

**“I’m like: ‘I know, I do the same thing’”:**

**Can minority speakers catch up with the Joneses?**

This study examines the role of minority status and linguistic isolation in the diffusion of mainstream linguistic change. We exemplify with two Canadian urban centres in which anglophones not only represent a dwindling minority (Quebec City: 1.5%; Montreal: 12%), but are also highly bilingual in French. These factors should make them resistant to external linguistic change (e.g. Britain in press; Milroy & Milroy 1985; Trudgill 1997). We investigate this hypothesis using as a diagnostic 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). Tagliamonte and D’Arcy (2004) have documented a fourfold increase in the use of this variant in Canadian English between 1995 and 2002 alone.

(1) When my mom goes, "Oh, that's cool!", I'm *like*, "Oh, don't say that." (QEC.QC.066.1032)

In this paper we examine the quotative system of Quebec English (Poplack et al. 2005) through analysis of the speech of 100 native anglophones aged 18-93. In addition to the well-documented factors of grammatical person, content of the quote and tense, we examine an array of linguistic, pragmatic and social factors (including reference time of the quotative, presence of intervening material and priming, as well as measures of the impact of French at the the community and individual levels). We compare rates and conditioning of variant choice, first across cities, age cohorts and bilingual abilities, then with a control group of monolingual Ontario anglophones, and finally, with what is known about the conditioning of this variant in other dialects (Blyth, Recktenwald & Wang 1990; Cukor-Avila 2002; Ferrara & Bell 1995; Romaine & Lange 1991; Singler 2001; Tagliamonte & D’Arcy 2004; Tagliamonte & Hudson 1999).

A first notable result is that overall rates of *be like* are even higher amongst young anglo-Quebecers than those reported by Singler (2001) and Tagliamonte & D’Arcy (2004) for other cities, testifying to the rapid and pervasive expansion of this variant. Rates of use appear to be correlated with intensity of contact and proficiency in French: *be like* is least likely where the status of English is most marginal and speakers are most bilingual, consistent with received wisdom. But rates are only one part of the picture. More telling, variable rule analysis shows that *all* speaker cohorts share the same major constraints reported for other varieties (*be like* is favoured in 1<sup>st</sup> person contexts, the present tense and when it introduces internal thoughts and non-lexical content), as well as a number of others not previously studied (e.g. it is disfavoured by NP and null subjects, past and compound tenses and intervening elements separating it from the constructed dialogue). Such highly structured and consistent patterns could not possibly have been transmitted internally, as older generations do not have enough *be like* in their speech (.2%) to admit variable conditioning. Despite their sociodemographic conditions, Quebec anglophones, though geographically marginalized, are linguistically integrated into the mainstream.

## REFERENCES

- Blyth, C., Recktenwald, S., & Wang, J. (1990) *I'm like, 'say what?!': A new quotative in American oral narrative. American Speech 65/3: 215-227.*
- Britain, D. (in press) Geolinguistics and Linguistic Diffusion. In U Ammon et al (eds.) *Sociolinguistics: International Handbook of the Science of Language and Society*, Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter.
- Chambers, J. (1986) Three kinds of standard in Canadian English. In W. C. Loughheed (ed.) *In Search of the Standard in Canadian English*. Kingston, ON: Strathy Language Unit Occasional Papers 1: 1-15.
- Cukor-Avila, P. (2002) *She say, she go, she be like: Verbs of quotation over time in African American Vernacular English. American Speech 77/1:3-31*
- Ferrara, K. & Bell, B. (1995) Sociolinguistic variation and discourse function of constructed dialogue introducers: The case of *be+like*. *American Speech 70/3: 265-290.*
- Milroy, J. & Milroy, L. (1985) Linguistic change, social network and speaker innovation. *Journal of Linguistics 21:339-384.*
- Romaine, S. & Lange, D. (1991) The use of *like* as a marker of reported speech and thought: A case of grammaticalization in progress. *American Speech 66/3: 227-279.*
- Poplack, S., Walker, J. & Malcolmson, R. (2005) An English "like no other"?: Language contact and change in Quebec. To appear in *Canadian Journal of Linguistics*.
- Singler, J.V. (2001) Why you can't do a VARBRUL study of quotatives and what such a study can show us. *University of Pennsylvania Working Papers in Linguistics, 7/3: 259-278.*
- Tagliamonte, S & Hudson, R. (1999) *Be like* et al. beyond America: The quotative system in British and Canadian youth. *Journal of Sociolinguistics 3/2: 147-172.*
- Tagliamonte, S & D'Arcy, A. (2004) *He's like, she's like: The quotative system in Canadian youth. Journal of Sociolinguistics 8/4:493-514.*
- Trudgill, P. (1997) Dialect typology: Isolation, social network and phonological structure. In G. Guy et al (eds.), *Towards a social science of language: Volume 1*. Amsterdam: Benjamins. 3-21.