Queer youth in the speech community
Enriching large scale studies of variation and change

Sali A. Tagliamonte (University of Toronto) & Dylan J. Uscher (University of Toronto)

Large scale studies have been the gold standard of variationist sociolinguistics (e.g. Labov 1966 *inter alia*); however recent research calls for the study of smaller communities within the larger whole (e.g. Eckert, 1988; 2000). This paper reports on a three-year project of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Queer (GLBQ) youth between 16-28 collected from the social networks of the second author. We undertake an analysis of the GLBQ corpus compared to a stratified sample from the same city. We target two highly gendered systems with rapidly changing forms: 1) quotatives and 2) intensifiers, as in (1-2).

(1) They’re like, you’ve never heard that?” And I’m like “no”.
(2) It was *so* odd. ... It was *really* odd.

Distributional analysis reveals heightened frequency of innovative *be like* in GLBQ speech: 79% vs. 62%. Incoming predicate intensifier *so* is lower, 6% vs. 9%; but there is higher use of *really* 16% vs 14%. Multivariate analysis of the constraints in each system (Ito & Tagliamonte, 2003; Tagliamonte, 2008; Tagliamonte & D’Arcy, 2004; 2007) are contrasted across GLBQ vs. mainstream group, adolescent vs. young adult, and sex. While internal constraints are generally consistent, sex and age effects are strikingly different. For quotatives, both male and female GLBQ youth have higher rates of *be like*, but only in adolescence. For *so* and *really*, GLBQ youth pattern similarly regardless of age. However intensifier *pretty* is favoured by males in adolescence only.

These findings demonstrate that GLBQ youth have fewer sex differences than the mainstream group, adding to the building evidence that social identity can be constructed in opposition to the patterns of the ambient population. Further, we suggest that the strong developmental effect such that GLBQ speakers abandon mainstream sociolinguistic patterns in their 20’s can be explained by alignment with and cohesion within the Queer community.

Selected references