

Vernacular 'like' in Raleigh: Black and White speakers

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Innovative syntactic functions of the English word *like* have been emerging for several centuries (D'Arcy 2017). Large-scale sociolinguistic studies of the innovative uses of *like* in the U.S. and Canada have focused on White speakers (Tagliamonte & D'Arcy 2007, Buchstaller & D'Arcy 2009; Schweinberger 2014). With the exception of quotative *be like* (Cukor-Avila 2002), the emergence and frequency of the innovative functions of *like* among Black speakers remains largely unexplored. It is well established that African American English speakers vary considerably in their uptake of regional phonetic shifts (Farrington et al. 2021). But the innovative functions of *like* are neither phonetic shifts nor regional; they are strikingly widespread and are embedded in the grammar. This paper compares White and Black speakers in Raleigh, North Carolina, asking whether five innovative uses of *like* (Table 1) emerged at similar points in apparent time for the two groups.

All instances of *like* were coded for 68 speakers (32 Black, 36 White), born between 1919 and 1991, from the conversational Raleigh Corpus. Of the 4131 total instances of *like*, 2222 were innovative uses as in Table 1. The number of tokens for each vernacular form for each speaker (N) was divided by the speaker's total number of words (T). Innovative functions of *like* occur rarely among Black or White speakers born before 1950 and become substantially more frequent after the 1980s, as shown for discourse marker *like* (Figure 1) and particle DP *like* (Figure 2). In the 1980s, White speakers vary widely in frequency and Black speakers reside in the lower half of White speakers' range. As a group, Black speakers in Raleigh have not adopted the innovative functions of *like* to the same degree as White speakers. The one exception is a Black female born in 1991 who reports being bookish as a child and being teased for 'talking White'.

White speakers' uptake of the innovative functions during the late 20th century is not surprising in the context of previous research in Raleigh showing concurrent, and highly variable, changes in White speakers' vowel systems as the result of dialect contact. Black speakers lived predominantly in East Raleigh and attended segregated schools through the 1960s, thus encountering conditions that promoted local dialect retention. Younger Black speakers' infrequent use of *like* even in the 1990s suggests that the innovative functions of *like*, while quite widespread globally, are still sensitive to social forces that isolate Black speakers. Active avoidance of the new functions of *like* may also be at work, given their ideological association with White girls (D'Arcy 2007).

Two exceptional White speakers offer further evidence that the innovative functions of *like* are sensitive to exposure. The apparent-time leader in all five functions, a White female born in 1962 (see Figures 1 and 2), spent several years outside the region earning a PhD and thereby gaining exposure to extra-regional speech. Conversely, the least innovative White male born after the early 1980s in the present sample was homeschooled and therefore had limited exposure to linguistic innovations.

Syntactic Function	Example from Raleigh corpus	Speaker birthyear, ethnicity, gender
Approximative Adverb	I was LIKE three when we moved there.	1948, White, female
Discourse Marker	At the time, LIKE, the neighborhood was a good mix, but...	1991, Black, female
Particle DP	I'll do like an internship every summer.	1985, White, male
Particle VP	Sorry if I'm LIKE talking too much	1991, White, female
Particle AP	It was LIKE so crowded.	1962, White, female

Table 1. Innovative functions of like and examples in the Raleigh corpus.

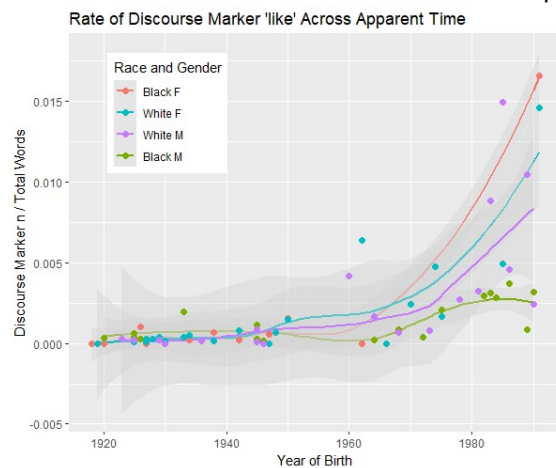


Figure 1. Discourse marker *like* in Raleigh.

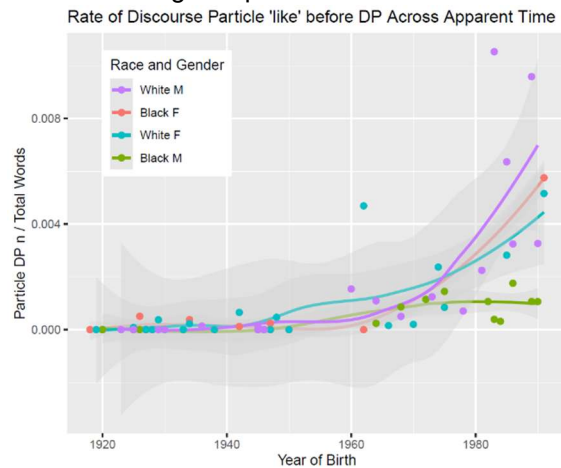


Figure 2. Particle DP *like* in Raleigh.

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