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In Defense of Valley Girl English

By: Reilly Nycum, *Southern Oregon University*

Introduction

In the early 1980's, musical artist Frank Zappa released "Valley Girl," a song depicting Valley Girl English, a term specifically used to describe the dialect spoken by those living in and around the San Fernando Valley. In the song, Zappa chants "She's a Valley Girl / And there is no cure" as a woman's high-pitched voice whines about her superficial life in the Valley, saying phrases such as, "Like, OH MY GOD! / Like-TOTALLY / Encino is like SO BITCHEN."¹ With this song, Zappa forever immortalized the term for users and listeners alike. His easily recognizable depiction of Valley Girl English resonates with listeners in several ways. When the typical person hears Valley Girl English they may think of skinny girls prancing around in short skirts at the mall in sunny California. People across the United States attach a stigma to Valley Girl English to such an extent that most seem to revile the dialect and label its distinctions as bad habits. Over time, scholars have become more interested in this phenomenon, researching exactly what characteristics people associate with the dialect and the perceptions that they have of those traits. Also, many study the linguistic trends people link to Valley Girl English such as like, be like, say, go, and particular slang terms in order to characterize the dialect and uncover possible reasons for the speech patterns. Vowel shifting, when people change the pronun-

ciation of their vowel sounds, has recently been identified with the Valley Girl dialect, although many other dialects demonstrate this same change. Much of the research on Valley Girl English is closely intertwined with popular perceptions of the dialect, notably with uptalk, which occurs when a speaker raises their intonation at the end of a word or sentence. This change most visibly highlights the general distaste much of the population has for the dialect. Ultimately, many fail to listen past the parodies and satire to pay attention to what is being said. However, the characteristics of Valley Girl English, such as vowel shifting, the quotative and non-quotative like, slang, and uptalk, do not signal a new change in the language and demonstrate the assets of a legitimate dialect spreading throughout the nation.

Regional Perceptions of Dialects

Despite the fact that California dialects find representation in many songs, movies, and television shows, relatively few scholars have studied the range of dialects in the area. Carmen Fought, a professor of linguistics at Pitzer University, was the first to conduct a study in 2002 in order to analyze the dialectology of California.² In her study, Fought handed 122 respondents (112 of them from California), a blank map of the United States and instructed them to mark the boundaries between where they thought people started speaking

¹ Frank Zappa, "Valley Girl," *Ship Arriving too late to save a drowning witch*, Barking Pumpkin Records, 1982.

² Carmen Fought, "California Students Perceptions of, You Know, Regions and Dialects?" *Handbook of Perceptual Dialectology*, vol. 2, (Benjamins Publishing Company, 2002): 113.

³ *Ibid.*, 114.³

distinct dialects. After examining the maps, Fought noticed that “California is associated with good English, but never proper.”⁴ The slight distinction between ‘good’ and ‘proper’ reveals the confusion Californians feel about their dialect. Although people rated California very highly in respect to ‘correctness’ or ‘politeness,’ they rated the Valley Girl dialect as a signal of low intelligence.⁵ Despite Fought’s relatively small sample size, her results acknowledge the biases Californians could hold about their own speech patterns. Other studies have since been conducted that reveal information about the way Californians and non-Californians view dialects. In a study published in the *Journal of English Linguistics* titled “Hella Nor Cal or Totally So Cal? The Perceptual Dialectology of California,” undergraduate field workers at UC Santa Barbara conducted a study using blank map methodology to uncover biases around California dialects. Researchers documented that while nonresidents thought they had a greater degree of confidence when labelling California, their responses reflect biases found in the media, focusing on “the most stereotypical and highly visible aspects of California’s language and culture.”⁶ Despite this, people are still inclined to rate California as speaking “good” English, showing that negative biases surrounding California dialects may focus more specifically on the Valley Girl dialect.⁷ These studies and others reveal the role of perceptual dialectology in revealing the perceptions people hold about Valley Girl English.

Vocabulary

The term like, often incorrectly stereotyped in the media as a meaningless interjection used by young people, did not originate from Valley Girl English. In an article titled “Like and Language Ideology: Disentangling Fact From Fiction,” Alexandra D’Arcy, a professor at the University of Canterbury, calls attention to the myths surrounding like and concentrates on its tangible usage in language.⁸ D’Arcy’s article systematically breaks down various stereotypes surrounding like, including the erroneous belief that the practice began with the Valley Girls.⁹ By analyzing many different speech patterns, D’Arcy gathered that the frequency of like usage does not correlate with the beginning of Valley Girl English but only heightens with the advent of the dialect.¹⁰ Moreover, she points out that “outside its local milieu, “Valley Girl” was not an active model for association, linguistic or otherwise, until after 1980.”¹¹ Since Valley Girl English brings attention to like, people associate the change with the Valley Girls. Rather, the use of like as “discourse marker, a discourse particle, and an adverb of approximation” came into existence with the advent of other dialects across the United States and elsewhere.¹² Additionally, D’Arcy’s identification of like as containing more meaning than an empty conversation filler or a verbal tic shows the true range of expressions like has in the language. Her analyses also reveal that like has set significations that set out rules of when to use like or not.¹³

³ Ibid., 114.³

⁴ Ibid., 133.

⁵ Ibid., 127.

⁶ Mary Bucholtz et al., “Hella Nor Cal or Totally So Cal? The Perceptual Dialectology of California,” *Journal of English Linguistics* (2007): 349.

⁷ Ibid., 348.

⁸ Alexandra D’Arcy, “Like and Language Ideology: Disentangling Fact From Fiction,” *American Speech* (2007): 386.

⁹ Ibid., 391.

¹⁰ Ibid., 405.

¹¹ Ibid., 404.

¹² Ibid., 405.

¹³ Ibid., 395.

Instead of viewing like as a signal of uncertainty D'Arcy calls to mind that linguistic trends almost always have hidden rules that outsiders do not understand. Myths surrounding like attach original usage and a pointless meaning to Valley Girl English despite the fact that Valley Girl English only draws attention to the term.

The use of quotatives associated with Valley Girl English, such as be like, say, and go, carry a similar connotation as like but reveal the biases that popular culture places onto the Valley Girl dialect. Three scholars from Cornell University studied the phenomenon of these quotatives, observing that be like acts as a way for speakers to introduce both "inner monologue or direct speech" to add a certain level of emphasis depending on usage.¹⁴ The researchers later came to the conclusion that "be like is functionally versatile and therefore may have more staying power in the lexicon."¹⁵ Furthermore, say and go offer a much more complex range of expressions than outsiders generally apprehend. Outside listeners often think that go is a synonym for say and fail to see the difference between the two. Scholars instead notice that "the use of go correlates with only the dramatic use of historical present and direct speech."¹⁶ Without an comprehension of the intricacies of quotatives such as be like, say, and go, listeners misunderstand the intention behind them. They only hear phrases unfamiliar to their vernacular and associate the change with a degradation of the language by the Valley Girls. In fact, women did not use any of the

quotatives more than the men in this study, particularly be like which was used more commonly by men.¹⁷ Even more so, some scholars classify the usage of be like as a convergence between Black English Vernacular and White English Vernacular.¹⁸ Taking into account this data and that the participants using these quotatives originated from the Northwest, the connection of these quotatives by users of them to Valley Girl English is quite interesting.¹⁹ Although the Valley Girl dialect incorporates the use of say, go, and be like, the connections people make from the quotatives to Valley Girl English points to a cultural perception rather than an actual linguistic change.

Slang also plays a large role in distinguishing Valley Girl English. Terms such as those used in the influential 1995 film *Clueless* such as "as if," "phat," "whatever," "bugging," and others characterize the vernacular in the eyes of those who hear and speak it.²⁰ Although movies and television do not change people's speech, *Clueless* does seem to influence Valley Girl English, especially in relation to slang, and may act as an exception to this rule.²¹ Linguists Robert MacNeil and William Cran endeavored to catalog Valley Girl slang by conducting a study on teenagers from Irvine.²² After giving the teenagers cameras to record their speech for several days in both personal and formal environments, MacNeil and Cran asked the teens to help them compile a dictionary of the terms they used throughout the footage.²³ In this dictionary, MacNeil and Cran notice "[t]en of the twenty-two expressions listed above are borrowed from black talk,

¹⁴ Carl Blyth, Sigrid Recktenwald, and Jenny Wang, "I'm Like, 'Say What?!': A New Quotative in American Oral Narrative," *American Speech* (1990): 215.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 225.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 216.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 221.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 216.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 224.

²⁰ Robert Macneil and William Cran, *Do You Speak American?* (Harcourt, Inc, 2005), 157

²¹ *Ibid.*, 157.

²² *Ibid.*, 159.

²³ *Ibid.*, 159.

or, as a student called it, ‘the ghetto fab vernacular that many teens use today.’”²⁴ Just as with the quotative *be like*, slang terms get appropriated in the Valley Girl dialect. This carrying over of linguistic characteristics complicates the current opinion on Valley Girl English. Much of the vernacular does not show any original movements in language; however, the dialect does call to attention the changes that are happening. While many correlate slang terms and other linguistic trends to the creation of Valley Girl English, this may only be due to the massive media coverage on the dialect.

Intonation

Dialects and Vowel Shifting

The vowel shifting observed in Valley Girl English represents a change in language observed in many other dialects, specifically in the United States. In a study conducted at the University of California, Berkeley, linguists noted that in Valley Girl English, the back vowels shift forward, “...front vowels have raised variants in some phonological environments and lowered variants elsewhere.”²⁵ This fronting of back vowels has also been observed in dialects in Philadelphia and Detroit, such as with the /aw/ sound in the word *now*.²⁶ Though other dialects are experiencing a vowel shift, people connect the change with Valley Girl English. For instance, in “Valley Girl” Zappa satirizes the vowel shift in words such as “super” or “totally,” pronouncing them by fronting the /o/ sound. *Do You Speak American?*, a book studying various dialect trends across the United

States, expands on the UC Berkeley findings by explaining how this vowel shift and other vowel shifts are a part of a larger trend in the United States, stating, “These linguists also found some chain-shifting of vowels resembling William Labov’s Northern Cities Shift around the Great Lakes—black sounding like block.”²⁷ Characteristics of the Northern Cities Shift, first defined by linguist William Labov, began far before the creation of the Valley Girl dialect.²⁸ When characterizing Valley Girl English, it remains important to recognize that the vernacular borrows from the vowel shift but does not represent a completely new change in the language. Vowel-shifting, while an important trait in the Valley Girl dialect, is not unique to the vernacular, despite its cultural association.

Speaker Age and Sex

Uptalk, much like other language developments related to Valley Girl English, tends to be over-exaggerated by the media and thus labelled as yet another horrible trend led by the younger generations. In a book titled *Uptalk* by Paul Warren, an Associate Professor at Victoria University, Warren thoroughly investigates the mechanics behind uptalk as well as the media’s depiction of the shift. In a sample examining 182 media portrayals of uptalk, Warren noted “a sizable minority were clearly negative or condemning of uptalk . . . If speaker sex was mentioned, then it was almost always to indicate that uptalk was a typical female trait.”²⁹ The way the media depicts uptalk creates a general distaste for the intonation which fosters an unhealthy view of the quickly spreading trend.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 161.

²⁵ Leanne Hinton, et al., “It’s Not Just the Valley Girls: A Study of California English,” Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society [Online] (1987): 125.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 125.

²⁷ Robert Macneil and William Cran, *Do You Speak American?* (Harcourt, Inc, 2005), 161

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

²⁹ Paul Warren, *Uptalk*, (Cambridge University Press, 2016): 129.

The misrepresentation of uptalk as being a feature only found in young, female speakers shows misrepresentation of a trend that is used by many different types of people, including men and the older generations. While Warren did notice that females and younger people tend to use uptalk with a higher frequency, men and older people still use uptalk.³⁰ This stereotyping of uptalk into a female quality, in part based in research, could be due to the fact that men rarely hit the high pitches women frequently use and which popular media associates with uptalk.³¹ As far as age, studies show “teenagers use uptalk in 2.29 percent of tone groups, while adults have a considerably lower rate of 0.23 percent.”³² While certainly this statistic reveals the higher rates of uptalk in younger people, older people still participate in the trend. Furthermore, rather than defining uptalk as a feature of indecisiveness, Warren suggests that it may indicate “openness, only in this case they are inviting the listener to participate in the conversation, or to indicate their understanding of what has been said. It is used to share information rather than to tell (or to question).”³³ Warren’s findings on the intentions of uptalk challenges negative views on the trend and give a less biased perspective on uptalk as a whole. The confusion around the purpose of uptalk and its association with a small subset of speakers severely understates the real impact of uptalk on modern dialects and people.

People tend to instill negative implications on uptalk, in part due to portrayals in the media; however, it remains a lasting and prevalent trend in all dialects and people regardless of their age or sex. James Gorman coined the term “uptalk” in a 1993 New York Times article titled ON LANGUAGE; Like, uptalk?³⁴ According to Gorman, uptalk is defined by a rising intonation at the end of a sentence that transforms the sentence into a question.³⁵ Although Gorman correctly defines uptalk, his further account of the trend reveals his bias against the tonal shift. He states, “nobody knows exactly where uptalk came from. It might have come from California, from Valley Girl talk . . . Some twentysomethings say uptalk is part of their attitude: cool, ironic, uncommitted.”³⁶ While it seems extremely doubtful that “young twentysomethings” consider uptalk as a part of their “cool, ironic, and uncommitted” attitude, Gorman’s comments certainly reflect the popular perception of uptalk. Many interpret uptalk as an act of doubt and stupidity, characteristics also forced upon Valley Girl English. Gorman later states in his article the idea that “uptalk won’t be uptalk anymore. It will be, like, American English?”³⁷ While Gorman does not agree with the spread of uptalk, he hits on an interesting aspect of the trend. Uptalk is spreading amongst all genders, ages, and areas. While people regularly connect uptalk with Valley Girl English, uptalk extends into many other dialects and languages.

³⁰ Ibid., 111.

³¹ Ibid., 112.

³² Ibid., 117.

³³ Ibid., 188.

³⁴ Ibid., 6.

³⁵ James Gorman, “ON LANGUAGE; Like, Uptalk?” *The New York Times*, August 15, 1993.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

Conclusion: Perceptions in Popular Culture

Popular culture and common belief foster an inherent predisposition against the characteristics of Valley Girl English. Many, however, tend to overstate some of the qualities of Valley Girl English, such as the use of like, and transform the vernacular into something inexorably linked to materialism and superficiality. This presents many issues when attempting to understand the dialect because it categorizes the Valley Girl English as illegitimate. This prejudice also causes people to understand Valley Girl English as a dialect only spoken by a certain type of person, the Valley Girl. This simply does not account for the wide usage of the facets of Valley Girl English, such as uptalk and the quotative be like. While one may feel that Valley Girl English sounds 'dumb' or 'air-headed,' its features are not unusual and may even be adopted from other vernaculars. Furthermore, the changes observed in Valley Girl English are growing increasingly apparent in other dialects across the United States. When people dismiss dialect patterns as purposeless and annoying, they fail to recognize the ways in which people use the patterns as a valid way of communication.

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