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A lowkey example of language change: “Lowkey you might find this interesting”
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As a speech community, young adults are constantly adapting and changing language with women leading linguistic change (Labov, 1990). Such linguistic change is systematic, natural, and rule governed. In this study, we investigate recent change in the syntactic category, syntactic distribution, and semantics of lowkey in the Southern United States English of Louisiana. Unlike the first usage in our title, lowkey's most common usage is adjectival and it expresses meanings like 'not elaborate, showy, or intensive; modest or restrained'.

A. We had a lowkey Mardi Gras weekend.

B. Meaning: Our Mardi Gras weekend was "not elaborate, showy, or intensive."

However, we show that this lexical item has two new meanings and syntactic distributions among younger speakers of English because of an apparent change in syntactic category. Lowkey is now used in casual settings as an adverbial and can mean either (1) 'secretly' or (2) 'kinda'.

1. I don't want anyone to find out, but lowkey I love Justin B. ‘secret’ interpretation
2. I lowkey want that dress. ‘kinda’ interpretation

We argue that these new meaning interpretations of lowkey depend on whether it is placed at the beginning of the sentence, as in (1), or to the immediate left of the main verb, as in (2). These two positions give rise to interpretations which correspond with predicted patterns for both speech-act adverbials (Cinque, 1999; Morzycki, 2014) and VP-modifying adverbials (Jackendoff, 1972; Potsdam, 1998).

Finally, we use elicitation data from ~25 subjects in conjunction with basic syntactic assumptions to support our hypothesis and to explain the following superficial confound. Speech-act adverbs may optionally appear between the subject and the verb in the same position as VP-modifying adverbs. In this position, both the ‘secret’ and ‘kinda’ interpretations are available. Crucially though, subjects report that kinda interpretations are unavailable when lowkey appears at the left-edge of the clause. In line with common assumptions about syntax, we hypothesize that the verb is not accessible for VP-modification by adverbs when situated in the left-edge of a clause.