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“Where our Queer Friends at?” A Sociolinguistic Analysis of GLBQ (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Queer) Speech in Canadian Youth

Since the inception of Sociolinguistics as a field of study, researchers have been trying to answer the question of how our social and personal identities and community memberships affect our use of language. Many studies have examined and explained linguistic differences that arise from such factors as socio-economic status (e.g. Labov 1972, Laferriere 1979), gender (e.g. Trudgill 1974), and age (Yoneda 1993). Much less researched is the notion of sexual orientation and its affect on speech. A very important paper in this field is Jacobs, Smyth & Rogers (2001), which focused on the impact of sexual orientation on a person’s phonetic and phonological processes.

This paper is an attempt to explore the effect of sexual orientation on two particular grammatical features: quotatives and intensifiers. These two features have been attested as major sources of linguistic change in the literature, particularly in youth populations, which makes them a good springboard into exploring this population’s grammar (Tagliamonte and Hudson 1999 (quotatives) and Ito and Tagliamonte 2003 (intensifiers)).

Results are based on a comparison of data from two corpora. One corpus, ROP6, is made up of conversational data I collected during recent interviews with 9 native speakers of Toronto English who were between the ages of 14 and 21 at the time of the interview and self-identified as either gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer. The ROP6 data are compared with data from counterparts of the same age range in Tagliamonte’s Toronto English Corpus (TEC). Since the TEC data comes from a randomized cross-section of the speech community, the TEC results are taken to be representative of ‘normative’ speech for the purposes of comparison to the ROP6 data.

Several interesting findings emerged from this comparison. I frame my discussion in terms of three research questions. First, are there any statistically significant differences between the speech of GLBQ youth and the speech of their ‘normative’ counterparts? Second, how do sex and educational status affect these factors? Finally, what can we assert from our findings about the ‘bigger picture’ in terms of GLBQ youth’s role in linguistic change? My hope is that the findings from this paper incite future research efforts into this field.