

Vernacular stability: Comparative evidence from two lifespan studies

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Real-time studies of lifespan linguistic change are typically based on a limited number of speakers, making it difficult to generalize the results. In this paper, we show that this challenge can be mitigated through: 1) comparative sociolinguistic analysis; 2) composite panel studies; and 3) study of a vigorous, well known change in progress — the English quotative system. By triangulating across these key dimensions we are able to draw strong conclusions about post-adolescent modification that would be impossible from a single study. By selecting a well-studied variable, we are able to situate our results against other real time studies of this feature (e.g. Buchstaller, 2015, D’Arcy, 2012).

The two datasets are: 1) the “Clara” corpus (Tagliamonte, 2012) and 2) the Language Change and Stabilization Corpus (LCS) (Wagner, 2008). Both track young North American women from adolescence (age 15-17) to early adulthood (age 24-27), in recordings made 2002-2014. The “Clara” sample comprises annual interviews between two sisters, providing an unusually large (>1600 tokens), temporally dense and relatively controlled source of data for a single speaker. The LCS sample is more stylistically variable, comprising seven speakers interviewed at two time points, alone or with a friend. The datasets are complementary (a case study and a cohort study, stylistically well-controlled versus stylistically diverse), yet almost identical with respect to the timeframe, topics, age, sex and social class of the speakers.

Quantitative analysis reveals that *be like* is the dominant quotative option in both corpora (mean 71%) and this frequency remains the same for virtually all of the speakers as they age. While frequency fluctuates modestly in response to stylistic factors, a critical finding is that the constraints on *be like* remain stable with no significant change over the years of recording. We also document a full saturation of the system by *be like* in the well-attested favorable contexts -- historical present tense, present temporal reference, and quotation of thoughts. This too remains constant over the decade in time covered by our data. In addition, logistic regression analyses find that *be like* is favored for past reference over residual tense-aspectual categories, and for first person subjects over others, consistent with many earlier studies (e.g. Tagliamonte & D’Arcy 2007).

In sum, this collaborative effort between scholars with comparable corpora furthers knowledge in several areas. First, it provides the most detailed examination to date of the quotative system over the lifespan. Second, it contributes to widening the scope of sociolinguistic studies of lifespan linguistic change, since the majority analyze features that – in contrast with *be like* – carry overt prestige (e.g. Sankoff & Blondeau 2007). Further, *be like* does not behave like superposed variants, subject to adult instability (Buchstaller 2015). Our results indicate that for this generation, *be like* is an entrenched part of their vernacular grammar acquired in childhood, incremented in adolescence and enduring across the adult lifespan. This finding provides support for Labov’s (2001) incrementation model of linguistic change and corroborates earlier research extending its application to levels of grammar beyond phonology (Tagliamonte & D’Arcy 2009).

References

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