

**Quotative variation in London English: Evidence from preadolescent speakers**  
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According to Eckert (2000:8), there is a dearth of information about the development of patterns of variation in childhood that lead up to adolescence. In this paper, I approach the issue of age differentiations in speech in later childhood by focusing on the vernacular of 48 children (27 girls and 21 boys) in order to explore specifically localised patterns of variation in quotative usage in preadolescence. Quotative variation in the preadolescent corpus is exemplified below:

- (i) I woke up... *I'm like* 'I'm not thinking about that again' [27F7/8]
- (ii) all the players have come up and *I've gone* 'What?' [12M7/8]
- (iii) my mum's here *saying like* 'No you can't have them as they're not ironed or washed or anything' [6F10/11]

The children investigated here were aged between 7 and 11, and were recorded between 2000 and 2004 in outer east London, an area which is claimed to be surprisingly under-researched from a sociolinguistic perspective (Britain 2001:125). The age range of the children coincides with significant developments in preadolescent social organization which have important linguistic correlates, including the characteristic transition from parent-oriented to peer-oriented networks, with individuals accommodating their language in systematic ways to that of their peers (Kerswill 1996:196).

Examination of more than 500 quotative contexts coded for an array of factors including grammatical person, content of the quote, tense, gender, and age reveals that there are nuanced pragmatic differences in the use of particular quotative variants which are sensitive to both the age and gender of speakers. Multivariate analysis of the data also suggests that the interval between the youngest and oldest speakers in the corpus is a period in which sociolinguistic competence in the use of particular vernacular variants is consolidated.

Furthermore, the consideration of the quotative system in its entirety (see Tagliamonte and Hudson 1999) also facilitates examination of the extent to which preadolescents are participating in domains of change, particularly in relation to the use of the *be like* quotative variant, which is a vigorous innovation spreading in British English (Tagliamonte and Hudson 1999; Macaulay 2001; Buchstaller 2004) as well as in several other major varieties of English (Tagliamonte and D'Arcy 2004; Tagliamonte and D'Arcy 2007). Contrary to expectation, given the pervasive correlations in the research literature between *be like* and younger speakers (Barbieri 2007:27), *be like* accounts for only 5% of the London preadolescents' total quotative usage, which is largely circumscribed to just *say* and *go*. The results not only highlight possible discontinuities between preadolescent and adolescent patterns of quotative variation, but also point to the differential rates at which innovations are diffusing in contemporary varieties of English.

The major findings of this study emphasise the need to conduct more fine-grained analyses of variation in younger age cohorts in order to detect trends that might otherwise be obscured in a study of aggregated data from broader age ranges (Llamas 2007: 73).

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