

“When people say, I was like ...”
The quotative system in Canadian youth

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Recent research demonstrates that quotatives are a good place to catch language change in action (Blyth et al. 1990, Romaine & Lange 1991, Ferrara & Bell 1995, Tagliamonte & Hudson 1999; Cukor-Avila 2002). The quotative *be like*, as in (1), appears to be taking over the system, while traditional quotatives such as *say* and *think*, as in (2-3), are being ousted.

- (1) *I’m like*, “Just be Canadian!”
- (2) *I said*, “Oh, it’s cheap, it’s cute.”
- (3) ...you were just *thinking*, “God, this is so boring!”

However, most of the current research targets university students with little or no attention to younger or older speakers, so little is known about how *be like* is diffusing. Moreover, since this form is implicated in linguistic change, more information is needed on the apparent vs. real time dimension and on whether age-grading is involved.

In order to explore these issues, we conduct a quantitative analysis of over 1400 quotatives in a 3/4 million word corpus of Toronto English collected in 2002. In addition to providing data from university students (ages 18-22) — making these materials comparable to earlier research — the corpus includes a stratified sample of 10-17 year olds, providing a view of the trajectory of change.

The perspective of real time shows that the frequency of *be + like* has increased exponentially in the last 8 years amongst the university cohort — compare 13% (Tagliamonte & Hudson 1999) vs. 62% — and *say* has been relegated to a minority variant. However, when the distribution of quotatives are viewed across age groups, there is an incremental increase of *be like* from youngest to oldest speakers and a decrease in *say*, suggesting a developmental trend. Subjecting these data to variable rule analysis selects the two well-known internal constraints on *be like* — content of the quote and grammatical person — as significant, with the same constraint hierarchies across the board. This demonstrates that internal constraints 1) are acquired from early stages of development and 2) persist even as a feature rises to dominance in a linguistic system. On the other hand, we observe a clear shift in the social evaluation of *be like*: females only favour the form over males from age 15-16 years. Thus, our results reveal that the critical departure point for acquiring the relevant social constraints on *be like* is in high school.

These findings corroborate earlier research (Labov 1990; Eckert 1989) in demonstrating the tremendous interaction of age and sex in sociolinguistic change, extending their relevance to discourse-level features and highlighting the important contributions of early age cohorts to this process. Indeed, treating younger speakers as a monolithic or even binary group (e.g. pre-adolescents vs. adolescents) obscures aspects of linguistic change that proceed differentially within and across cohorts.

We discuss the relevance of these findings for tracking the ongoing evolution of *be like* and explore their implications for understanding the diffusion of linguistic innovations and linguistic change more generally.

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