

## Like, it wasn't invented *ex nihilo*

A central tenet of variationist sociolinguistics is that heterogeneity is an inherent aspect of the linguistic system, and, like other aspects of the grammar, it is structured. In other words, variation is not random. Yet, there is a feature of present-day vernacular English that has eluded traditional linguistic description, appearing more *ad hoc* than systematic. This is discourse 'like', as in (1).

- (1) *Like*, Carrie's *like* a little *like* out-of-it but *like* she's the funniest, *like* she's a space-cadet. Anyways, so she's *like* taking shots, she's *like* talking away to me, and she's like, "What's wrong with you?" (3/T/f/18)

Part of the difficulty in assessing possible constraints on 'like' is the wide range of surface constructions in which this form appears. Thus, we find citations of its "syntactic detachability and positional mobility" (Romaine & Lange 1991:261) as well as claims that it can "occur grammatically anywhere in a sentence" (Siegel's 2002:64). There have been concerted efforts to uncover linguistic constraints on 'like' (Underhill 1988; Andersen 2001), but these analyses have largely relied on the places where it does occur, largely ignoring those where it does not. Moreover, with the exception of Dailey-O'Cain (2000), no investigation of 'like' has considered the speech community in its entirety; rather, the focus has been on a specific sub-section of the population: younger – generally adolescent – speakers (e.g. Miller & Weinert 1995; Andersen 2001; Siegel 2002; etc.). Until these groups are seen in relation to older segments of the population, patterns of use among those who are purported to use 'like' the most cannot be contextualized. Presumably, contemporary youth have not invented this form *ex nihilo*.

This paper reports the major findings of a large-scale research project investigating the syntactic development of 'like' in discourse. The framework is accountable, variationist, and sociolinguistic. 'Like' has never been investigated this way before. The analysis draws on naturally occurring speech data from nearly 100 speakers between the ages of 10 and 87, all of whom belong to the same speech community; more than 20,000 tokens of structurally delimited and accountably circumscribed variable contexts are considered.

The apparent time results are unequivocal, providing a remarkable display of grammatical development. 'Like' is shown to have generalized slowly across syntactic structure. Indeed, once it spreads to a given context, 'like' continues to appear in that position among successive generations and its frequency consistently rises. Such a result strongly suggests regular, step-wise development. Moreover, the youngest speakers in the community are not using 'like' in contexts in which older segments of the population do not; the difference is that they use it at higher rates. In other words, the monotonic association of frequency with age that is characteristic of change in progress (Labov 2001:460) is in evidence. Thus, the synchronic state of 'like' did not emerge all at once as a fully-fledged system. Instead, it has developed systematically, one projection at a time, across the span of almost a century.

### References

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