (2014a) has explored whether (TD) or (ing) variation in monomorphemic words is structurally the same variable as it is when (TD) or (ing) constitutes an affix; MacKenzie (2013) argues that auxiliary contraction is a conflation of two distinct variable processes; and Wallenberg (2013) contends that different types of morphosyntactic variation are instantiated by the same type of grammatical mechanism. What all of these studies have in common is a focus on examining variables that have sociolinguistic meaning of some kind and establishing what processes in the grammar create the variability they exhibit.

Wolfram (1991:29), however, argued “that the formal display of linguistic processes and the display of social and linguistic covariation are not inherently tied together in the most revealing sociolinguistic description” – i.e., that explaining the grammatical processes that produce sociolinguistically-conditioned variation, theoretically enlightening though it might be, is not necessarily relevant to the social meaning the variable exhibits or the social conditioning on its variation.¹ The linguistic variable as a sociolinguistic entity, Wolfram argued, is better conceptualized as “a convenient, largely heuristic construct” for describing how variants are correlated with social factors, and the social meanings associated with variants may be independent of the structure of the grammatical processes that produce them: “this revealing sociolinguistic profile is free to cross different... phonological processes”. Thus from this perspective, the variable per se cannot simultaneously be defined as a “decision-point”, in Wallenberg (2013)’s terms, and be characterized as an entity that is potentially subject to sociolinguistic evaluation; there is no guarantee that those two descriptions apply to the same things.

Labov (1993) makes a related point with his “Interface Principle”: “Members of the speech community evaluate the surface forms of language but not more abstract structural features”² such as “phonemic contrasts, rule ordering, or the

1. Wolfram was discussing specifically the theoretical paradigm of variable generative-style rules, which is now out of fashion; but his basic argument extends beyond that paradigm to accounts of the grammatical structure of variation in general.

2. Meyerhoff (2001) and Buchstaller & Levon (2014) interpret this as meaning that morphosyntactic variables such as subject-verb agreement cannot be subject to sociolinguistic evaluation; under this interpretation the Interface Principle is clearly false. However, the more

direction or order of variable constraints.” In other words, although dialects, speakers, or utterances may differ from one another in terms of what abstract structures and grammatical rules are employed, those structures and rules themselves are not subject to sociolinguistic evaluation – only the surface-level visible features of the utterances they produce are evaluated.³ For example, although the phonetic implementation of the vowel phoneme in the word *caught* may be subject to evaluation and have social meaning attached to it, the fact of whether or not the phonemic inventory contrasts the phoneme in words like *caught* with that in words like *cot* is not itself directly sociolinguistically evaluated. This echoes Wolfram’s concern that the formal production-based model of the sociolinguistic variable does not capture the entity that undergoes sociolinguistic evaluation: though a speaker might employ a phonological process to replace *-ing* with *-in’* in some words, and a morphological process in other words, what is subject to sociolinguistic evaluation (according to this argument) is whether *-in’* is actually produced, not whether the morphological process is employed or whether the phonological process is employed. Thus the actual variable grammar itself plays the role of the “more abstract structural features” alluded to by Labov (1993).

Campbell-Kibler (2011) goes a step farther than this with her finding that the social meanings associated with competing variants such as *-in’* and *-ing* need not even be complementary to each other. She compares listeners’ sociolinguistic judgment responses to three matched guises: one using *-ing*, one using *-in’*, and a null guise in which it was impossible for the listener to tell whether *-in’* or *-ing* was used. She finds that the difference between listeners’ judgments of the *-in’* guise and the null guise is *not* simply the inverse of that between the *-ing* guise and the null guise; for example, the use of *-ing* made a speaker sound more intelligent and articulate than the null guise, but the use of *-in’* did not make the speaker sound *less* intelligent. In other words, the social meaning a listener extracts from hearing *-ing* is not simply the opposite of the social meaning extracted from hearing *-in’*. The two variants are found to have social meanings that are formally independent of each other, even though the speaker produces them strictly as alternatives to one another.

What this means, essentially, is that sociolinguistic *perception* does not respect the principle of accountability in the way that sociolinguistic *research* does. In order

generous interpretation I use here, where the division is between surface-visible features on the one hand (which may be phonological, syntactic, lexical, etc.) and on the other hand the underlying abstract rules, contrasts, and constraints which produce them, I believe has value.

3. A similar principle probably applies to determine what features can be the subject of dialect diffusion; cf. Labov (2007).

to conduct an accountable variationist analysis, we must situate each variant in comparison to the other variants with which it competes, and it is in the context of such a comparison that we *as researchers* generally try to evaluate the social meaning of one variant versus another. But apparently the listener does not do that – i.e., it seems that the listener does not determine the social meaning of *-in'* on the basis of its status as an alternative to *-ing*, but rather as a form on its own terms that has its own social meaning. Thus, in Campbell-Kibler's analysis, the variant, not the variable, is the entity to which social meaning is attached. This conclusion is in a sense just a more developed form of Labov's Interface Principle: if the object of sociolinguistic evaluation is "the surface forms of language but not more abstract structural features," as Labov puts it, we can construe the very fact that *-in'* exists in covariation with *-ing* to be one of those abstract structural features. The surface form is simply *-in'*, not the choice of *-in'* over *-ing*, and it is the surface form that carries social meaning. This also echoes an observation by Dines (1980) that discourse variants can sociolinguistically index characteristics like class and style, even though (as discussed above) it is not always possible to establish exactly what other variants a given variant is competing with. If a variant can have clear social meaning even when its role as an exponent of a specific variable is obscure, this supports the hypothesis that the variant, not the variable, is where sociolinguistic meaning is situated.

The discussion above invites the following question: what happens when a single apparent surface form acts as a variant of *multiple* distinct variables?⁴ If it is in the variant itself that sociolinguistic meaning is situated, rather than the variable's contrast with covariants, that would seem to predict that a single surface variant should have the same social meaning regardless of what variable it instantiates. This prediction does not hold, as Labov (1993) notes, at least in the case of phonetic and allophonic variation. Labov observes that the social meaning of a sound depends on what phoneme it instantiates: for example, although the diphthong [iə] in the word *mad* may be negatively evaluated in New York City, the same sound in the word *idea* is not. Thus the "surface form" subject to evaluation in such cases is "the realization of a particular sound in a given position in a general class of words: in other words, allophones." In other words, at least in a case where the same surface variant is an exponent of two phonological variables with different underlying

4. This question itself has two different interpretations, depending on whether the variable is construed in terms of Wallenberg (2013)'s "decision-point" or Wolfram (1991)'s "heuristic construct". If Tammenga (2014a) is correct that *-in'* in *walkin'* and *-in'* in *mornin'* represent two different variable processes in the grammar, we could ask whether it's possible for those two *-in'*s to have different social meanings even though they represent examples of a single variable from the heuristic-construct point of view. For the sake of simplicity, we shall focus on variables in the Wolfram sense for this discussion.

representations,⁵ we expect the social meaning of the variant to be contingent on the fact that the variant is instantiating a particular variable. So what is subject to social evaluation in this case is the surface variant considered in relation to the underlying structure it represents (even if, according to Campbell-Kibler 2011, not the comparison between that variant and its covariants).

For discourse variation, however, the question seems thornier. It may be the case that a variant's social meaning can depend upon its status as an exponent of a specific variable; but discourse variants may be highly multi-functional, so that it is not always possible to compactly define what variable they instantiate. In these cases, does the social meaning the listener extracts derive from the variant's status as an exponent of a specific, if nebulous, linguistic variable? Or does the social meaning attach merely to the variant itself – and, if so, does that extend into contexts in which variable exponence is more well-defined? These questions, inspired by Campbell-Kibler (2011)'s result, illustrate the kind of questions that are raised by treating variants, rather than variables, as the object of sociolinguistic analysis.

Thus the goal of this paper is to synthesize several strands of thought on the relationship between sociolinguistic variables and their variants, in order to argue that analysis centered on variants rather than variables may have a greater role to play in sociolinguistics. As a case study to explore what variant-centered analysis may be able to contribute, we will focus on a particular surface variant that can instantiate several different variables, including discourse variables: the word *like*.

2. The many functions of like

The word *like* has a wide variety of lexical, grammatical, and discourse functions in contemporary English, many of which are involved in variation and/or change. Although there is an enormous amount of variationist research on some of *like*'s functions, the relationships between these functions have implications for the general theory of linguistic variation and the nature of the variable in ways that have not necessarily been fully explored.

D'Arcy (2007) catalogues the various functions of *like*, with the aim of rebutting what she describes as a popular “language myth” that “*like* is just *like*; that is, there

5. *Mad* vs. *idea* is not an example of this, since the [iə] in *idea* does not itself represent a variable. However, an example of this type of situation can be found in Boston, where the long monophthong [a:] is a variant of both the broad-*a* variable (in which it covaries with [æ] in words of the BATH class) and the rhoticity variable (in which it covaries with [aɹ] in words of the START class).

is one *like* that is recycled repeatedly” (p.388). She divides *like* into five “grammatical” (i.e., standard and “largely unremarkable”) functions, listed in (1a–e) below, and four “vernacular” functions that “are largely restricted to informal discourse”, shown in (1f–i).

- (1) a. verb: *I don't really like her that much.*
 b. noun: *the likes of all great fighters*
 c. adverb:⁶ *It looks like a snail.*
 d. conjunction: *It felt like everything had dropped away.*
 e. suffix: *something stroke-like*
 f. quotative complementizer: *He was like, "That's an upside."*
 g. approximative adverb: *to go like thirty miles*
 h. discourse marker: *Like she's a space cadet.*
 i. discourse particle: *They had like scraped her.* (D'Arcy 2007)

D'Arcy categorizes the functions of *like* chiefly in terms of the syntactic roles they play; for example, the difference between discourse markers (1h) and discourse particles (1i) is diagnosed by whether the *like* in question appears clause-initially or clause-medially.⁷ Blondeau & Nagy (2008) decompose the “conjunction” (1d) category into two distinct syntactic classes, as shown in (2): they classify the function in (2a), in which *like* covaries with *as*, as syntactically a conjunction, but the function in (2b), in which *like* covaries with *as if* and *as though*, as a complementizer. Brook (2014) uses the term “comparative complementizer” for function (2b).

- (2) a. conjunction: *Winston tastes good, like a cigarette should.*
 b. complementizer: *She feels like her friend deserves the job more.*
 (Blondeau & Nagy 2008)

López-Couso & Méndez-Naya (2012) draw a further distinction, between *like*'s function of introducing adverbial clauses of Similarity, as in (2a), and a distinct function introducing clauses of Comparison demonstrated in (3). Although (3) might belong to the same syntactic category as (2a), it has not only a different semantic function but a distinct set of covariants: in (2a), *like* competes with *as*, whereas in (3) it competes with *as if* and *as though* (as it does in 2b).

- (3) conjunction: *They look at me like I'm dirt.*
 (López-Couso & Méndez-Naya 2012)

6. Although D'Arcy labels this function of *like* as an “adverb”, it looks like a preposition to me.
 7. There is also a somewhat older clause-final discourse *like* of British origin, as in *You'd hit the mud on the bottom, like* (D'Arcy 2005: 4, 66, and passim; Romaine & Lange 1991). D'Arcy describes this use of *like* as obsolescent, though it apparently remains robust in at least Irish English (Kallen 2013: 191).

In any event, it is clear that the word *like* has a broad range of standard and vernacular functions. In those functions that are variable, it possesses different sets of covariants: for example, the approximative *like* (1g) covaries with *about*; the quotative *be like* (1f) covaries with other quotatives such as *say*; the discourse marker (1h) arguably covaries with other discourse markers such as *I mean* and *you know*;⁸ and so on.

With the exception of the verb (1a), all of these functions of *like* have a common etymological source and continue to share a “semantic core” (Jucker & Smith 1998: 184), as will be discussed in more detail below. The presence of a synchronic semantic relationship is a frequent criterion for judging two senses of the same surface word-form to represent a single polysemous lexical item, rather than two lexically distinct words that are only coincidentally homophonous (Panman 1982, Blank 2003). This seems to justify regarding all but (1a) as diverse functions of a single versatile function word *like* (contra Drager 2011 and Tamminga 2014b, who seemingly presuppose them to be coincidental homophones). Labov (1993) identifies the lexical item, as a class, as one of the types of variant to which social meaning can be attached. This lexical item *like* therefore appears to be a prime example of a single variant that instantiates multiple *distinct* linguistic variables, whether “variable” is defined from the top-down perspective of Wolfram (1991) or the bottom-up perspective of Wallenberg (2013); and thus the myth that “*like* is just *like*” is rebutted.

The fact that the different functions of *like* participate in different variable systems means that standard variationist methodology requires treating them separately. For instance, Ferrara & Bell (1995) state, in discussing the quotative *like*, that the discourse particle *like* belongs to “an altogether different variable” and therefore “is *not* the subject of this study” (emphasis theirs); D’Arcy (2005:29), in discussing the discourse particle, states that “quotative *be like* forms no part of this investigation”. A typical variationist study of *like* is thus careful to circumscribe the variable context at issue, establish if possible which other variants compete with *like* in this particular variable context, and dismiss the other potential functions of *like* as not directly relevant to the constraints on variation affecting the *like* under discussion.

8. According to D’Arcy (2007:394), these alternate discourse markers “can often be felicitously substituted for *like* without affecting the epistemic stance of the utterance”. However, in her own analysis, D’Arcy (2005) applies the principle of accountability merely by comparing the presence of the discourse marker and particle *like* against its absence (in various syntactic frames), rather than against specific competing variants.

Although the different incarnations of *like* are functionally different and participate in distinct systems of variation, it is well known that many of them are connected both synchronically and diachronically. D'Arcy (2005:ch.3) argues that the discourse marker *like* originated from grammaticalization of the preposition and conjunction functions of *like*;⁹ and she shows (2005:ch.8, 2008) via an apparent-time analysis how the sentence-medial discourse particle originated as a syntactic generalization of the discourse marker, and has penetrated further and further into the structure of the sentence over the course of the past several decades. Romaine & Lange (1991) argue that quotative *like* originated as a specialized function of the discourse particle, and that “the meanings of ‘approximative’ and ‘similarity’” associated with standard functions of *like* such as (1c) “have contributed to both the discourse uses of *like*” (p.245). Buchstaller (2013:17ff) shows that *be like* serves as a template for creating additional novel quotatives based on different discourse particles, such as *be kinda*, indicating that *like*'s status as a discourse particle remains synchronically relevant to its use as a quotative. And although D'Arcy (2006) argues convincingly (contra Andersen 2001: 260 and others) that the approximative function of *like* is synchronically syntactically distinct from the discourse particle, it is nevertheless possible for an individual token of *like* to be ambiguous between the two readings, since both the approximative and the discourse particle can appear in NP-initial position; these two functions can thus fade into each other.

However, what D'Arcy (2007) refers to as the “*like* is just *like*” myth is not these synchronic and diachronic linguistic connections between the different functions of *like*, but rather what she perceives in the media as “a tendency to talk of *like* as a single, monolithic entity.” Examples of this tendency are not hard to find on the Internet. Shepherd (2011), in a blog post entitled “You, Like, Need to Stop Using the Word ‘Like’”; conflates quotative *like* with “randomly inserting the word ‘like’ where it doesn’t belong” and describes it as untranslatable (instead of correctly perceiving it as roughly synonymous with *say*). Tracy (2013), writing for *The New Republic*, in critiquing Metcalf (2013)’s defense of quotative *like*, sequesters from the

9. Jespersen (1942:417–18) argues that the old-fashioned clause-final discourse *like* (see Note 7 above) originates from the suffix *-like* exemplified in (1e). D'Arcy (2005:64) disputes this analysis, in part on the grounds that it “contradicts the hypothesis of unidirectionality” in grammaticalization. However, I note in passing that the origin Jespersen ascribes to clause-final *like* is exactly equivalent to the undisputed origin of the clause-final discourse element *ish*, as in *Tomorrow's an easy day, ish* (cf. Diertani 2011§5.2.5, who uses *ish* as part of an argument *against* the unidirectionality hypothesis). The case of *ish* suggests that the hypothesis of an adjectival suffix becoming a sentence-final adverbial discourse marker is not quite as implausible as D'Arcy suggests.

quotative to the discourse functions of *like* in order to condemn the former by association with the latter. Wasko (2011) cites a taxonomy of *like* functions by Balistreri (2003) in which discourse, quotative, and approximative functions of *like* are jumbled together under some of the same headings. And of course Frank and Moon Zappa's 1982 song "Valley Girl", which often appears in discussions of *like* and stereotypes associated with it, uses *like* in both its discourse and quotative functions. D'Arcy (2007) demonstrates that, although quotative *like* may have originated as a "Valley Girl" innovation, the other vernacular functions of *like* have a much longer history – and thus stereotyping them all as originating with the Valley Girls is itself another example of conflating multiple functions of *like* and associating them with a single social evaluation.

Thus, although the vernacular functions of *like* belong to different variable contexts and have different covariants, general commentary on *like* by non-linguists indicates that, in overt evaluation, the different vernacular *likes* are not distinguished from each other, and share sociolinguistic evaluation. In other words, the very existence of the "*like* is just *like*" myth that D'Arcy (2007) attacks is evidence for the hypothesis suggested above on the basis of Campbell-Kibler (2011) and Labov (1993) – that it is the variant, not its relationship to other variants of the same variable, that attracts sociolinguistic evaluation, and if a discourse variant participates in multiple alternations in multiple different variable contexts, it can still be treated as a single sociolinguistic object. Thus to dismiss "*like* is just *like*" as a myth, although correct from the variable-centered perspective, arguably overlooks an important sociolinguistic fact.

There is another significant generalization that is missed by a variable-centered, rather than variant-centered, approach: that each vernacular function of *like* is increasing in apparent time at the apparent expense of its respective covariants. D'Arcy (2007; see also D'Arcy 2005, 2006, 2008; Tagliamonte & D'Arcy 2007) demonstrates this using data from Toronto¹⁰ for each of the functions (1f–i) – the quotative, the approximative, the discourse marker, and the discourse particle – but does not really comment on or analyze this seeming coincidence. Moreover, although D'Arcy classifies the comparative complementizer (2b) as one of the standard functions of *like* that are "largely unremarkable" and "have long been features

10. Apparent- and real-time change toward quotative *like* in speech communities and regions other than Toronto has been documented in a great many studies, including Macaulay (2001) in Glasgow, Dailey-O'Cain (2000) in southeastern Michigan, Ferrara & Bell (1995) in Texas, D'Arcy (2012) in New Zealand, and many others. Dailey-O'Cain (2000) also demonstrates apparent-time change toward *like* as a discourse particle and/or marker, as do Kastronic (2011) among Québec English speakers and Cheshire et al. (2005) in northeastern England. I am not aware of other variationist studies on approximator *like*.

of both written and spoken English”, unlike the vernacular functions she discusses in detail, López-Couso & Méndez-Naya (2012, 2015) and Brook (2014) find that this function of *like* is in fact also a relatively recent innovation both compared to most of the other “standard” functions of *like* and compared to its covariants such as *as if* and *that*, and that it is increasing in apparent time at the expense of those covariants. Thus at least four or five distinct linguistic variables are all undergoing a change toward the very same variant.¹¹

Variable-centered variationist analysis apparently has no explanation for this apparent coincidence. If the variable is the basic unit of linguistic variation and change, there is no particular reason to expect different variables’ direction of change to be correlated with each other – the fact that *like* is gaining an advantage over *say* and *go* in the variable context of quotatives has no reason to have any relationship with whether *like* is defeating *as if* for the role of comparative complementizer or *about* for the role of approximative adverb. D’Arcy (2006) even goes to some lengths to argue that the different changes affecting *like* may not even be the same *kind* of linguistic change – *like* is increasing its frequency as an approximative adverb through simple lexical replacement of *about*, but as a discourse particle as a result of an ongoing process of grammaticalization. Why then should five seemingly independent variable contexts – fulfilling different grammatical functions, with different sets of covariants, undergoing structurally different types of changes – all be changing toward the same variant at roughly the same time? In order to truly explain what’s going on with *like*, it is necessary to link up the various functions of *like* as all playing a role in the same larger change, rather than looking at each individual variable context in isolation.

3. Change beyond the envelope of variation

Aaron (2010) provides a model for looking beyond the envelope of variation to explain the change taking place within it. In particular, she discusses a change in the marking of future temporal reference in Spanish from the synthetic future tense to a periphrastic construction using forms of the verb *ir* ‘go’. Aaron explains

11. Regarding function (2a) of *like*, the conjunction of similarity covarying with *as*, to the best of my knowledge there are no studies demonstrating a parallel change in this variable. However, D’Arcy (2007) and Romaine & Lange (2001) note that this *like* was regarded as nonstandard in the mid-20th century, and a high-profile use of *like* in the advertising slogan *Winston tastes good like a cigarette should* attracted widespread prescriptivist condemnation. Romaine & Lange observe, however, that unlike most of the “vernacular” functions, this use of *like* has been in existence for centuries, and “colloquial speech possibly always favored *like*.”

the motivation for this change by examining the functions of one of the two competing variants *outside* the variable context in which the change is taking place. As she puts it (p.14f), following “the standard variationist practice of excluding tokens which do not form part of the variable context” (a quotation from Poplack & Turpin 1999: 160) would “discard a tremendous amount of explanatory power [because] the *elsewhere* is deeply connected to the *here*.” In particular, in Aaron’s analysis, the change of future temporal reference from synthetic to periphrastic marking is intimately connected to a rise in the use of synthetic future morphology to indicate epistemic modality. Essentially, as the synthetic future morpheme adopts this new non-future function, its old function – future temporal reference – begins to be taken over by an alternative variant; the change in future temporal marking is connected to the fact that the old synthetic future variant is in the process of changing its meaning. Epistemic modality is outside the variable context in which the synthetic and periphrastic future variants compete, but the reason for the change within the variable context, in Aaron’s analysis, can only be understood by looking at the function of the synthetic variant outside that variable context.¹²

In this analysis, the set of changes involving the synthetic future morpheme has the structure of what we would call a chain shift, if it were a phonetic rather than a morphosyntactic change.¹³ In a phonetic chain shift, we find one phoneme undergoing some phonetic change and another phoneme moving to occupy the region of phonetic space the previous phoneme is vacating. For example, in the Northern Cities Shift of the Inland North region of the United States, the TRAP vowel is raised, and the LOT vowel fronts toward the previous phonetic value of TRAP.¹⁴ The relationship between future temporal reference and epistemic modality in Spanish is structurally the same as that between TRAP and LOT: as the synthetic future morpheme changes from denoting future temporal reference to denoting epistemic modality, another morpheme, the periphrastic future in *ir*, moves in to take over the function that the synthetic future is abandoning.

This analysis is obviously not directly analogous to the question of *like*. In the Spanish future chain shift, the key variant (the synthetic future) is *decreasing* its

12. Lavandera (1978:179) makes the similar observation that a variant’s functions outside the envelope of variation can be relevant for explaining its social meaning within the envelope of variation: the fact that *wiped out* ‘exhausted’ is a “more colloquial form” than *exhausted* may be related to the fact that *wiped out* also means ‘demolished’, and its use to mean ‘exhausted’ is more metaphorical.

13. See Gordon (2011) for a review of the theory of phonetic chain shifting.

14. For the purposes of this discussion, I am agnostic as to whether this is a push chain (the movement in LOT causing the movement in TRAP) or a pull chain (vice versa). Aaron (2010:14) seems similarly agnostic as to the order of causation of the changes at issue in her study.

rate of use for one function (future temporal reference) while increasing its rate of use in another (epistemic modality). The case of *like*, in which multiple different variables are changing toward the *same* variant, is clearly not a chain shift. However, what Aaron (2010) provides us is a demonstration that the functions a variant performs outside a given variable context can be relevant for explaining a change taking place inside that variable context. This is our goal for *like* – relating the changes affecting *like* in multiple variable contexts to each other.

In the study of phonetic change, it is commonplace for changes affecting two or more distinct variables, such as the vowels in TRAP and LOT, to in fact be reflections of a single broader phenomenon with a single underlying cause; chain shifts are merely one of several such types of phenomena. Thus it is perhaps not that surprising that Aaron's analysis, based on looking outside the envelope of variation to explain a morphosyntactic change, prompts a simple analogy with a well-known type of phonetic change. It may therefore be desirable to look for a phonetic analogue to the family of changes involving *like*; the way an analogous family of phonetic changes is analyzed and explained could shed light on the best way to analyze and explain *like*.

The most obvious candidate for a phonetic analogue to a change in which multiple distinct variables change to the same variant is phonemic merger. However, while a merger is a change in the relationship between two phonemes (becoming one phoneme), it does not necessarily involve two phonemes both undergoing change themselves – mergers can and often do take place as a result of one phoneme remaining phonetically stable while another changes to converge with it. Thus merger is more a *result* of phonetic change than a *type* of phonetic change;¹⁵ and phonemic merger in general is unlikely to give insight into the motivation for changes taking place in multiple variables simultaneously given that merger itself need not involve more than one variable actually undergoing change.

Another possible phonetic analogue for a multiplicity of variables all undergoing the same change at the same time is the phenomenon of parallel shifting: multiple phonemes all changing in the same phonetic direction at the same time, such as when the front short vowels of TRAP, DRESS, and KIT all undergo simultaneous backing in Montréal English (Boberg 2005) or when the back upgliding diphthongs of GOOSE, GOAT, and MOUTH all undergo simultaneous fronting in Philadelphia and other communities of the Midland and Southern United States (Labov et al. 2006). However, Fruehwald (2013:154) argues that the motivation for the parallelism of these phonetic changes is that the phonemes that undergo

15. Herold (1990) discusses the variety of different types of phonetic and phonological change that can all lead to merger; cf. also Maguire et al. (2013) for a review.

them share a phonological feature, and it is that feature that is actually undergoing the change – for instance, TRAP, DRESS, and KIT all share the feature of being short front vowels, and the entity that's changing is the phonetic implementation of the feature [-back]. It seems hard to analogize this to the case of *like* – it seems unlikely that there is some abstract grammatical feature that the discourse *functions* of quotation, approximation, discourse marking, etc. all share in such a way that changing that feature in a parallel way for all of these discourse functions would converge on the single lexical item *like* even though they were instantiated by different lexical items in the initial condition.

Instead, I suggest that the best phonetic analogue for the set of changes toward *like* is the phonological “conspiracy” – defined by Hock (1991:159) as “modifications of the phonological pattern... implemented not by a single change, but by a number of phonologically quite different processes.” In other words, a conspiracy is a situation in which a set of disjoint phonetic and phonological changes take place that seem to have no direct phonetic causal connection to each other, united only by the fact that they all serve to bring about some phonologically-defined target state of the language. A well-known example discussed by Hock (1991:161) is the so-called Slavic Open Syllable Conspiracy: a number of distinct sound changes that are reconstructed between Proto-Balto-Slavic and Proto-Slavic, few of which seem directly causally connected to each other, all of which contributed in various ways to creating a Proto-Slavic language with no syllable codas. Crist (2001) discusses the Slavic Open Syllable Conspiracy in detail, as well as two other conspiracies: the elimination of Proto-Germanic *z from Proto-West Germanic, and the elimination of the Proto-Indo-European semivowel *j from syllable onsets in Greek. A few of the sound changes listed by Crist (2001:34ff) as contributing to the Greek conspiracy are shown in (4).

- (4) a. metathesis: *anj > ain
 b. fortition: *j > *dz > zd / #__
 c. fortition: *pj > pt
 d. deletion: *j > Ø / V__V
 e. affrication: *tj > *ts > s / #__

These changes, affecting different environments in which *j could appear, have little in common phonetically, *except* that they all lead to a state of affairs in which the semivowel /j/ is absent from syllable onsets. The type of phonetic pressures that would lead /j/ to be strengthened to /t/ when preceded by /p/ seem to be quite different from those that would lead /j/ to be deleted intervocalically, or to metathesize with a preceding /n/. Thus there seems to be no *a priori* reason to expect all of these phonetic pressures to operate in the same language; there is certainly no chain-shift pressure or parallel-shift generalization by which they can

be jointly explained. In a simple model of a notional form of pre-Greek in which these changes were ongoing, we might suppose there existed a variable in one variable context in which /j/ covaried with /t/,¹⁶ a distinct variable in a different context in which /j/ covaried with zero, and so on, and all of these variables happened to be involved in change in progress in the direction of the non-/j/ variant.

This model seems quite parallel to the situation that obtains with *like* in modern English: several distinct variables, which occur in different contexts and in which *like* alternates with different covariants, all happen to be undergoing change in such a way as to bring about a common target condition of the language. In this case, instead of all changing *away* from the single variant shared by all these variables, the language is changing *toward* it. So the apparent teleological end state toward which multiple variables appear to be conspiring, rather than eliminating a phoneme like /j/ from the language, in this case seems to be merely a high frequency of use of the word *like*.

Crist accounts for phonological conspiracies through the lens of Optimality Theory: the reason multiple distinct sound changes all conspire to eliminate /j/, for example, is that the real nature of the change occurring in the language was an increase in the strength of an OT constraint forbidding the segment /j/ from syllable onsets. As the constraint rose in the ranking, the different phonological environments in which /j/ existed compensated by eliminating /j/ in whatever way happened to be most compatible with whichever other highly-ranked constraints were relevant in that environment. It is unlikely that there is any Optimality Theory constraint specifically favoring the use of the word *like* whose rank in the constraint hierarchy is in the process of being promoted in English. However, the general point underlying the OT analysis is that linguistic change can be driven by a top-down change in what surface-level outputs are preferred, and such a change can reach across multiple variable contexts and affect them all as a single causal process; independently examining each of the variables undergoing change can miss the broader generalization. In the case of phonological conspiracies, the top-down change is a change in the phonological grammar. It appears likely that the variant *like* is being targeted by a top-down change, but not one affecting grammatical constraints; in the following section, I will suggest that the change promoting *like* may be situated in the realm of discursive practice. This is a different character of change than a

16. Obviously it is more likely that these changes took place through gradual phonetic movement rather than discrete alternation between the starting and ending states of the change. Indeed, the starting and ending states – e.g., /j/ and /t/ – might not have been both within the range of variation that existed at a single point in time. This oversimplified discrete model is similar enough to the probable gradient reality to get the point across here, though.

conspiracy *sensu stricto*; but the analogy with phonological conspiracy serves to remind us that what may look like multiple changes affecting multiple variables can be reflections of a single phenomenon, and thus that it can be valuable to look beyond the envelope of variation of a single variable.

The inference that a particular variant can be targeted for linguistic change, irrespective of the variable alternation it participates in, seems like a natural extension of Campbell-Kibler (2011)'s thesis that the locus of sociolinguistic evaluation is the variant, rather than the choice between competing variants within a particular envelope of variation. If the variant can be the entity that bears social meaning (as the persistence of the folk perception that “*like* is just *like*” suggests is the case for this variant), then we might expect that the variant could also be the entity targeted for linguistic or sociolinguistic change.

4. Like as a change in discursive practice

Coupland (2014) propounds a distinction between linguistic change proper and *sociolinguistic* change – the former simply including “changes over time in the distribution of formal features of speech”, while the latter encompasses changes in the relationship between linguistic behavior and social structure and indexicality. For example, if a vernacular variant increases its overall frequency of use from one point in time to another, that may be a linguistic change whereby the variant spreads from vernacular to standard registers and appears more frequently in the vernacular register than it used to, without a change in the roles these registers play in community speech practices as a whole; or it may be the result of a sociolinguistic change whereby vernacular speech styles come to be used in more situations than before (while the internal makeup of standard and vernacular speech styles remains the same); or both. As Coupland notes, traditional variationist methodology is ill-equipped for distinguishing between the two situations. Although the current discussion is firmly situated within the domain of linguistic change, this distinction between sociolinguistic change and linguistic change parallels the distinction that was the focus of the previous section, inasmuch as it distinguishes changes targeting linguistic variables directly from changes in the broader structural matrix (whether linguistic or social) in which those linguistic variables are embedded. Of the five dimensions of sociolinguistic change Coupland identifies, the most relevant to this discussion is that of change in *discursive practice*, the dimension most tightly linked to the “formal makeup and distribution of speech styles”.

D’Arcy (2012) has already profitably analyzed some of the prehistory of the quotative function of *like* through the lens of broader changes in discursive

practices. She investigates the diachronic development of quotation over a series of corpora of New Zealand English covering 125 years of apparent time, and finds that not only has the set of variants used to indicate quotation changed over that time (from nearly exclusively *say* in the oldest corpus to robust variation between *say*, *go*, *be like*, etc. in the most recent data), but the discourse functions with which quotation is associated have changed a great deal as well. In the earliest corpus, quotation is used virtually exclusively to directly report actual speech. Over the course of the 20th century, however, the range of pragmatic functions for which quotation is employed diversifies markedly, to include quotation of thoughts and emotional states, hypothetical speech, non-speech sounds, and others; and it is with this diversification in functions that there arises the diversity of forms which is so characteristic of modern variationist research on quotation. Thus the well-known changes in variant choice for quotation are in part explained by broader changes in the *discursive function* of quotation.¹⁷ Tagliamonte & D'Arcy (2007) report a similar pattern in Toronto English, whereby the percentage of quotations that represent internal monologue rises from 8% to almost 30% over the course of the 20th century in apparent time, and *be like* rises to fill that niche.

Can we explain the *like* conspiracy through a notion of discourse function shared across the many different roles of *like* in the multiple variable contexts it appears in? Let's begin with the function of *like* as a discourse particle. There appear to be two main schools of thought on its discourse function: that it serves as a marker of non-contrastive focus (e.g., Underhill 1988, Miller & Weinert 1995); and that it functions as a hedge, or indicator of inexact or non-literal speech (Sharifian & Malcolm 2003, James 1983, Schourup 1985: 141, Jucker & Smith 1998, Andersen 2001). Although Miller & Weinert portray these two hypotheses as mutually incompatible, Fuller (2003) convincingly argues that both hedging and focus are within the range of functions the discourse particle *like* can be used for, and that those functions overlap in some utterances; she suggests that the hedge, broadly construed, is likely to have been *like*'s original discourse-particle function. As will be seen below, it is the hedging function that bears the closest connection to the other uses of *like*, so it is on this function that I will focus here.

Andersen (2001:256) characterizes this role of *like* in particularly clear terms as marking "non-identical relationship between utterance and thought", with

17. As a very simple example, the rate of use of the variant *think* increases substantially from 1% of verbs of quotation to 6% between the first and second corpora. But clearly this change in variant distribution is an epiphenomenon of the change in discursive practice toward more frequent use of quotation to report thought, rather than direct competition between the verbs *say* and *think* as "ways of saying the same thing".

glosses such as “this is a term which may not be the most appropriate for me to use or which is unusual for me to utter” and “I have something on my mind, but I don’t know (exactly) how to put it.” Note the very hesitancy of these glosses; they do not license the listener to infer that the speaker is deliberately speaking non-literally, but only that the choice of words *may* be inexact. Thus it seems that discourse particle *like* performs, as at least one of its functions, the job of rendering the phrase it is attached to epistemically vague – it is detached slightly from commitment to a literal reading without specifically implying that a non-literal reading is to be preferred.¹⁸ We can refer to this function as “vague literality”. Nor has this fact about the discourse function of *like* escaped folk metalinguistic commentary: an article on *Jezebel* (Ryan 2011) characterizes *like* as serving to “make us [sound] a little less sure of ourselves”; and poet Taylor Mali (2002) includes *like* (along with such features as uptalk and other discourse markers such as *you know*) in a poem-rant about discourse techniques that express “uncertainty” and lack of “conviction”.

Much of the discourse-pragmatic literature on *like* lumps together under the label of “discourse marker” several of the vernacular functions that D’Arcy (2006, 2007) makes a point of distinguishing between on variationist and syntactic grounds, because they share aspects of this pragmatic force of epistemic vagueness or semi-detachment from literal interpretation. Jucker & Smith (1998:191), for example, say that the approximative is one example of how the various functions of *like* “can be subsumed under its core function of flagging linguistic expressions... as less than literal”; Andersen (2001:260) makes a similar point. This is true of all approximatives, of course: i.e., to indicate that a stated quantity is approximate is the same as to indicate that the quantity is not to be taken entirely literally. However, there is some evidence that *like* embodies vague literality in a more specific way than do traditional approximators such as *about* and *approximately*. Siegel (2002) contends that (5b) is infelicitous as a contradiction to (5a), while this is not the case for (6), although, again, D’Arcy (2006) disputes that judgment:

- (5) a. *He has like six sisters.*
 b. **No, he has exactly six.*

18. Although D’Arcy (2005, 2007) in general does not attempt to gloss the contemporary discourse-particle function of *like*, she does give a gloss for the clause-final discourse *like* (see Note 7 above), which she considers essential to the diachronic development of the present-day discourse *like*. She describes clause-final *like* as “signaling to the listener that the proposition only resembles or approximates reported events; it is not meant to be taken literally or verbatim” (2005:68), which is very similar to Andersen’s gloss of the contemporary discourse particle.

- (6) a. *He has about six sisters.*
 b. *No, he has exactly six.* (Siegel 2002)

If the judgments presented by Siegel are correct – i.e., if it is more felicitous to regard *exactly* as contradicting *about* than contradicting *like* – then the approximative function of *like* appears to be pragmatically compatible both with the quantity stated being exact and with it being approximate, and the listener is not licensed to conclude that approximation is being asserted.¹⁹ In other words, it is ambiguous with regard to whether approximation is even taking place.

Similarly, it is a well-known fact about quotative *like* that it can be freely used to introduce both direct quotations of actual speech and paraphrases of internal monologue and emotional state (e.g., Romaine & Lange 1991, Buchstaller 2013, and many others). So for example, a sentence like (7a) is entirely ambiguous with regard to whether or not the speaker actually spoke anything aloud, whereas (7b) explicitly describes speech and (7c) explicitly describes internal monologue. Thus quotative *like* differs from more traditional quotatives such as *say* and *think* in that it does *not* make any direct assertion as to whether the quotation being stated was something that was literally said.

- (7) a. *I was like, “Gross.”*
 b. *I said, “Gross.”*
 c. *I thought, “Gross.”*

Like the approximative, the quotative is sometimes described in the discourse-pragmatic literature as a special case of the discourse marker or particle (e.g. Jucker & Smith 1998: 189ff), and its vague literality attributed to that. This is not the case for the comparative complementizer *like*; although it shares a “semantic core” (Jucker & Smith 1998: 184) with the discourse marker, it is a syntactically and pragmatically distinct entity (cf. Blondeau & Nagy 2008). However, that shared semantic core still includes the notion of vague literality. Brook (2014) discusses level of literality specifically as a factor influencing the choice of comparative complementizer: for instance, she finds that *that* and the null complementizer are favored for subordinate clauses that are being asserted to actually seem to be the case, as in (8a), whereas *as if* and *as though* are favored for more metaphorical

19. This may merely be a consequence of the *like* in constructions such as (7a) being syntactically ambiguous between the approximative adverb and the pre-DP discourse particle, though D’Arcy (2006) suggests that the discourse particle “rarely” appears in this context. However, even if that structural ambiguity is what is causing the ambiguous literality in this case, ambiguous literality is still being produced and thus is perceivable as a property of approximative *like*.

subordinate clauses, as in (8b) (although variation does exist and all variants are used for both levels of metaphoricality).

- (8) a. literal: *It seems that the boys are sick today.*
 b. metaphorical: *I feel as though I could eat a boiled alligator.*

(Brook 2014)

López-Couso & Méndez-Naya (2015) echo this in describing *as if* and *as though*, together with other “minor declarative complementizers”, as specialized for “non-assertive matrices, i.e., those that do not claim the truth of the proposition”. But while López-Couso & Méndez-Naya group *like* in this category as well, Brook (2014) disagrees, arguing that “uniquely [*like*] is *not* sensitive to the literality of the subordinate clause” – it is more favorable to metaphorical clauses than *that* is, but more favorable to literal clauses than *as if* and *as though*. If Brook’s analysis is correct, this function of *like* mirrors the vagueness associated with quotative *like*: it is equally open to the possibility that the clause in question is to be interpreted metaphorically and the possibility that it is to be interpreted literally, just as quotative *like* is equally open to the possibility that real speech is being quoted and the possibility that the quotation is only metaphorical or figurative.²⁰

Thus the functions of *like* that have been found to be increasing in apparent time all share the pragmatic function of indicating vague or ambiguous literality, alongside whatever other grammatical, pragmatic, and semantic functions they possess – *like* is overtly *equally* compatible with both literal interpretations and approximate, metaphorical, or figurative interpretations of the constituents it is associated with. This is a property of the lexical item *like*, shared across the several distinct variable contexts and grammatical functions in which it appears; it’s not strictly a property of its use as a discourse marker or particle even in the broad sense of Jucker & Smith (1998), since it applies to the comparative complementizer as well.

The conspiracy of change toward the variant *like*, then, may be motivated by this shared discourse function. In other words, we can conjecture that there has been a change in discursive practice toward greater ambiguity in degree of literality in vernacular conversation, and that as a result of this *sociolinguistic* change (in Coupland’s sense), a variant that indexes vague literality gains ground at the

20. Quotative and comparative-complementizer *like* are parallel in another way as well: despite its ambiguous literality, *like* has become the primary variant for both metaphorical functions, while the more specifically metaphorical *as if* / *as though* and *think* have been driven to marginality. In contemporary Toronto, *as if* represents only 1.4% of comparative complementizers, with *as though* unattested in the corpus (Brook 2014), and *think* only 4% of quotatives (Tagliamonte & D’Arcy 2007). The literal variants *that*/zero and *say* remain in the 20% range.

expense of its various competitors as a set of *linguistic* changes.²¹ This hypothesis thus unites the changes in multiple variables under the umbrella of a single change affecting top-level discourse content, in the same way that Crist (2001)'s account of phonological conspiracy unites several phonetic changes under the umbrella of a single change in phonological output constraints. The case of *like* suggests that change can be motivated by an individual variant being targeted with its specific discursive function shared across multiple variable contexts, and thus best explained by considering the variant, rather than the variable, to be the fundamental unit in terms of which change is described.

The point of the discussion in this section, therefore, has been to illustrate the connection between variant-centered analysis and the theory of change in discursive practice as a mode of sociolinguistic change: since discourse function can be a property of a variant independent of its relationship to the variable context it instantiates, changes in discursive practice can motivate changes in variant choice in ways that would not be captured by an analysis that remained within the envelope of variation. Variant-centered analysis has thus led us to a concrete hypothesis about the motivation for change, which can be tested in future research.

This argument does not directly answer the question mentioned earlier in this paper of whether *like* has the same *social meaning* in all the variables it instantiates: although the pragmatic discourse function of a variant and its sociolinguistic indexicality are related properties, in that they both constitute social information which can be conveyed to the listener over and above the variant's semantic denotation, they are not the same thing. The persistence of the popular "*like is just like*" metalinguistic belief does support the hypothesis that social meaning of this sort is shared across variable contexts to some extent, as discussed above, but addressing this question more formally must be the subject of a future paper.²²

5. Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to synthesize several strands of research in language variation and change that have been addressing the same deeper issues,

21. This hypothesis proposes an answer to the question posed by Tagliamonte & D'Arcy (2007:214) of "why the extant form *think* was not recycled for the rising option of quoting inner monologue" – viz., that *be like* was selected for its function of flexibly quoting both inner monologue and speech, not just for inner monologue alone.

22. Preliminary results of a matched-guise study (Maddeaux & Dinkin to appear) do not show significant similarity among the judgments of social meanings for different functions of *like*. This suggests that social indexicality is not sufficient to explain the conspiracy of change toward *like* in multiple variable contexts.

in some cases without realizing it. Labov (1993) argued that sociolinguistic evaluation is associated specifically with surface features, and Campbell-Kibler (2011) extended this to show that it is a property of the surface *variant*, not of the variable structure in which it participates. At approximately the same time, Aaron (2010) showed that to explain changes within a variable context, it can be necessary to look at the role a variant plays outside that envelope of variation. In both cases, regarding the variant as an entity on its own terms, outside of its paradigmatic relationship to the variable it instantiates, yields insights about the structure of variation and change. Coupland (2014) argues for a more far-reaching understanding of sociolinguistic change, encompassing more than just changes within a variable context, and D'Arcy (2012) demonstrates that attention to change in discursive practice can explain changes taking place within a variable context as well. If we broaden Campbell-Kibler's finding slightly to hypothesize that it is not only social evaluation but also other aspects of sociolinguistic and discourse function that inhere to the variant rather than the variable, then a change in discursive practice can be attached to a single variant, which becomes targeted for change across multiple variable contexts. The precedent of phonological conspiracy in historical linguistics offers a parallel insight into how multiple changes in distinct variable contexts can be linked by a top-down change in an output target. The multi-functional *like* provides a concrete example of how a variant, rather than a variable, can be the sociolinguistically motivated entity driving a linguistic change; and thus what D'Arcy (2007) terms the "myth" that "*like* is just *like*" in fact represents a deeper sociolinguistic reality.

The traditional variable-centered approach of variationist linguistics hinges upon defining the envelope of variation and considering any variant from the perspective of the structure of its competition with other variants within a single variable contexts. This approach is absolutely necessary for discovering the constraints upon variation and the direction of linguistic change, and is the ideal approach for studying where within (or outside of) the grammar variation is actually produced. But the sociolinguistic work a variant does is, as Wolfram (1991) argued, not dependent on the grammatical structure of the variable processes that produce it; and although the speaker must index social meaning by choosing one variant over another, the listener who perceives that social meaning need not make use of that same contrast. Moreover, keeping the focus within a single variable context can cause variationist researchers to miss the forest for the trees when a single variant has multiple functions, as Aaron (2010) demonstrated. Thus variant-centered analysis, as exhibited in this paper, is a necessary complement to variable-centered analysis if a full understanding of the sociolinguistic structure of change is to be reached.

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