Sociophonetic variation of 'like' in British dialects

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Previous research on 'like' focuses on its various discourse functions (e.g. Underhill 1988; Buchstaller 2004; D’Arcy 2006; Cheshire et al. 2011), rather than its conversational phonetics. Drager’s (2009) work on 'like' at a high school in New Zealand is a notable exception. Investigating a number of different pragmatic functions, she found that quotative 'like' tends to be less diphthongal than 'like' used in other functions.

This study aims to find out (a) whether monophthongisation of 'like’ also occurs among adolescents in London and Edinburgh and, if so, (b) how it is sociolinguistically constrained. Comparing the speech in these two places is particularly interesting as vernacular realizations of the PRICE vowel are subject to different trends among adolescents in these locations. Data were collected from 20 teenagers in London and Edinburgh each. In a first step, 'like'-realisations in a corpus of conversational recordings were coded for frequency, speaker age and sex, as well as the discourse function of 'like’ (as quotative, discourse marker, discourse particle, approximative adverb, etc.). The 'like’ tokens were then subjected to an acoustic analysis, noting vowel formants in nucleus and offglide, duration, pitch values, speech rate, Euclidean distance between F1 and F2, preceding and following context and formulaic status. A series of mixed-effects regressions were conducted in R in order to determine which of these factor groups contribute significantly to the variability in 'like’ realisations.

This study provides acoustic evidence for a reduction in diphthongization in both places and for qualitative differences in the less diphthongal vowel realization in Edinburgh and London. Our results show that 'like’ does indeed occasionally sound clearly monophthongal and that discourse function best explains this variation. Reduced diphthongisation, however, is not only constrained by discourse function but also depends on the formulaic status of the phrase in which 'like’ occurs.

Keywords: discourse markers, teenagers, like.