THE DEPARTMENT OF LINGUISTICS & ASIAN/MIDDLE
EASTERN LANGUAGES IS PLEASED TO ANNOUNCE
A FACULTY CANDIDATE TALK BY

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1:00-2:00 pm Love Library 430

VARIANT-CENTERED VARIATION
AND THE *LIKE* CONSPIRACY

The key methodological principle of sociolinguistics, the principle of accountability (Labov 1972), foregrounds the linguistic variable as the entity of interest: any variant is situated in comparison to the other variants it competes with. Some recent papers (e.g., Campbell-Kibler 2011, Aaron 2010), argue, however that looking beyond the variable context is necessary to get a full picture of the structure of variation. This paper synthesizes several strands of thinking about the relationship between variables and their variants in the context of the word *like*.

Like is involved in several variables, covarying in each with different competitor variants—as a quotative, a discourse particle, and others (D'Arcy 2007). From a variable-centered perspective, it is seemingly a coincidence that multiple functions of *like* are simultaneously increasing in apparent time. An analogy to the phonological concept of "conspiracy" (Crist 2001) suggests looking for a common cause.

Campbell-Kibler (2010) suggests that social meaning attaches to the sociolinguistic variant, rather than the variable. A matched-guise study (Maddeaux & Dinkin to appear), aimed at testing this hypothesis on *like*, involved nine guises of a two-minute narrative: eight each containing one function of *like*, and a control guise without *like*. Participants each rated the control guise and two *like* guises on several social dimensions, and described what differences they perceived between the guises. Results indicate that newer "vernacular" *like* functions are evaluated differently than "standard" functions—even though some standard functions are undergoing the same change. This suggests that we may need to look somewhere other than evaluation to explain the conspiracy of parallel change toward *like*.

I propose finding the explanation using the lens of change in *discursive practices* (Coupland 2014): the various uses of *like* share the discourse function of reducing the speaker's commitment to the literal truth of the statement being made. This suggests that we may interpret the *like* conspiracy as a long-term change toward a particular discourse function embodied in a specific variant, and that change in discursive practice acts on the level of the variant rather than the variable.