

The quotative system of contemporary American English: a cross-register,
corpus-based study of sociolinguistic use

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This paper reports findings from a corpus-based study of quotatives in four computer corpora representing different registers of spoken interaction—casual conversation, campus-related service encounters and workplace conversation, university students study groups, and academic office hours. Conversation data were drawn from the *Longman Spoken and Written English Corpus* (1995-1996); the other corpora were from the *TOEFL 2000 Spoken and Written Academic Language corpus* (1998-1999). The corpora were demographically sampled and range between 100,000 and 500,000 words. This study builds upon and challenges previous investigations of *be like* and other quotatives in American English (Blyth et al. 1990, Dailey O’Cain 2002; Ferrara and Bell 1995; Romaine and Lange 1991), and other varieties of English (e.g., Cukor-Avila 2002; Macaulay 1999; Tagliamonte and Hudson 1999; Winter 2002). The study provides a more accurate and representative account of quotative use in present-day American English than previous studies, whose findings were based on small data sets consisting of conversational narratives or sociolinguistic interviews representing specific discourse communities.

The study investigated 1) the overall frequency of quotatives in four registers; 2) the distribution of quotatives across tense; 3) the frequency of occurrence of quotatives with grammatical person; 4) the discourse-pragmatic function of quotatives; 5) the sociolinguistic distribution of quotatives across speaker’s age and sex. Simple present and simple past forms of the ‘new’ quotatives *be like*, *go*, *be all* and the traditional *say* were searched using a concordancing program, and the data were manually sorted to eliminate non-quotative forms. Analyses of frequency and multivariate statistics were conducted on the data.

The analysis of the distribution of over 1800 quotatives shows that 1) all new quotatives are more frequent in present tense, while *say* is more frequent in past; 2) in present tense, *be like* is even more frequent than *say*, and 3) *go* hardly ever occurs as past *went*. The analyses of frequency in association with grammatical person and of the discourse-pragmatic function – limited to the 1276 quotatives from Conversation – reveal clear patterns of association between frequency of occurrence of the quotatives and grammatical person, as well as between grammatical person and discourse-pragmatic function of the quotatives. Specifically, 1) *go* occurs more often with third person singular (p.s.) subjects; 2) *be like* occurs with third p.s. in more than 40% of the cases, confirming Ferrara and Bell’s (1995) hypothesis of the expansion of *be like*’s discourse function; 3) *say* and *go* generally introduce plausible quotation (i.e. constructed dialogue) with first and third p.s.; 4) *be like* generally introduces plausible quotation with third p.s. and improbable quotation (i.e., inner speech, lexicalized sound, or gist of something) with first p.s. 5) *be like* introduces plausible quotation in about one third of first p.s. cases, in contrast with Ferrara and Bell (1995, 279). Finally, analyses of the effect of speaker’s age and sex on quotative use provide further evidence of the spread and grammaticalization of the new quotatives. Multivariate statistical analyses reveal how speaker’s sex and age affect the distributional use of quotatives in contemporary American English.

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