



ELSEVIER

Available online at [www.sciencedirect.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

SCIENCE @ DIRECT®

Journal of Pragmatics 37 (2005) 1896–1915

Journal of  
PRAGMATICS

[www.elsevier.com/locate/pragma](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/pragma)

## *So who? Like how? Just what?* Discourse markers in the conversations of Young Canadians<sup>☆</sup>

Sali Tagliamonte

*University of Toronto, Department of Linguistics, 130 St George Street, Toronto, Ont., Canada M5S 3H1*

Received 19 November 2003; received in revised form 10 March 2004; accepted 5 February 2005

---

### Abstract

In this paper I mine the rich resources of a large corpus of conversational data from young Canadians between 10 and 19 collected in 2002–2003 by participant observers from the same community. The spoken discourse of these speakers is replete with forms such as *like*, *just*, *so*, etc. as in 'I'm *just like so* happy'. What is the nature of these linguistic features? Where did they come from? How are they spreading and by whom? This pilot investigation reveals a concentration of these forms amongst the 15- to 16-year olds generally, and female speakers in particular. This result corroborates many other findings suggesting the tremendous influence of the peer group in the middle teenage years, the correlation of adolescence with dramatic linguistic differentiation and that females lead linguistic change. Further, despite the received wisdom, at least in the media, these features are not haphazard, random or indiscriminate. Instead, their patterns of use are quite circumscribed and linguistically defined. Indeed, their contrasting linguistic profiles viewed across different age cohorts (twens, teens, and young adults) suggest that they are undergoing different types of change. More generally, the findings highlight the extent of linguistic innovation among young people in contemporary urban speech communities.

© 2005 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Language change; Innovation; Teenagers; *Like*; Intensifiers

---

<sup>☆</sup> This paper was presented for the Approaches to Spoken Interaction Panel organized by Anna-Brita Stenström and Karin Aijmer at the International Pragmatics Association Meeting in Toronto Canada on July 15th 2003.

*E-mail address:* [sali.tagliamonte@utoronto.ca](mailto:sali.tagliamonte@utoronto.ca).

## 1. Introduction

Innovation in language affects all areas of society. A case in point is a number of dramatic ‘new’ discourse/pragmatic markers in the English language which have gained considerable high-profile attention in recent years, from the media, educationalists and linguists alike. The innovative features are highly conspicuous and typically associated with the younger generation. Some of these are forms such as *like*, *just* and *so*, etc. as in (1) through (5):<sup>1</sup>

1. I’m *just like so* there, you know?
2. *Like*, that’s what I *like* told you.
3. I *just* decided and *just* went.
4. She’s *so* not cool.
5. You *so* want it.

Explanations for such uses are many, including pause fillers, hedges, highlighting or focus devices, as well as indicators of vagueness or ‘loose language’ (e.g., Underhill, 1988; Miller and Weinert, 1995; Andersen, 1996, 1997a, 1997b, 1998, 2000). Whatever the function, young people are unanimously singled out as the innovators (Andersen, 1996, 1997b, 2000; Buchstaller, 2001; Erman, 2001; Siegel, 2002). However, to date, very little research has explored these particular phenomena in Canada, nor more importantly, explored the origin, pathways and impacts of such changes in the English language amongst the youngest generations of speakers where they are apparently innovating from. Thus, little is known about where they are developing in the speech community, or about their trajectory of linguistic change. Indeed, another important question is whether these linguistic items really represent linguistic change or whether they are simply items that distinguish teen-talk from the language of both younger and older speakers. Of course, this question can only be answered by tracking these changes into the future; however, the results I will report on here lay the foundation for a more longitudinal study.

Although there are many claims about the use of these features by ‘young people’ — to which *young* people does this refer? There is actually a dearth of conversational data from speakers in the late primary (10- to 12-year old) and middle school (13- to 14-year olds) age brackets. The linguistic features in question may be diffusing to these age cohorts, or maybe even have originated there, long before later adolescence in high school (the 15- to 17-year olds).

In this paper, I provide an empirical account of a number of salient discourse markers, *like* and *just*, as well as intensifiers (*really*, *very*, *so*), in the spoken interaction of these

---

<sup>1</sup> I do not discuss here the use of *like* as a quotative, e.g., *I’m like*, “Hello”, and *She’s like*, “Hi”, in this paper (e.g., Blyth et al., 1990; Buchstaller, 2001, in press; Dailey-O’Cain, 1996; Romaine and Lange, 1991; Tagliamonte and Hudson, 1999). This function of *like* in this corpus is analyzed in Tagliamonte and D’Arcy (2004).

younger sectors of the population. The data comes from a new research project on the language of tweens,<sup>2</sup> teens and 20 ‘somethings’ in Toronto, Canada. The method I employ is quantitative and within the traditional of sociolinguistic variation theory (e.g., Labov, 1972; Sankoff, 1988, 1980b). Although the study of discourse markers does not belong to the fields traditionally associated with this approach, I attempt to adapt the methodology in order to tap into these innovative features of language, which are undergoing change in Canadian English. One of the aims of this research is to track the new developments in English more generally.

## 2. The project

The project is part of an ongoing research program being conducted within the Research Opportunities Program (ROP) for second-year students at the University of Toronto. This research project focuses on ‘new’ features of Canadian English that are reported to be rapidly increasing in the speech of the younger generation, particularly in Western English-speaking countries. Admittedly, the size of this corpus is small in comparison to other teen language corpora, with only 26 speakers overall and 4–5 members of each age group.<sup>3</sup> In addition, it is *somewhat* focused on middle-class speakers. However, as the corpus is replicated over the years it will gradually build a more socially complex distribution. For example, the recently completed 2004 corpus has now added another 24 speakers. Thus, the combined corpus currently has a break down of 8–12 members per age group. It must also be said that the data is narrow geographically, but at the outset it is worthwhile to circumscribe the corpus in this way so as not to create too diffuse a sample. For now, I restrict the investigation to the urban context of Toronto and to speakers born and raised in the city. Thus, my interpretation of the data must be necessarily cautious and limited to the particular data involved.

The long-term goal of this project is to investigate the origin of these features in the Toronto speech community more generally (i.e., across age groups), and further to explore their history in the English language. The project aims to contribute new insights into the social and linguistic motivations of language change, particularly the influence of youth. Moreover, the fact that the ROP project is repeated in each academic year also means that the corpora will eventually provide a longitudinal view of change in progress, in essence a typical ‘trend’ study of linguistic change (e.g., Chambers, 1995).

In order to ‘tap into’ innovative changes in Canadian English in Toronto, members of the ROP research team<sup>4</sup> interview members of their own social and familial networks between the ages of 10 and 20 (e.g., their sisters, cousins, neighbours, friends, etc.). Thus, the

<sup>2</sup> The term ‘tweens’ refers to young people between the ages of 8 or 9 and 12. These speakers are typically referred to as pre-adolescents in the literature.

<sup>3</sup> COLT, for example, has 500,000 words.

<sup>4</sup> Special thanks to *Jonille Clemente, Marion Hau, Madeleine Macdonald, Muhammad Velji, and Jessica Wertman* — students of the University of Toronto Faculty of Arts and Science — for their work in ROP 299Y1 2002–2003 section L0101, Project 37. They interviewed the Toronto natives for this study, and extracted and coded the data.

Table 1

Sample criterion: born, raised, lived in Toronto all their lives

Age group	Male	Female	Speakers
10–12 (primary school)	4	2	6
13–14 (middle school)	3	2	5
15–16 (high school)	2	2	4
17–19 (1st year university)	4	2	6
20–22 (2nd year university)	1	4	5
Speakers	14	12	26

interviewers, aged 20–22, are not simply participant observers but actual members of the same community.<sup>5</sup> This makes this corpus one of the few data sets collected by in-group members of the current youth culture. The approach the interviewers take is simply to sit down and talk to the young people for about an hour. In each case a small, unobtrusive tape-recorder is employed, with a lavalier (tie-clip) microphone, which is clipped within 20 cm of the mouth. The ‘interviews’ focus on informal topics such as school activities, hobbies, sports, friends, and lots of commiseration about problems with their parents, boyfriends and girlfriends, etc.

### 3. Data

The details of the 2002 corpus are shown in Table 1. It comprises 26 speakers between the ages of 10–20 and amounts to about 200,000 machine-readable words. The age groupings correspond to the different school levels in Canada, primary school (grades 1–5); middle school (grades 6–8), and secondary school (grades 9–12). At the outset our plans were to study the discourse features that characterize the language of young people today. However, studies of other levels of linguistic analysis are also underway: in morpho-syntax, e.g. deontic modality, *have to/gotta/must*, possessive *have*, future *going to* and in phonology, e.g. variable (ing), (t,d), etc.

In this paper I introduce the corpus and target for examination three salient and frequent forms in the data — *like*, *just* and *so*. The following excerpts from the transcriptions illustrate each of the targeted features.

#### 3.1. *Like*

We have five teachers. *Like*, they- I don’t know- they- they’re not exactly- some of them are really nice. *Like* you really like them- *Like* one of my teachers, she’s amazing. *Like* I love what she teaches. And it’s a really- *like* the way that she presents *like* the class and the

<sup>5</sup> It must be kept in mind that the interviewers are not necessarily middle-class, but come from a broad range of educational and socio-economic and socio-cultural backgrounds. This is, in fact, a particular socio-cultural fact about Toronto.

subject is really great. And I'm really understanding *like* everything she's saying. And some of the other teachers are from another planet. *Like* can't think properly, *like*.

Amanda Levy, 12, Female<sup>6</sup>

### 3.2. *Just*

I'm there, I'm like, *just* playing around, doing nothing. [1] Same thing. [03] Same thing over and over again. And then, every once-in-a-while, me and my friend who plays the bass. Like, whenever somebody would come in, we'll like, *just* stop and play Another-One-Bites-the-Dust. [1] Oh yeah. [03] It's really funny. And then we're going-to try and learn, like *just* to piss him off, really. We *just* do, 'cause it's more fun.

Antonio Silvaggio, 16, Male

### 3.3. *Intensifiers*

She was actually like, *really* grateful and like. 'Cause like, I thought she would just be like, "Euh! These are *so* small! Oh, couldn't you find more?" Or like, something like gay. So then, I was happy that she was-like, "Aw, thank you so much like, oh, these pictures are *so* good!" Like, I got like, *really* good pictures'.

Clara Felipe, 16, Female

In this preliminary report, I explore the nature and character of these features. On the hypothesis that an increase in an item's text frequency is an important indication of ongoing linguistic change, I focus on broad distributional facts, and examine how age and sex interact with the linguistic patterns of occurrence.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. *Like*

The most frequent of the targeted features is the ubiquitous form *like*, as in the examples in (6). In its non-verb, non-conjunction use (i.e., non-standard) it occurs 9739 times in this corpus. For many speakers, this use of *like* is more frequent than the word *and*, and often occurs multiple times in a single sentence, as in (6b–e).

6.
  - a. Cause we made *like* a video.
  - b. Now *like* my plan is to go *like* with one friend to the movies and stuff like that.
  - c. *Like* I know when *like* wherever I start *like* going- buying my own clothes or whatever.

<sup>6</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

- d. I can read like, a whole day and like, “Hmm.”  
 e. She’d always wear like those tight like leather or like really tight cloth

Whether *like* can occur anywhere or is in some way rule-governed is much debated in the literature, undoubtedly due to the fact that it is difficult to define syntactically (Schiffrin, 1987). Romaine and Lange (1991) claim that *like* can occur before prepositions, adjectives and adverbs as well sentence initially. Andersen’s (2000) seminal work on *like* reveals that it can occur in a wide variety of contexts, from whole propositions to single terms. Further, it can be syntactically bound (clause internal) or unbound. Other accounts suggest that *like* can be placed anywhere in the sentence. For example the Webster’s New World Guide to Current American Usage says “some speakers use *like* without meaning or syntactical function almost anywhere in a sentence” [emphasis mine] (Randall, 1988: 206). In the popular press *like* is widely regarded as a ‘space filler’, which is apparently used “when the person speaking cannot come up with anything else to say” (Body Berg, The Exponent, U. Wisconsin-Platteville, 22 April 2002).

However, there are clear hints that *like* may have a certain systematicity in sentence structure. Meehan (1991: 40) suggests that “the positioning of *like* in the sentences is never random, although to some hearers it may seem so”. Underhill (1988: 243) claims that *like* is ‘rule governed’ nearly always introducing a constituent, occurring most often before a verb phrase, but also before a noun phrase or between the auxiliary and the rest of the verb phrase. Romaine and Lange report that sentence initial position represents the most frequent (50%) of all tokens and Andersen (2000) suggests that it is less likely to occur within phrases with high syntactic fixedness, and more likely to occur immediately before the lexical material of a phrase, as opposed to grammatical words. In much more recent research, Wolgemuth (2003) showed that in Canadian English (c. 1995) the most frequent positions for *like* were before a noun phrase (34%,  $N = 68$ ) and before a sentence (23%,  $N = 47$ ).<sup>7</sup>

Using these observations as a guide, let us now turn to the data to determine how often and where *like* is occurring in Toronto Youth English. Fig. 1 shows the frequency of *like* according to the following grammatical category.<sup>8</sup>

First of all, these data indicate that *like* may not occur just anywhere. What we find is that the vast majority of the 9739 tokens of *like* in the corpus occur in only two or three locations in spoken interaction — 30% of all the *like* tokens occur before a noun phrase [\_NP], as in (7). Note that the noun phrase may be full noun or indefinite pronoun<sup>9</sup>, and can be bare, determined, or quantified. Another 23% of the *like* tokens occur at the beginning of a sentence [\_S], as in (8).<sup>10</sup> With respect to this context, it is clear that *like* can occur after discourse markers (e.g., *so*) and/or temporal adverbs (e.g., *then*). The

<sup>7</sup> Wolgemuth (2003) also found that *like* never occurred within well-established compounds, or within proverbial expressions. A similar observation was made by a reviewer of this paper.

<sup>8</sup> The categories in Figure 1 refer to the post-*like* grammatical context. For example, \_s refers to a following sentence, \_INT refers to a following intensifier and \_DM refers to a following discourse marker. Further, \_SUB refers to a following subject, \_PREP refers to a following preposition, and \_ADV, a following adverb.

<sup>9</sup> Recent findings reveal that *like* does not occur before a personal pronoun (Wolgemuth, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> The notion of *sentence* is problematic in conversational studies, since it is difficult to categorize spoken language, which is filled with one word or one phrase utterances, cut-off sentences and the like. Our approach was simply to categorize the following context as a sentence whenever it contained a main clause determiner phrase, whether this was a fragment or not.

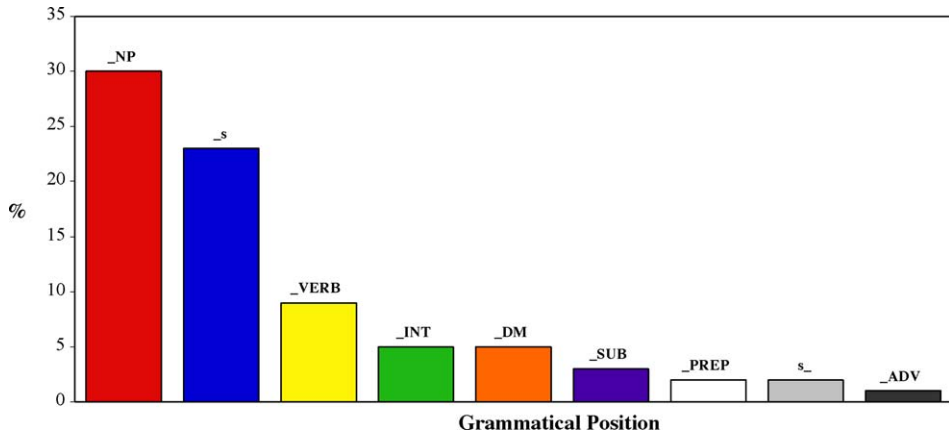


Fig. 1. Frequency of *like* tokens by following grammatical category.

next most frequent context for *like* (9%) is before a verb, as in (9). Interestingly, a cursory examination of the verbs reveals that they are virtually all encoded with preterit morphology.

7.
  - a. You're trying to get attention in like [the wrong way]. (p)
  - b. So then when he had the speech, he had like[everything] on like [paper]. (a)
  - c. You can get sued for like [a million dollars]. (g)
  - d. So you get like [a worm] and then you catch like [a little tiny stupid little dumb fish]... (t)
  - e. Oh yeah, yeah. You get like [three passes]. (p)
  - f. I found like [a hundred pictures] for her already, 'cause she needs like [six hundred].
  
8.
  - a. So then like he posted up signs around the school, (a)
  - b. Like it's where you photocopy things and open floppies and print things for them. (s)
  - c. For messing up the computer, apparently like the whole system was ruined. (q)
  - d. Like it makes me feel good, it makes me feel better. (t)
  
9.
  - a. So then he like [whipped] it. (a)
  - b. Halfway up the hallway I just like [dropped] it and like [walked] over to a place and bought water. (k)
  - c. It had a fish right in its mouth and we like stepped right on over it. (e)
  - d. I think he's just like changed. (q)

This tabulation shows that *like* is not evenly distributed across sentence structure. Indeed, it corroborates earlier research in demonstrating the propensity of *like* in pre-sentential and pre-noun phrase position. Interesting is also the fact that the frequency of *like* in pre-noun

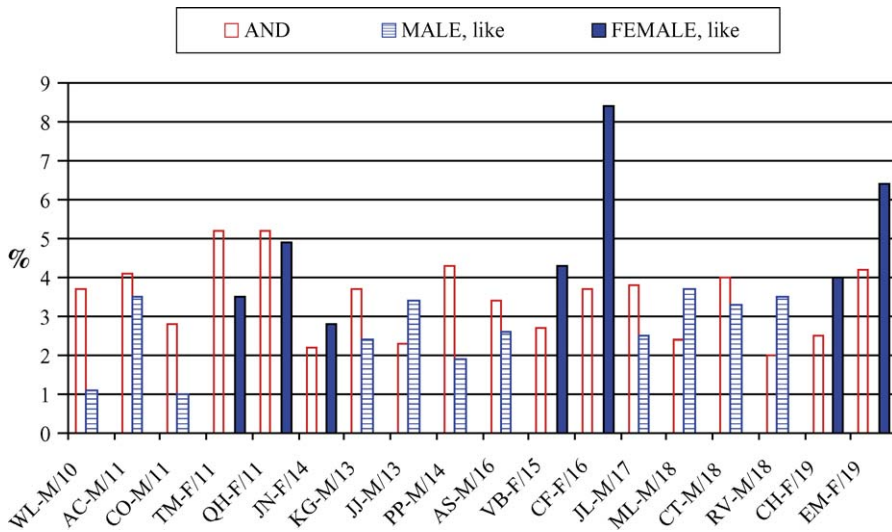


Fig. 2. Distribution of *like* and *and* tokens by individual arranged from youngest to oldest. The distribution of *like* in each of eighteen individual speakers in our corpus processed at the time of writing. The individuals are arranged in age from youngest to oldest and separated by male (the striped columns) and female (the dark columns).

phrase and pre-sentential contexts is remarkably similar to Wolgemuth’s (2003) research on data from 1995. The consistent, highly frequent result for pre-noun phrase position, in particular suggests that it may be developing some kind of function in the grammar.

As mentioned earlier, *like* is typically associated with young people. However, the question is: which young people? Because this corpus covers tweens, teens and university students we can track the frequency of this feature across age cohorts of young speakers.

Fig. 2 shows the distribution of *like* in each of the individual speakers in our corpus. The individuals are arranged in age from youngest to oldest and separated by male (the striped columns) and female (the dark columns). In addition, the figure shows, for comparison, the proportion represented by the word *and* (the outlined column).

Fig. 2 also shows that females tend to use more *like* in every age group. Moreover note that for many of these speakers ( $N = 8$ ) the frequency of *like* is greater than *and*.

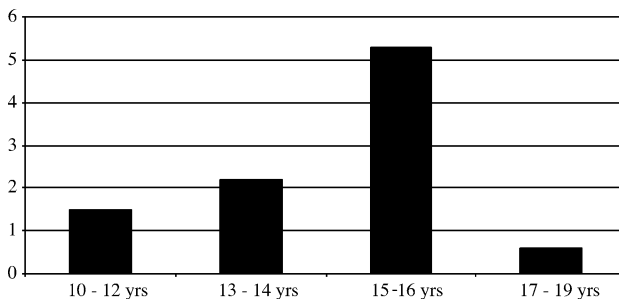


Fig. 3. Frequency of *like* across age groups.



Fig. 3 shows the distribution of *like* across age groups. In this tabulation, the proportion of *like* has been calculated out of the total number of words provided by each age group.

Fig. 3 reveals a very dramatic pattern. The 15- to 16-year olds are using more tokens of *like* than any other age group. At the two ends of the scale — the 10- to 12-year olds and the 17- to 19-year olds, however, the use of *like* is much lower.<sup>11</sup> The frequency of *like* across age groups suggests that Toronto youth acquire the use of *like* in primary school, develop its use in middle school, but it is not until secondary school that it is used in abundance. Note the drop in frequency at the university level, where the use of *like* declines substantially. This trajectory resembles the classic pattern for *age-grading* — a change correlated with “a particular time of life” (Chambers, 1995: 164), rather than a change that is percolating successively through the generations, as would be expected with an incoming grammatical change.

#### 4.2. *Just*

While an inordinate amount of media attention as well as academic research has been devoted to *like*, the use of *just* is barely mentioned. However, this form has also been increasing in recent years and has apparently garnered the same type of stigma as *like*. Speakers are admonished to reduce their use of *just* and the form itself is referred to as “the whiney excuse word” (Bickel, 2002).

Many of the current uses appear unremarkable in isolation, as in (10a–c), where their function has its standard adverbial meaning of *simply* or *only*. The uses in (10d and e), however, show that while the same reading is present, the context of use, particularly in (10e) is somewhat strange. This suggests that *just* may be expanding beyond its standard function.

10. a. That’s *just* textbook work.  
 b. Well, I dunno, they’re *just* kissing.  
 c. Some of them are cute, some of them are *just* weird.  
 d. So I can *just* go on the Internet, look up some cheats and then *just* play.  
 e. I *just* stayed home ‘cause someone was taking care of me. And then I was *just* watching T-V. And I *just* took a nap.

Indeed, when we examine our corpus, we find that *just* is one of the most frequent forms used among the young people. In this corpus it occurs **1738** times.<sup>12</sup> Once again, we can begin with the question — does *just* occur just anywhere? Fig. 4 shows a tabulation of the frequency of *just* tokens according to the following grammatical category.

<sup>11</sup> As part of the preliminary assessment of these data, we calculated the total number of words and the total vocabulary for each speaker. Individual word counts were tabulated using CONCORDE 2.0 (Rand and Patera, 1992) which easily calculates the frequency of each word spoken by each speaker in the data. What counts as a single word as opposed to a compound is another problematic issue. We follow a strict transcription protocol so that corpus-internal consistency is maintained. This ensures that word counts are comparable across speakers.

<sup>12</sup> This count represents all orthographic instances of *just*.

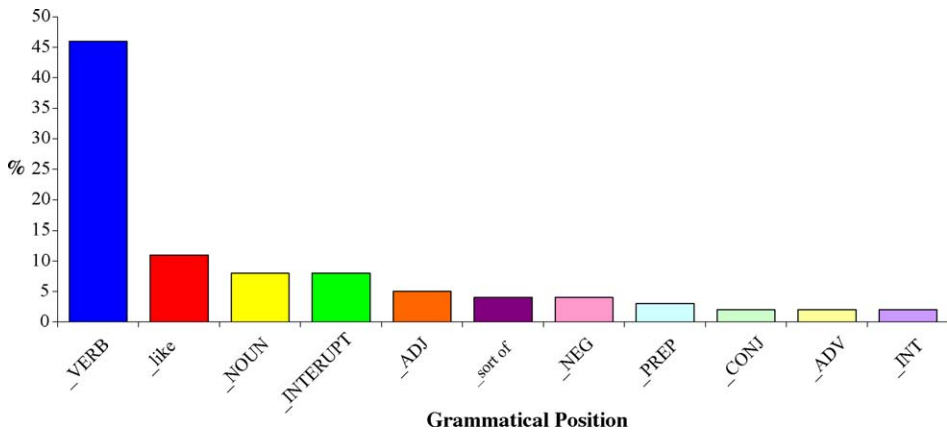


Fig. 4. Frequency of *just* tokens by following grammatical category.

As we observed with *like*, *just* does not occur anywhere either. Indeed, it is even more highly circumscribed than *like*. The majority of forms — a full 46% ( $N = 760$ ) — occur before a verb, as in (11). Note too that the verb may be simple present, present progressive or simple past.

11. a. I ***just*** know that an older sister would be awful. (f)  
 b. Oh, wouldn't it be so nasty if we were ***just*** talking to him and then they ***just*** fell off? (a)  
 c. ***Just*** practicing for like the school. We ***just*** put them on, we didn't care. (e)  
 d. Two minutes into it I ***just*** forgot and ***just*** started talking. (k)

As far as I am aware, this propensity of *just* to occur before a verb has not been reported before. Here too, the sheer frequency of the collocation in the data is suggestive of ongoing linguistic change.

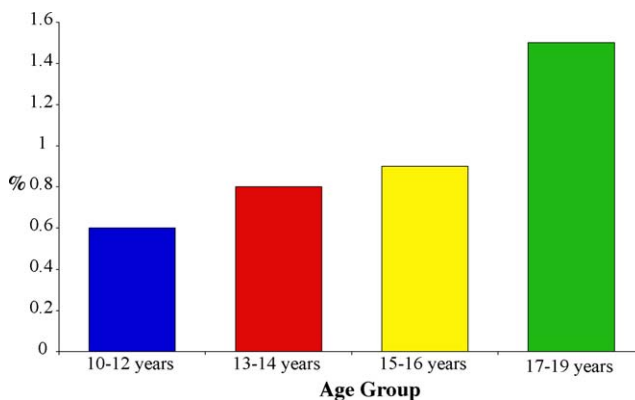


Fig. 5. Frequency of *just* across age groups.

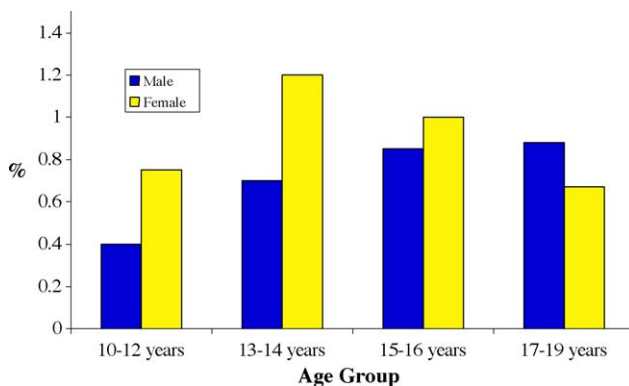


Fig. 6. Distribution of *just* across sex and age groups.

However, does this feature show the same trajectory of change across the generations as we saw for *like*? Fig. 5 shows the distribution of *just* across age groups. In this tabulation, as with *like* in Fig. 3, the proportion of *just* has been calculated out of the total number of words provided by each age group.

Here, unlike the distribution for *like* we see a regular progression such that the use of *just* increases incrementally from youngest to oldest speakers. This type of distributional pattern is characteristic of ‘real’ change in progress — one that is percolating successively through the generations in the community (e.g., Labov, 1972; Chambers, 1995).

If the rise in *just* is an indication of ongoing change we might expect to find, consistent with earlier research, that females lead across the speech community. Fig. 6 tests this possibility by comparing the male and female speakers. In this analysis, the proportion of *just* has been calculated out of the total number of words for each of male and female speakers in each age group.

Fig. 6 reveals that female speakers are indeed way ahead of the males — clearly leading the change in most age groups. This correlation is also a hallmark of change in progress. However, notice the reversal amongst the university students. Here, males use more *just* than females. This suggests that the use and trajectory of *just* across age groups does not adhere entirely to all the characteristics of ongoing change.

In sum, the feature *just* provokes a number of research questions. Firstly, what kind of change is this? Further, what is *just* doing in the grammar? In other words, what are the young people doing with *just*? These are the types of questions I will be turning to in the next phase of this research. In particular, we will need to calculate which of the multiple functions of *just* (Erman, 1997) are represented in each age group and whether or not these are changing in apparent time. Further, we will have to examine the pre-VP position in more detail by examining how the verbs used with *just* compare with all the other verbs in the data.

Table 2  
Frequency of intensifiers by lexical item ( $N \geq 10$ )

Intensifier	Percent	<i>N</i>
<i>really</i>	11	466
<i>so</i>	7	306
<i>pretty</i>	5	222
<i>very</i>	2	94
<i>completely</i>	.3	15
<i>totally</i>	.25	11
All other items	6.5	282
Overall intensification	32.5	1396
No intensification	68	2900
Total		4296

#### 4.3. Intensifiers

The final feature I consider is the use of intensifiers, as in (12).<sup>13</sup>

12. a. It was, *really, really, really* bad.  
 b. She's *so completely* overprotective.  
 c. It was *very* pretty ... I loved her hair, it was amazing ... And it was *really* pretty.  
 d. Yeah, that was *extremely* nice .. that's *really* nice.  
 e. That must be *pretty* freaky in the winter time.

The corpus presents a particularly good opportunity to study this feature as young people are notorious for an overabundance of intensification in general (Stenström, 2000). Moreover, intensifiers are thought to be increasing in frequency in recent times (e.g., Ito and Tagliamonte, 2003). Further, intensifiers are associated with rapid turnover and lexical renewal and thus are thought to present an excellent means to track language change as well as to tap into current trends in contemporary English (Ito and Tagliamonte, 2003; Stenström, 2000).

I focus here on the types of intensifiers that occur with adjectives (Stenström, 1999: 70) and follow earlier methodological practice in extracting them from the data (see Ito and Tagliamonte, 2003). Thus, in contrast to the preceding analyses on *like* and *just*, here I take into account not simply the forms under investigation, but also the contexts in which they could have occurred but did not (Labov, 1972; Guy, 1993). One of the advantages of this method is that it enables me to compare the findings with other studies of the same feature.

Table 2 shows the overall distribution of adjectival intensification in the data. Of the 4296 adjectives which could be 'boosted' with an intensifying adverb, 1396 were, making the overall propensity of intensification 32.5%. This is quite high — indeed it is

<sup>13</sup> Only forms functioning as intensifiers are included in this analysis. Other uses of the same forms, e.g., *really* as an adverb or *pretty* as an adjective, have been excluded.

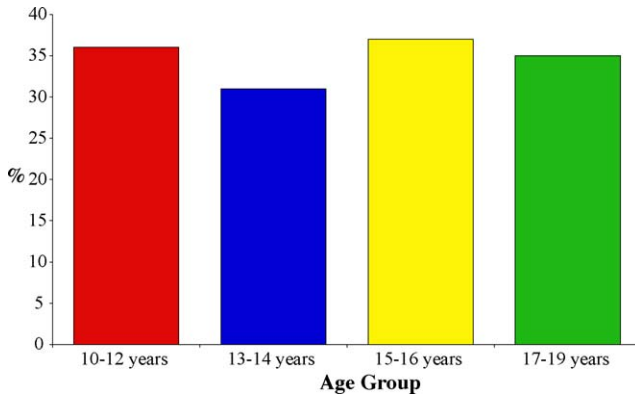


Fig. 7. Distribution of intensified adjectives across age groups.

substantially higher than previous reports. For example, in contemporary British English, there is 24% intensification overall (Ito and Tagliamonte, 2003) and in the television series *Friends* Tagliamonte and Roberts (2004) find 20% intensification. In these data, the rate of intensification is 10% higher.

Given the well-known tendency for intensifiers to cycle and recycle over time, an important question to ask is whether or not this overall rate of intensification changes according to speaker age. Fig. 7 shows the distribution of the most frequent intensifiers — *really*, *so*, *pretty*, *very* — by age.

Fig. 7 reveals that the high average rate of over 30% intensification by age is remarkably consistent across all age groups. Thus, there is no evidence for increasing intensification according to speaker age, at least not amongst these younger sectors of the population.

Table 2 also provided a breakdown of the intensifiers that occur more than 10 times in the corpus. Although there are a variety of different intensifiers, most of these occur very infrequently. The vast majority are represented by a very small group — *really*, *very*, *pretty* and *so*. It is widely known that intensifiers change constantly and rapidly in form and

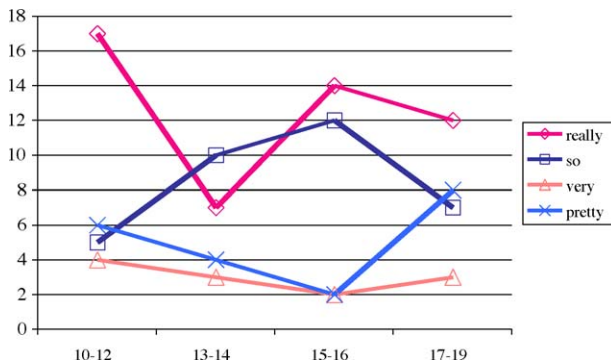


Fig. 8. Distribution of *really*, *very*, *pretty* and *so* across age groups.

frequency from one generation to the next. This means that the young people may not be using the same set intensifiers in each age bracket. Thus, the next question that arises is: which intensifiers are used by the different age groups?

Fig. 8 separates out three of the most frequent intensifiers in the data — *very*, *really* and *so* — and displays which of these intensifiers are being used in each age groups and how often.

Fig. 8 shows that *very* is marginal across the board. However, this is not surprising because *very* is the older, more formal, form (see Ito and Tagliamonte, 2003). *Really*, the intensifier that is the most frequent amongst British youth (Stenström, 1999; Ito and Tagliamonte, 2003) and thought to be the most frequent and ubiquitous intensifier in North America more generally (Labov, 1985) — is indeed the most frequent intensifier in most age groups. These results for the distribution of *really* and *very* mirror these contemporary reports and reveal that the young speakers in our corpus are picking up the typical norms of their community. However, notice that *so* is a close contender. The examples in (13) show some typical uses:

13. a. I feel so out of style! (b)  
 b. Oh, I'm so jealous! (w)  
 c. Lord-Of-The-Rings was so boring; it was talk talk talk talk talk. (d)

Fig. 8 shows that the use of *so* increases from the 10- to 12-year olds to the 13- to 14-year olds, to the 15- to 16-year olds where it is most frequent. However, notice that use of *so* recedes amongst the university students. Taken along with the results for *like* and *just*, it appears that there is a blossoming of the 'new' intensifier *so* at the secondary school level; while the two ends of the pole are more conservative.

As I considered earlier, if this is truly a linguistic change in progress, we might expect to find that females are leading the change. Indeed, earlier research (Stenström, 1999: 77; Ito and Tagliamonte, 2003) showed a tendency for females to use more intensification in general, and recent research (Tagliamonte and Roberts, 2004) has demonstrated a female

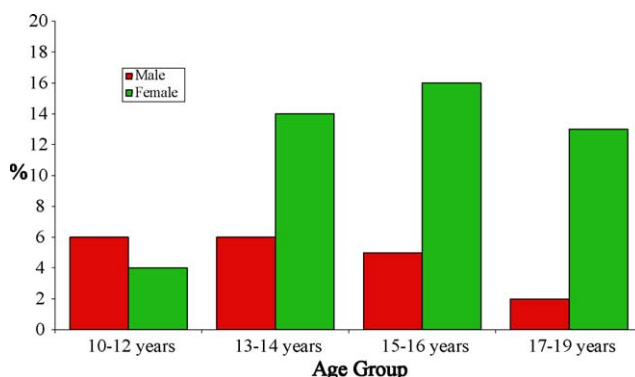


Fig. 9. Distribution of intensification with *so* by sex across age groups.

preference for *so* in particular. Fig. 9 tests whether there is a difference in the behaviour of male and female speakers for this intensifier in this corpus.

Fig. 9 shows that females are overwhelmingly leading in the use of *so* from middle school (the 13- to 14-year olds) onwards.

Thus, for this feature there is evidence of age grading as well as ongoing linguistic change. On one hand, *so* is the favoured intensifier amongst the secondary school cohort and recedes as the speakers get older, suggesting age-grading. On the other hand, there is dramatic sex differentiation across the board. Females clearly lead in every age group beyond the tweens, the 10- to 12-year olds (the youngest cohort in our sample). This is a pattern typical of incoming linguistic change.

## 5. Discussion

I now consider the general trends that have become apparent with regard to the use of *like*, *just* and intensifier *so* in these data.

First of all, the use of *like* and *just* in the English of Toronto youth between 10 and 20 is exceptionally frequent. *Like* can occur up to once every 20 words; while *just* occurs up to once every 50 or 60 words. As far as intensification is concerned, the rate is higher than in previous studies. Taken together these facts highlight the innovative nature of these features in this variety of English. There is an acceleration of frequency for all of them.

However, when the results for age distributions for the three different features *like*, *just* and intensifier *so* are viewed in tandem, each one provides a different perspective on linguistic change. Taken together, they provide a composite picture of the overall nature of ongoing linguistic innovation in these data.

### 5.1. *Like*

Of the three features — *like*, *just* and intensifier *so* — only *like* shows a clear and unique concentration amongst the 15- to 16-year olds. Indeed, the shifting frequencies of its use by different age groups shows a trend that looks like classic age grading. The youngest speakers participate in the use of these forms, but they are the most conservative users. There is a trend towards greater use amongst the next age cohort, the tweens (the 13- to 14-year olds), and again with the 15- to 16-year olds. However, the oldest speakers (the 1st year university students) show a trend toward more conservatism, patterning along with the youngest age group.<sup>14</sup> This marks the type of *retrenchment* of conservative norms identified by Chambers (1995: 170) and pinpoints the direction of linguistic change towards standard (mainstream) norms as adolescents enter young adulthood. This trajectory of change for *like* suggests age grading. Of course the next question is: what is it about the 15- to 16-year olds that lends them to an overabundant use of *like*? Further, what functional and/or pragmatic features are observable that may be connected with

<sup>14</sup> The conservatism of the youngest age group may be interpreted as reflecting the degree of influence of parents during this phase of development. Indeed Chambers (1995: 158) argues that the first formative period in language development is characterized, in part, by the influence of family.

Table 3  
Summary of findings

Lx feature	Frequent	15- to 16-year olds	Females lead	Decline at age 20	Change in progress	Circumscribed
<i>like</i>	√	√	√	√	x	√
<i>just</i>	√	√	√	x	√	√
<i>so</i>	√	√	√	√	√	n/a

adolescence in general, and their linguistic behaviour in particular. It is to these issues that we can now turn, framed by the overall distributional patterns in the material.

### 5.2. *Just*

The use of *just* contrasts with the trajectory of development visible for *like*. Use of *just*, overall, appears to be increasing incrementally from one age group to the next. Furthermore, sex differentiation is visible from the youngest age group right through. Here then, the trajectory of change bears the hallmarks of ongoing linguistic change.

### 5.3. *Intensifiers*

As far as the use of intensifiers is concerned the corpus reveals a high frequency of intensification. Like *like*, the incoming feature, *so* is concentrated amongst the 15- to 16-year olds; however, with *so* there is no evidence for a reversal back towards the more traditional intensifiers amongst the oldest age groups. Instead, *so* seems to be taking over as the new intensifier across all age groups. However, we do see that amongst the first-year university students there is a reversal of sex differences. This suggests a reallocation of the social value of intensification with *so* amongst young adults. Where once *so* was associated with females, it now appears to be used by males as well, if not more so. I suggest therefore that as *so* diffuses across the population it may be expanding to include both male and female speakers equally.

## 6. Summary

Table 3 summarizes the findings for *like*, *just* and *so*.

*Like*, *just* and *so* are all salient features of Toronto Youth English, concentrated amongst 15- to 16-year olds generally and female speakers in particular. However, only *like* declines by age 20, while *just* and *so* prevail, perhaps heralding their status as new features of English. These overall findings suggest that both *just* and *so* represent *bona fide* changes in progress. Further research is needed in order to clarify precisely how, or if, these features are changing in this speech community.

Taken together, the findings support the tremendous influence of the peer-group in the middle teenage years — high school. The correlation of adolescents with dramatic linguistic differentiation and innovation is not new. This relationship has been a prominent



finding in the sociolinguistic literature (Chambers, 1995), particularly in the seminal work of Eckert (e.g., 1988, 1997, 2000). It is confirmed here in graphic detail for the Toronto youth for features within the domain of discourse/pragmatics.<sup>15</sup>

However, the contrasting social profiles of *like*, *so* and *just* as viewed across the different age groups (tween, teen, young adult) suggest that these features are undergoing different types of change. Thus, one of the advantages of this cross-sectional sample of young people is that it provides a much more detailed picture of different linguistic changes *within* this critical age group in a speech community. Eckert (1988: 206) argued that adolescence, “. . . provides greater motivation than at any other time in life to adapt linguistic patterns to community structure. This age group, therefore, provides an important key to the study of the mechanisms of such adaptation.” I suggest that the adaptation process is developmental, beginning in pre-adolescence and extending through the teenage years (high school). Further, the trajectory of change across these ages leads to an enhanced picture of what the socio-symbolic value of linguistic features may have as they develop.

On a more methodological note, these results highlight the value of pursuing a quantitative analysis of proportion and distribution when it comes to innovating features, even when they may have a number of different functions in the grammar. It is only when the high frequencies of individual forms are calculated from the total number of words spoken by individuals or groups (or some other normalizing measure) that number of forms can be compared accountably (whether across different sub-groups of the speech community or across studies). In this way stability or change can be identified in usage patterns.

It remains to determine whether the patterns visible from the simple frequency counts of overt forms across linguistic contexts of use will hold when every instance of each of the relevant grammatical categories in the data is taken into account. Such an analysis would have required counting every single instance of nouns, verbs and other categories in the data and was beyond the scope of this preliminary paper. However, see D’Arcy (2005). It is only when the high frequencies of these individual forms are calculated from the total number of functional categories of the same type, that these raw frequencies can be compared accountably as well. Thus, for example, the high frequency of *like* in pre-noun phrase position may simply be the result of a higher frequency of noun phrases in the data. The high frequency of *just* in pre-verbal position simply the result of a higher frequency of verbs. I will turn to this type of analysis in future research (e.g., Tagliamonte, 2004).

Finally, in all of these analyses, our research has demonstrated that the females are often well ahead of the males. This too is a consistent finding throughout the literature on linguistic change (e.g., Labov, 1972; Eckert, 1988; Chambers, 1995). While these findings reveal that the correlation of linguistic change with females does operate in these very young sectors of the population, it does not do so consistently. Male/female differences do not pattern similarly in all age groups. Amongst the youngest cohort (the 10- to 12-year olds) sex differences are either non-existent or marginal. It is only amongst the older teen cohorts that the features become strongly correlated with females. These trends show that sex differences — at least with respect to these discourse/pragmatic features — are

<sup>15</sup> Eckert’s (e.g., 1988) studies focussed on sound change only.

developmental, and are learned. They do not appear to be endemic to the features themselves, but are created in the speech community, within the peer group.

Finally, and perhaps most surprisingly given the received wisdom, at least in the media, the use of *like* and *just* are not haphazard, random, or indiscriminate. Indeed, even *like* — so notorious for its ability to turn up just anywhere — may well be quite circumscribed. So far, these preliminary results show that *like* occurs before nouns, before full sentences, and before verbs, but rarely elsewhere, while *just* occurs overwhelmingly before verbs. Such focussing, or co-occurrence pattern is precisely the type of trend that would be predicted if these forms were becoming meaningful parts of the grammar. In other words, strong contextual constraints on language use, e.g., particular positions in sentence structures hint at deeper changes in the language. For example, the fact that *like* is occurring so often before a noun may mean that it is developing into some kind of nominal marker. Indeed, one of the main claims about its function is that it is a focuser (Underhill, 1988). While focusing particles are not part of standard English grammar, they are quite common and indeed elaborate in other languages. Similarly, the fact that *just* is occurring so often just before a verb may mean that it is developing into some kind of verbal marker. In fact, research has shown that English is developing a system of aspectual particles, a feature which adds additional information to the verb (e.g., Brinton, 1988). In other words, these forms, which have been thought of as being simply discourse or pragmatic markers, may well be in the process of becoming part of the grammar of a new variety of English. A trajectory of change from discourse to grammar has been noted in linguistic studies previously (e.g., Sankoff, 1980a), thus providing a model for extending the current study. In future research we will be turning to explore these types of hypotheses, and to testing the findings I have reported here in larger and more socially complex material.

For now, however, I would like to join with other researchers of teen language (e.g., Eckert, 1988, 2000, 1997; Stenström and Andersen, 1996; Andersen, 1997b, 2000; Erman, 2001) to emphasize the tremendous breeding ground for linguistic innovation that exists amongst the tweens and teens in contemporary, urban speech communities. The language of these speakers is a gold mine for innovative linguistic features, revealing evidence for both grammatical, as well as sociolinguistic change. However, which of the changes are here to stay, and which are subject to fashion, will have to await further research.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the enthusiastic audience for their many comments and suggestions for this research.

## References

- Andersen, Gisle, 1996. The pragmatic marker like from a relevance-theoretic perspective. In: Jucker, Andreas, Ziv, Yale (Eds.), *Discourse Markers: Selected Papers from the 5th International Pragmatics Conference*. John Benjamins, Amsterdam and Philadelphia, pp. 147–170.

- Andersen, Gisle, 1997a. They gave us these yeah and they like wanna see like how we talk and all that: the use of like and other discourse markers in London teenage speech. In: Kostsinas, U.-B., Stenström, A.-B., Karlsson, A.-M. (Eds.), *Ungdomsspråk i Norden*. Institutionen för nordiska språk, Stockholm, pp. 82–95.
- Andersen, Gisle, 1997b. They like wanna see like how we talk and all that: the use of like as a discourse marker in London teenage speech. In: Ljung, M. (Ed.), *Corpus-based Studies in English: Papers from the 17th International Conference on English Language Research on Computerized Corpora*. Rodopi, Amsterdam, pp. 37–48.
- Andersen, Gisle, 1998. The pragmatic marker *like* from a relevance-theoretic perspective. In: Jucker, Andreas, Ziv, Yale (Eds.), *Discourse Markers: Descriptions and Theory*. John Benjamins, Philadelphia, pp. 147–170.
- Andersen, Gisle, 2000. *Pragmatic Markers and Sociolinguistic Variation*. John Benjamins, Amsterdam.
- Bickel, Stephanie, 2002. Rid Yourself of Damaging Word-Habits! [www.businessknowhow.com](http://www.businessknowhow.com).
- Blyth Jr., Carl, Recktenwald, Sigrid, Wang, Jenny, 1990. *I'm like, "say what?!"*: a new quotative in American oral narrative. *American Speech* 65 (3), 215–227.
- Brinton, Laurel J., 1988. *The Development of English Aspectual Systems*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Buchstaller, Isabelle, 2001. An alternative view of *like*: its grammaticalisation in conversational American English and beyond. *Edinburgh Working Papers in Applied Linguistics* 11, 21–41.
- Buchstaller, Isabelle. *He goes*, and *I'm like*: the new quotatives re-visited. *American Speech*, in press.
- Chambers, J.K., 1995. *Sociolinguistic Theory: Linguistic Variation and its Social Significance*. Blackwell Publishers, Oxford.
- Dailey-O'Cain, Jennifer, 1996. The sociolinguistic distribution of and subjective attitudes toward the discourse marker 'like' in the midwestern United States. Paper presented at Cardiff, Wales, UK.
- D'Arcy, Alexandra, 2005. *Like: it's syntactic development*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Toronto.
- Eckert, Penelope, 1988. Adolescent social structure and the spread of linguistic change. *Language in Society* 17 (2), 183–207.
- Eckert, Penelope, 1997. Age as a sociolinguistic variable. In: Coulmas, F. (Ed.), *The Handbook of Sociolinguistics*. Blackwell, Oxford.
- Eckert, Penelope, 2000. *Language Variation as Social Practice*. Blackwell Publishers, Oxford and Malden.
- Erman, Britt, 1997. 'Guy's just such a dickhead': the context and function of *just* in teenage talk. In: Kostsinas, U.-B., Stenström, A.-B., Karlsson, A.-M. (Eds.), *Ungdomsspråk i Norden*. Institutionen för nordiska språk, Stockholm, pp. 82–95.
- Erman, Britt, 2001. Pragmatic markers revisited with a focus on *you know* in adult and adolescent talk. *Journal of Pragmatics* 33, 1337–1359.
- Guy, Gregory R., 1993. The quantitative analysis of linguistic variation. In: Preston, D. (Ed.), *The Quantitative Analysis of Linguistic Variation*. American Dialect Research: John Benjamins, Amsterdam and Philadelphia, pp. 223–249.
- Ito, Rika, Tagliamonte, Sali A., 2003. *Well weird, right dodgy, very strange, really cool*: layering and recycling in English intensifiers. *Language in Society* 32, 257–279.
- Labov, William, 1972. *Sociolinguistic Patterns*. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.
- Labov, William, 1985. Intensity. In: Schiffrin, D. (Ed.), *Meaning, Form and Use in Context: Linguistic Applications*. Georgetown University Press, Washington, DC, pp. 43–70.
- Meehan, Teresa, 1991. It's like, 'What's happening in the evolution of like?': a theory of grammaticalization. *Kansas Working Papers in Linguistics* 16, 37–51.
- Miller, Jim, Weinert, Regina, 1995. The function of *like* in dialogue. *Journal of Pragmatics* 23, 365–393.
- Rand, Davia, Patera, Tatiana, 1992. *Concorde*. Computer program. Centre de recherches mathématiques. Version 1.1S, Montréal.
- Randall, Bernice, 1988. *Webster's New World Guide to Current American Usage*. Simon and Schuster, New York.
- Romaine, Susanne, Lange, Deborah, 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.
- Sankoff, David, 1988. Sociolinguistics and syntactic variation. In: Newmeyer, F.J. (Ed.), *Linguistics: The Cambridge Survey*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 140–161.
- Sankoff, Gillian, 1980a. The origins of syntax in discourse: a case study of Tok Pisin relatives. In: Sankoff, G. (Ed.), *The Social Life of Language*. University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, pp. 211–255.

- Sankoff, Gillian, 1980b. A quantitative paradigm for the study of communicative competence. In: Sankoff, G. (Ed.), *A Quantitative Paradigm for the Study of Communicative Competence. The Social Life of Language*. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, pp. 47–79.
- Schiffrin, Deborah, 1987. *Discourse Markers*. University of Cambridge Press, Cambridge.
- Siegel, Muffy E.A., 2002. Like: The discourse particle and semantics. *Journal of Semantics* 19, 35–71.
- Stenström, Anna-Brita, 1999. *He was really gormless — She's bloody crap*: girls, boys and intensifiers. In: Hasselgård, H., Okesfjell, S. (Eds.), *Out of Corpora: Studies in Honour of Stig Johansson*. Rodopi, Amsterdam and Atlanta, pp. 69–78.
- Stenström, Anna-Brita, 2000. *It's enough funny, man*: intensifiers in Teenage Talk. In: Kirk, J. (Ed.), *Corpora galore: analyses and techniques in describing English. Papers from the Nineteenth International Conference on English Language Research on Computerised Corpora (ICAME 1998)* Rodopi, Amsterdam and Atlanta, pp. 177–190.
- Stenström, Anna-Brita, Andersen, Gisle, 1996. More trends in teenage talk: a corpus-based investigation of the discourse items *cos* and *innit*. In: Percy, C.E., Meyer, C.F., Lancashire, I. (Eds.), *Synchronic Corpus Linguistics. Papers from the sixteenth International Conference on English Language Research on Computerized Corpora, Toronto 1995*. Rodopi, Amsterdam, pp. 189–203.
- Tagliamonte, Sali, 2004. *It's just like so cool! English in the 20th Century*. Presented at the International Association of University Professors of English (IAUPE). Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, 8–14 August, 2004.
- Tagliamonte, Sali, D'Arcy, Alexandra, 2004. *He's like; she's like*: the quotative system in Canadian Youth. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 8.4, 493–514.
- Tagliamonte, Sali A., Hudson, Rachel, 1999. *Be like* et al. beyond America: the quotative system in British and Canadian youth. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 3 (2), 147–172.
- Tagliamonte, Sali, Roberts, Chris, 2004. *So weird; so cool; so innovative*: the use of intensifiers in the television series *Friends*. *American Speech* 80.2.
- Underhill, Robert, 1988. Like is like, focus. *American Speech* 63 (3), 234–246.
- Wolgemuth, Tracy L. 2003. It's LIKE discourse LIKE: the story of discourse LIKE in Canadian English in 1995. MA Forum paper, University of Toronto.

**Sali Tagliamonte** is an Associate Professor of Linguistics at the University of Toronto, Canada. Her research focuses on morpho-syntactic variation and change in the evolution of English. She has worked extensively on North American varieties of English and is the co-author of “African American English in the Diaspora: Tense and Aspect” (Blackwell Publishers). Currently, she is engaged in multiple research projects. One investigates British dialects and involves cross-variety comparisons amongst British and North American dialects, another explores the nature of linguistic innovations amongst contemporary youth, and another focuses on changes in apparent time in Toronto English.