

How Did It Happen? The new verb of quotation in Philadelphia

Linguists oriented to change and variation have noted the rise of *be like* throughout the English speech communities. The many reports of change in apparent time show that it is now the dominant verb of quotation for youth in cities throughout English-speaking North America, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand (Butters 1982, Blyth et al. 1990, Romaine & Lange 1991, Tagliamonte & Hudson 1999, Cukor-Avila 2002, D'Arcy 2007, 2010). The Philadelphia Neighborhood Corpus (PNC) provides the materials for a real-time view of the rise of this phenomenon, since it includes yearly studies of the speech community dating from 10 years before the first published reference to *be like* by Butters in 1982 and for the three following decades. With these materials, it is possible to address a number of questions concerning the point in time when *be like* first appeared, the age group in which it is transmitted across time, and the degree to which it spreads to other age groups who did not acquire it in their formative years.

Figure 1 shows the proportion of *be like* in verbs of quotation for the 150 speakers in the PNC who used more than 4 tokens of the variable. In the yearly interviews from 1973 to 2012, there are 705 instances of *be like* out of 3,129 total verbs of quotation. The first uses of *be like* are found in 1979, from speakers who also introduce quotations with *Like I said* and *Like* without a verb. The late 1970s may then be considered the generating period. The 1980s show an expansion of *be like* among speakers in their twenties and thirties, who were adolescent in the generating period. From the 1990s to the present, the speech community shows a remarkable stability: a split between high users of *be like* among adolescents and young adults, and low users of the new verb of quotation by older speakers and their pre-adolescent children. Throughout this whole time period, we do not find any Philadelphian over 60 who uses more than occasional example of *be like*. *Go* plays only a minor role from 1970 to the present. A regression analysis of the social factors involved shows no significant effect of gender or ethnicity.

It has been proposed that the growth of *be like* as a verb of quotation is related to other vernacular uses of *like*, particularly as a pre-NP modifier and discourse marker (Dinkin in press). These new uses of *like* lead to a rise in the frequency of this lexical item. However, the PNC data of Figure 2 shows that the total use of the lexeme *like* has been fairly constant until recent years. The sudden rise to frequencies as high as 10% of the words in running speech appears to be a subsequent event, not unconnected with the 1979 innovation.

Blyth, Carl J., Sigrid Recktenwald and Jenny Wang. 1990. I'm Like, "Say What?": A New Quotative. *American Speech* 65:215-227.

Butters, Ronald R. 1980. Narrative Go 'Say'. *American Speech (Winter)*: 304-307.

Cukor-Avila, Patricia. 2002. She say, She go, She be like: Verbs of quotation over time in African American Vernacular English. *American Speech* 77:3-31.

D'Arcy, Alexandra. 2007. Like: Syntax and Development. U. of Toronto dissertation.

D'Arcy, Alexandra. 2010. Quoting ethnicity: Constructing dialogue in Aotearoa/New Zealand. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 14:60-88.

Dinkin, Aaron. In press. Variant-Centered Variation and the Like Conspiracy.

Romaine, Suzanne and Deborah Lange. 1991. The use of like as a marker of reported speech and thought: a case of grammaticalization in progress. *American Speech* 66:227-279..

Tagliamonte, Sali & Rachel Hudson. 1999. Be like et al. beyond America: The quotative system in British and Canadian youth. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 3:1-20.

Figure 1. Proportion of verbs of quotation represented by *be like* by year of interview for speakers in the Philadelphia Neighborhood Corpus.

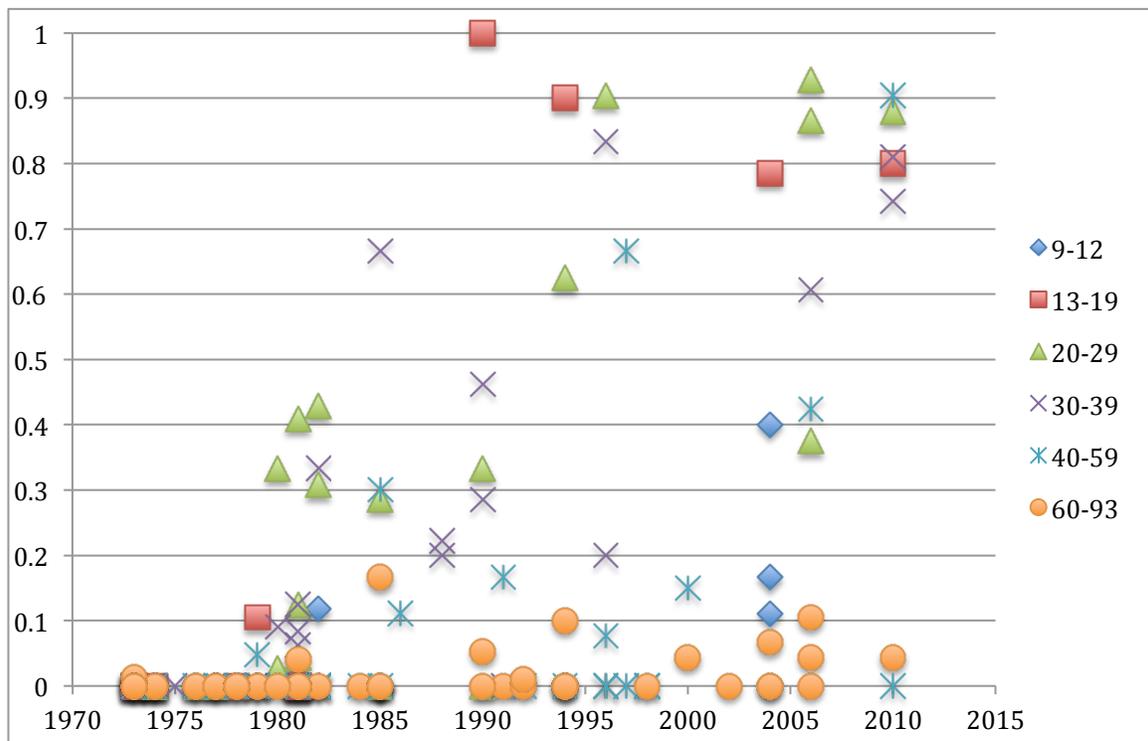


Figure 2. Frequency of the lexeme *like* in the Philadelphia Neighborhood Corpus by year of interview.

