“Como” in commute: The travels of a discourse marker within and between communities and across languages

More than two decades ago, Underhill (1988) and Romaine and Lange (1991) characterized the grammaticalized discourse functions of “like” in American English as a change in progress, led by young female speakers. Since then, the use of “like” as a discourse marker has not only spread across American English dialects, but also to other English-speaking countries. Tagliamonte & Hudson (1999) traced the spread of “like” to Canada, Anderson (2001) to Great Britain, and Miller (2009) to Australia and New Zealand. The use of “como” in Spanish as a discourse marker equivalent to “like” has followed a similar pattern. First detected in Spanish-English bilingual communities (Sánchez-Muñoz (2007) and Said-Mohand (2008)), it has now been detected in Spanish monolingual dialects (Jorgerson & Strenstrom (2009)).

The present investigation is a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the use of “como” as a discourse marker in the Spanish spoken in Southern Arizona, based on a corpus of twenty-four sociolinguistic interviews of young male and female Spanish-English bilinguals. In the speech of these bilinguals, the discourse marker “como” mirrors the focus and quotative discourse functions borrowed from “like” in English, as illustrated in (1) and (2) below.

(1) Pues yo como yo hablo español pero yo nunca he estudiado como la gramática.
    Well I like I speak Spanish but I never have studied like the grammar.

In (1), a male bilingual uses “como” to fulfill the focus discourse function of “like” in English, emphasizing that he speaks Spanish, but he has not studied the grammar.

(2) Era como Ay me molesta que, eso de los pochos que hablan una mezcla de lenguajes.
    I was like, Ah, It bothers me that pochos speak a mixture of languages.

In (2), a female bilingual uses “como” as a quotative, introducing reported speech.

As Sánchez-Muñoz (2007) and Said-Mohand (2009) first documented in Los Angeles and Miami respectively, the results of this study demonstrate that both male and female Spanish-English bilinguals in Southern Arizona are using “como” in Spanish to fulfill the focus and quotative discourse functions of “like” in English. This innovative use of “como” as a discourse marker reifies the process of stylistic practice outlined by Eckert (2008) as a bricolage, or the fusion of “como” in Spanish with the discourse functions of “like” in English as a token of bilingual identity. Moreover, the diffusion of the discourse functions of “like,” with “como” in Spanish as their vehicle, illustrates Mendoza-Denton’s (2011) concept of semiotic hitchhiking.

The analysis of young Spanish-English bilinguals using “como” in Spanish to fulfill the discourse functions of “like” in English sheds light on how bilinguals structure discourse by drawing from both languages. It is hoped that the results of this study on the diffusion of the focus and quotative “como” will add to our knowledge of how discourse markers can travel both within and between communities and across languages.
Selected References


