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When People Say, "I Was Like...": The Quotative System in Canadian Youth

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

Sali Tagliamonte* and Alex D’Arcy

1 Introduction

Recent research demonstrates that the quotative system is a good place to catch language change in action (e.g., Blyth et al. 1990; Cukor–Avila 2002; Ferrara and Bell 1995; Romaine and Lange 1991; Tagliamonte and Hudson 1999). One of the most striking developments is the vigorous diffusion of *be like*, shown in (1), which appears to be taking over the system. Concomitantly, the more traditional quotatives such as *say* and *think*, as in (2–3), are becoming much less frequent.

- (1) a. Even though I have the shirt, I *m like*, “I’m going to blend in.”
I *was like*, “Why is every one giving me such dirty looks?” (2/z)
b. She’s *like*, “Guys, I’m going to cry.” She’s *like*, “But I won’t.”
And we *were like*, “No you won’t.” (2/c)
c. You realize it’s just a clock and you’re *like*, “Stupid clock.” (2/b)
d. Like if I was dying, she would *be like*, “No no no, we’ve got to keep going!” (2/i)
e. It’s just *like*, “Drip, drip.” (2/a)
- (2) a. They’re going to *say*, “I have disgusting parents.” (2/o)
b. Doctor gives him an empty jar and *says*, “You bring this back tomorrow.” (2/p)
c. And she *said*, “What are you doing?”
She *said*, “Oh, Miss Mallard really doesn’t care.” (2/e)
d. Kids think they have the right to *say*, “Oh I’m Italian.” (2/c)
- (3) a. People will *think*, “This is a good, like, advantage.”
I was *thinking*, “Okay, now we can have our own pictures.” (2/n)
b. We *thought*, “Wow, this is really funny.”
Then you *think*, “He’s the original remixer.” (2/z)
c. Have kids ever done anything that made you *think*, “They’re so annoying!” (2/w)

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Indeed, Labov describes the rapid expansion of *be like* in discursive speech styles as (personal communication in Cukor–Avila 2002:21–22):

one of the most striking and dramatic linguistic changes of the past three decades, offering sociolinguists an opportunity to study rapid language change in progress on a large scale in order to address the general questions on the mechanism, the causation, and the consequences of change.

However, how *be like* is actually diffusing remains poorly understood. For one, most of the current research targets a specific population, namely, university students. Very little attention has been given to younger or older speakers. Furthermore, with the exception of Ferrara and Bell (1995) and Cukor–Avila (2002), the majority of this work has depended on apparent time to yield insights into the changing quotative system. Given that *be like* is implicated in linguistic change, more information is needed on the apparent vs. real time dimension and, in particular, on whether age–grading is involved. These issues form the basis of the current analysis.

2 Background

First noted just over twenty years ago (Butters 1982), the past 13 years have been witness to an explosion in research investigating this newer member of the quotative cohort. These works include Blyth et al. (1990), Meehan (1991), Romaine and Lange (1991), Ferrara and Bell (1995), Sanchez and Charity (1999), Tagliamonte and Hudson (1999), Dailey–O’Cain (2000), Singler (2001), Buchstaller (2001), and Cukor–Avila (2002) for English, and Golatto (2000) for German. Despite the differing methodologies and foci of these studies, certain trends in the development of quotative *be like* repeat themselves. These include the operation of two internal constraints, Grammatical Person and Content of the Quote, as well as a distinct age bias.

The consensus in the sociolinguistic literature is that *be like* is an ‘under forty’ phenomenon, generally associated with the speech of teenagers and university students (Blyth et al. 1990; Ferrara and Bell 1995). However, this quotative continues to be favored by speakers in their late twenties and early thirties; the drop–off point between the two extremes of *be like* usage appears to be situated during the late thirties (Singler 2001).

Regardless of age, two internal constraints have been reported to condition the use of *be like*. The first, grammatical person, functions to favor this form for first person subjects, as in (1a). The second, content of the quote,

reflects the pragmatic function of *be like*, which traditionally has been to introduce nonlexicalized sounds, as in (1e), and internal dialogue, as in (1c).

Notably, the rise in the use of *be like* has been considered a case of grammaticization in progress (Meehan 1991; Romaine and Lange 1991; Ferrara and Bell 1995). If this is indeed the case, then *be like* is predicted to follow a distinct pathway of development. This pathway, extrapolated from Ferrara and Bell 1995, involves the broadening of the internal constraints on *be like*. Specifically, increased diffusion is expected to lead to an expansion into third person contexts and a generalization across all types of constructed dialogue, including direct speech, both exemplified in (1b, d). Interestingly, sex effects have also been implicated with ongoing grammaticization. Thus, while in the initial stages of diffusion females are thought to use more *be like* than males, this difference is predicted to neutralize at a later stage.

3 Data and Method

In order to explore these issues, we conducted a quantitative analysis of the quotative system in a 3/4 million-word corpus of Toronto Youth English (TYE). The data were collected in the fall of 2002 by second-year university students who interviewed members of their own families or social networks who were between the ages of 10 and 19—mostly brothers, sisters and close friends. The sample criterion was that interviewees have been born, been raised, and lived in Toronto all their lives. An important aspect of this corpus is that the interviewers were not simply participant observers; they were actual members of the same community, making the TYE corpus one of the few data sets collected by in-group members of the current youth culture.¹

This project is part of a larger research program focusing on ‘new’ features of English such as *like*, *just* and *so*, as in (4) (Tagliamonte 2003):

- (4) a. So you get *like* a worm and then you catch *like* a little tiny stupid little dumb fish ... (2/t)
 b. I *just* stayed home ‘cause someone was taking care of me. And then I was *just* watching TV. And I *just* took a nap. (2/g)
 c. I feel *so* out of style! (2/b)

The aim of this program is to investigate the origin of these features within the speech community, their history in the English language, and their cur-

¹The approach the interviewers took was to talk to the participants for about an hour, focusing on informal topics such as school activities, hobbies, sports, friends, problems with their parents, boyfriends and girlfriends, etc.

rent state of development in Toronto. The long-term goal of the project is to contribute new insights into the social and linguistic motivations of language change, and in particular, the influence of youth.

The TYE corpus is summarized in Table 1. The data from university students make these materials comparable to earlier research. It is the age range, however, which starts in primary school, extends to middle school, then passes on to high school, and finally, ends in first-year university, that enables us to address broader questions of language change.

Age	Male	Female	Total
10–12 (<i>primary school</i>)	4	3	7
13–14 (<i>middle school</i>)	3	1	4
15–16 (<i>high school</i>)	2	2	4
17–19 (<i>1st year university</i>)	4	2	6
TOTAL	13	8	21

Table 1: Toronto Youth English Corpus

3.1 Circumscribing the Variable Context

In order to model the effects of real time on the diffusion of *be like*, it was critical that the data be coded following the method outlined in Tagliamonte and Hudson 1999, where the Canadian quotative system was first examined. Accordingly, every instance of a verb introducing constructed dialogue, including tokens of the null form, as in (5), was retained for analysis. Given that *be like* has been implicated in ongoing grammatical change, it is necessary to consider the quotative system as a whole in order to assess the contexts into which this form may or may not be expanding (Tagliamonte and Hudson 1999:155). This approach is consistent with the principle of layering (Hopper 1991; Romaine and Lange 1991) in which grammaticizing forms, while maintaining their traditional functions, expand their functional load to include innovative ones as well. Moreover, unless considered from the perspective of the entire quotative cohort, frequencies of occurrence may not only be inaccurate, but they may be misleading as well.

- (5) a. Three people phoned me one night, Ø “You’re being an idiot.”
 Ø “What?”
 Ø “You’re being an idiot.”
 Three people. I *was like*, “I better stop being an idiot.” (2/c)
- b. She’s *like*, “Jason, can I paint your nails?”
 and I *m like*, “Okay.”
 Ø “Can I paint them green?”
 Ø “No.” (2/k)

Although the current methodology models that outlined in Tagliamonte and Hudson 1999, one aspect bears further elucidation here. Since *be like* is predicted to generalize across all types of constructed dialogue on its route of grammaticization, it is critical to be able to consistently distinguish between constructed dialogue that reports the speaker's thoughts and/or attitude and that which recreates an actual utterance.² Consequently, if not clear from the sequence itself, our basis for coding internal dialogue vs. direct speech was the context in which the quote occurred. If the quote formed part of an "*I said, she said*" sequence or advanced the story-line, as in the first two quotes in (6a–b), it was treated as direct speech. If, on the other hand, it encoded an attitude or a general feeling of the narrator or a group of people, as in the final quotes in the examples in (6), then it was considered internal dialogue.

- (6) a. It could be twenty-five degrees outside and they're *like*, "Where's your sweater?"
 I'm *like*, "Sir, I'm dying as it is."
 It's *like*, "I'm not going—you want to get my sweater?" (2/c)
- b. And then they were *saying like*, "Oh, um, so you're doing like, the grade twelve, um, calculus? So isn't that like O–A–C?"
 And then I'm *like*, "Sort-of."
 But like, they were just being so like stupid. Not stupid, but just like ignorant, and like, they think that they know everything.
 So I *was like*, "Whatever." (2/a)

In cases in which the content of the quote was incomprehensible or the grammatical person could not be disambiguated, the tokens were excluded. This provided us with a total of 1240 tokens for analysis.

4 Results

Table 2 displays the overall distribution of quotatives in the corpus.³ The newer form *be like* represents 60% of the total number of all quotatives, an overall frequency that dwarfs that of both traditional *say* and *think*. Indeed, *think* is vanishingly rare in these materials, accounting for 1% of the data.

²We do not believe that internal dialogue and constructed attitude can be distinguished (see Ferrara and Bell 1995).

³There were only three tokens of *be just* in these materials; they were included in the category of 'other' quotative verbs.

Verb	%	N
<i>be like</i>	60	739
<i>zero</i>	18	229
<i>say</i>	10	123
<i>Go</i>	6	74
<i>think</i>	1	12
other	5	63
TOTAL		1240

Table 2: Overall distribution of quotative verbs

Considered from the perspective of real time, these results are particularly striking. In 1995, the frequency of *be like* was only 13% among Canadian 18–22 year olds (Tagliamonte and Hudson 1999). As just noted, however, in these more recent materials the overall frequency is 60%. A direct comparison with the first year university students in the 2002 TYE corpus reveals an even higher overall frequency, with *be like* representing 63% of quotative usage. This means that the proportion of *be like* has increased by more than 4 1/2 times in the last seven years. In contrast, *say*, which used to be most frequent, has been relegated to a minor variant. It comprises just 10% of quotative verbs overall.

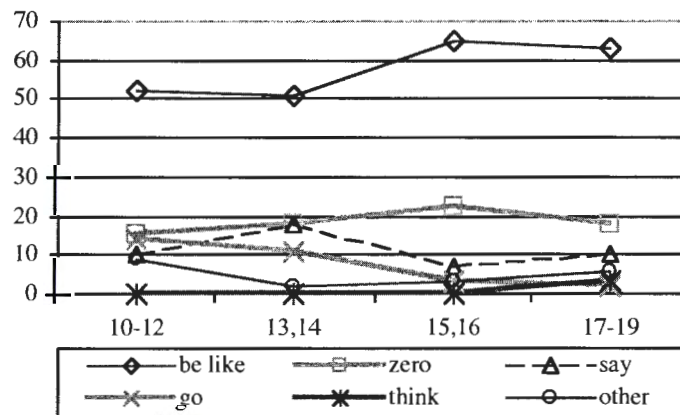


Figure 1: Overall distribution of quotatives by age in the TYE corpus

However, the age range represented by our corpus enables us to supplement the real-time comparison; we are able to plot the trajectory of quotatives in apparent time. These results are displayed in Figure 1 above.

Figure 1 graphically demonstrates that regardless of age, Canadian youth rarely use anything other than *be like*. However, there is a clear trajectory of change in apparent time: the frequency of *be like* rises sharply amongst the 15 and 16 year olds and then remains high. If indeed this change is percolating successively through the generations, as would be expected with an incoming grammatical change, we might expect to find evidence for this in the well-known constraints operating on the use of *be like* that have previously been reported in the literature. These constraints, and the predictions they make for ongoing grammaticization as enunciated by Ferrara and Bell (1995), are summarized in Figure 2.

Measure	Initial stage	Later stage
SEX	Females use more than males	Neutralization of sex difference
GRAMMATICAL PERSON	Favored for first person	Expansion into third person
CONTENT OF THE QUOTE	Used for internal Dialogue	Expansion into direct speech

Figure 2: Summary of predictions for increasing grammaticization of *be like*

In Canadian English in 1995, Tagliamonte and Hudson found that females preferred *be like* over males, but the difference was not significant. Although both the internal constraints were present at statistically significant levels, it was the content of the quote that carried the strongest explanatory value. As a result of this highly circumscribed status and the lack of a sex effect, Tagliamonte and Hudson concluded that there was “no evidence for grammaticization” of *be like* (1999:167).⁴

So, the question is, how do these constraints pan out in Toronto in 2002, seven years later? Moreover, to what extent are the younger generations in the community picking up on them? In order to address these issues, we turn to a multivariate analysis of the use of *be like* in each of the four age groups in the TYE corpus.

⁴Among British university students, Tagliamonte and Hudson (1999) found that the same internal constraints were operative and statistically significant, but, intriguingly, despite greater use of *be like* overall, sex was significant. This is contrary to expectation if sex differences identify an early stage in the diffusion of *be like*.

4.1 Multivariate Analysis

The results of the multiple regressions are displayed in Tables 3a,b below. We will attempt to interpret these results in terms of the three lines of evidence available from multivariate analysis: 1) statistical significance, 2) constraint ranking, and 3) relative strength of factors.

4.1.1 Statistical Significance

As far as statistical significance is concerned, all the predicted constraints on *be like* are significant. The only exception occurs amongst the oldest group, where content of the quote is *not* significant.

	10–12 yr. olds			13–14 yr. olds		
Corrected mean	.58			.65		
Total N	289			119		
	FW	%	N	FW	%	N
Sex						
Female	.50	52	252	.51	47	28
Male	.49	49	37	.50	52	91
Range	1			1		
Grammatical person						
First person	.53	62	86	.65	76	29
Third person	.49	53	146	.43	50	60
Range	4			22		
Content of quote						
Internal	.81	80	30	.87	88	16
Dialogue	.45	51	237	.40	49	77
Range	36			47		

Table 3a: Contribution of external and internal factors on the use of *be like* amongst 10-12 and 13,14 year olds

4.1.2 Constraint Ranking

If we now consider constraint ranking, the overarching observation is that all age groups share the same constraint ranking for both the internal constraints and the external factor of sex. First person subjects consistently favor *be like*

as does internal dialogue, the same as reported for the Canadian data from 1995. The fact that they are found here, seven years later, and that they are visible from the youngest speakers in the community demonstrates that the internal constraints on *be like* are acquired from early stages of development and persist even as the feature rises in frequency. These results also reveal that females consistently favor *be like* over males, regardless of age group. This too is consistent with the results for Canadian English in 1995.

	15–16 yr. olds			17–19 yr. olds		
Corrected mean	.75			.70		
Total N	378			454		
	FW	%	N	FW	%	N
Sex						
Female	.55	71	242	.55	68	122
Male	.40	54	136	.37	48	332
Range	15			18		
Grammatical person						
First person	.65	85	103	.59	78	215
Third person	.42	65	188	.36	57	142
Range	23			23		
Content of quote						
Internal dialogue	.367	74	82	 [.52]	69	137
Direct speech	.45	62	260	 [.49]	62	286
Range	22					

Table 3b: Contribution of external and internal factors on the use *be like* amongst 15–16 and 17–19 year olds

Next, consider *grammatical person*.⁵ Although, as we just saw, the constraint ranking stays exactly the same across age groups, this factor changes from having minimal effect amongst the youngest cohort (notice that the range is only 4), to becoming the strongest contributing factor amongst the oldest with a range of 23. In other words, as the speakers get older the constraint gains in strength until finally it is the strongest constraint of all amongst the university students.

⁵Tokens whose subject was *it* were excluded from the analysis of *grammatical person*, since *be like* occurs nearly categorically in this context (92%, N=87).

Finally, with respect to *content of the quote* we observe that initially it exerts the strongest effect on the use of *be like*.⁶ The interesting thing is that its relative strength changes so dramatically across the sample. It is both significant and strong in the youngest two age groups, but then its strength begins to wane, becoming equal to that of grammatical person amongst the 15 and 16 year olds (compare range values of 23 and 22), and then, as mentioned earlier, by the first year university students, is no longer significant.

4.2 Implications for Grammaticization

How are we to interpret all these results? Well, on one hand the sheer frequency of *be like*, coupled with the consistency of constraints across age groups, demonstrates the extent to which *be like* has permeated the Toronto speech community, and by extension, Canadian English.

On the other hand, as *be like* rises in frequency across the age groups, we can see a definite pathway of change. Indeed, if for illustration purposes the range values are plotted on a graph as in Figure 3 below, it is possible to see the waves of change. We turn back to the predictions in the literature in order to understand how these waves of change may be interpreted.

As discussed earlier, ongoing grammaticization of *be like* has been linked to *neutralization* of a sex difference. Here, in apparent time, there is no such thing going on. The variable rule analysis has revealed that females consistently favor *be like* over males, regardless of age. What the range values add to this picture is that there is a leap in the strength of this social factor that is associated with the age of the speaker. The range is minimal amongst the two youngest groups, indicating that there is little to distinguish male and female. However, from the age of 15–16 onward, the values increase substantially, indicating a rise in female preference for *be like*. In other words, the place where sex strongly correlates with use of *be like* begins in high school, where there is a concomitant spike in frequency, and from then on, its strength is maintained. This suggests that the time for acquiring the relevant social constraints on *be like* is during the high school period. If this is the case, then this may have little to do with grammaticization, but everything to do with the social evaluation of *be like* in the speech community.

⁶Non-lexicalized sounds were excluded from the analysis of *content of the quote*. There were just 38 tokens overall, with 11 or fewer in each age group. With the exception of the youngest group, the majority of these occurred with *be like*.

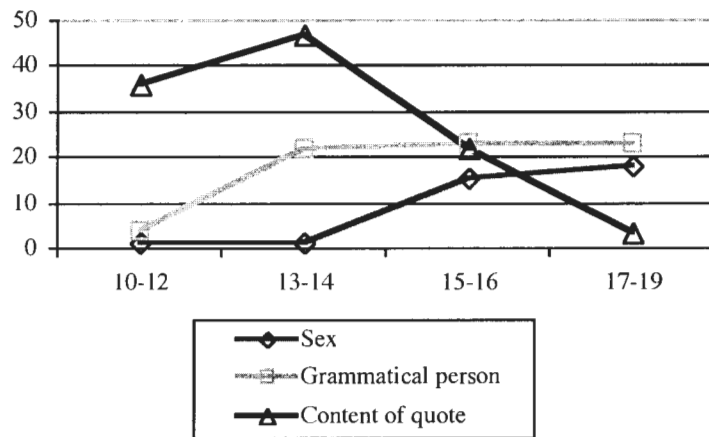


Figure 3: Range values of external and internal factors on the use of *be like* according to age

The grammatical person constraint also fails to meet the predictions outlined in Ferrara and Bell 1995. The multivariate results indicate that this factor is statistically significant for all age groups, with first person subjects favored in all age groups. Furthermore, the plot in Figure 3 demonstrates that once the strength of this factor is established by the age of 13–14 years, its effect is constant from that point onwards. Thus, in terms of ongoing grammaticization, there is no evidence of expansion into third person contexts.

However, as mentioned earlier, *be like* is associated with a specific pragmatic function, demonstrated by its correlation with internal dialogue. Use with direct speech would be taken as an indication of increasing grammaticization (Ferrara and Bell 1995:271).

In the TYE corpus, this factor dominates amongst the youngest speakers, where it eclipses the others. However, the effect drops in strength during the high school period, to the point where it is no longer statistically significant amongst the 17–19 year olds. This trajectory demonstrates that *be like*'s association with internal dialogue weakens dramatically in apparent time.

The question is, does this change indicate increasing grammaticization? Two pieces of evidence point in this direction. First, the propensity for *be like* to introduce internal dialogue levels out while the form is *increasing* in use. Second, the females are ahead in this process. As Figure 4 demonstrates, cross-tabulation with sex in the oldest age group reveals that it is only the

females who show this leveling effect. The males still use *be like* more frequently with internal dialogue, but the females use *be like* for direct speech and internal dialogue equally. In other words, the young men continue to maintain the traditional pattern while the young women are leading the shift toward leveling the pragmatic constraints. This role of females as the innovators is a familiar observation in linguistic change (Labov 1990).

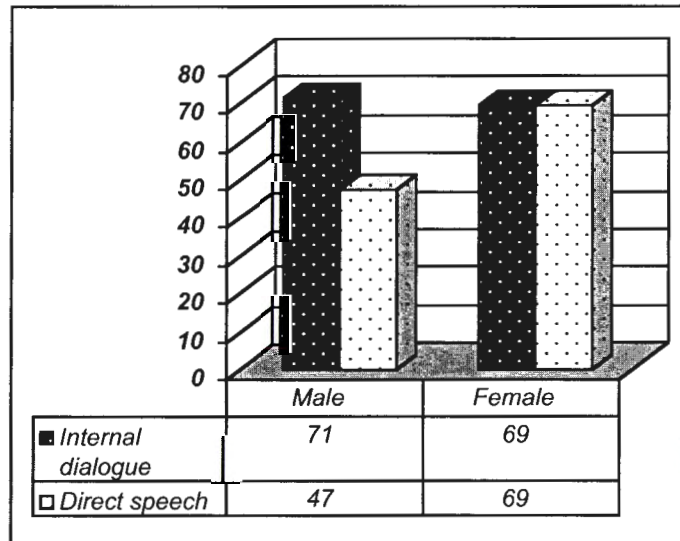


Figure 4: Distribution of *be like* in 17–19 year olds by content of the quote

5 Discussion

These findings demonstrate ongoing, rapid change in the quotative system of Canadian English. Where just seven years ago *be like* comprised only a small proportion of quotative verbs amongst speakers in their early twenties, it has now risen to be the majority form for all speakers between the ages of 10 and 19.

Along with increasing frequency of *be like* there is evidence for constancy of constraints in some areas of the system, but also evidence for ongoing grammatical development as well. Interestingly, the precursors of these were already present in Tagliamonte and Hudson's work from 1995. Given

the unique status of *be like* within English all over the world, however, it is useful to situate the Canadian data within this broader context.

For example, it has been believed that while females favor *be like* during its initial stages of diffusion, this distinction gradually levels out as the form becomes increasingly embedded in the vernacular. Our results suggest the opposite. First, the real time comparison with Canadian English in 1995 shows that as *be like* increases in frequency, the sex effect becomes more marked: sex was not significant in 1995, but in the current materials, which reflect a 4 1/2 time increase in the use of *be like*, speaker sex is significant across the board. The correlation between frequency and sex is mirrored in the apparent time data: the more frequent *be like* is, the stronger effect of sex becomes. These results support Tagliamonte and Hudson's suggestion that the further *be like* diffuses, "the more likely it is to differentiate male and female speech" (1999:167).

At the same time, the reported internal constraints on *be like* are both present. As in earlier studies, *be like* is favored in first person, a constraint that is maintained in apparent time. The consistency of this effect across major varieties of English—Canadian and British English (Tagliamonte and Hudson 1999) and American English (Blyth et al. 1990; Ferrara and Bell 1995)—and in real time amongst African Americans in the rural south (Cukor-Avila 2002), suggests that it is a defining feature of *be like*. Similarly, the effect of content of the quote is also operative. However, with this constraint comes evidence for ongoing grammaticization. Where once *be like* was almost always used for inner dialogue or thought—and this is the strongest constraint reported by those who have tested for it (Cukor-Avila 2002; Tagliamonte and Hudson 1999)—in our data there is clear evidence that *be like* is expanding more and more into direct speech. Indeed, amongst the female university students in our corpus, *be like* is used as much to represent interactive dialogue as any other context. As far as we are aware, this is a new development and has not been reported before.

More broadly, these findings add to earlier research in demonstrating the important interaction of age and sex in sociolinguistic variation. In these materials we observe the same type of interaction found in Eckert's work with phonological variables (1989): *be like* is significantly correlated with speaker sex, but the nature of the correlation is highly dependent on speaker age. Indeed, the striking finding here is the extent to which the advent of sex differences can be pinpointed to a particular stage in a speaker's life. Here, the sex differential does not manifest strongly until the speakers are 15 and 16 years old. This corroborates earlier research in identifying high school as a critical departure point for the social evaluation of linguistic features (e.g. Eckert 1989).

However, we would also like to highlight the changes that take place *before* that. The ages leading up to high school have their own place in the trajectory of change. For example, the youngest speakers already have the pragmatic constraint in place, but the others only develop incrementally. This shows that younger speakers cannot be treated as a monolithic or even binary group differentiating pre-adolescents from adolescents. Indeed, it is only with the more detailed perspective that we have shown here that the emergence of social constraints can be pinpointed. These clearly develop within the vernacular, but appear to be the product of a particular subgroup of the speech community.

What of the question of age-grading? Our results corroborate the real-time findings of Cukor-Avila (2002) where the highest frequency of *be like* usage occurred with speakers in their mid-teens. But, our data also show that the rates remain high up to first-year university, suggesting that if age grading is involved, the effect extends well past the teenage years. On the other hand, there does seem to be a receding trend. In Figure 1, the frequency of *be like* does decline slightly in the oldest age group. This decrease is concomitant with an increase in the use of *say* and *think*, as well as other, semantically richer quotatives such as *explain*, *decide*, *yell*, *sing*, etc. If use of *be like* does begin to decrease in young adulthood, part of this development may be that speakers are no longer as reliant on this form to introduce constructed dialogue because numerous other quotatives are entering their repertoire.

In terms of the bigger picture, however, this study has shed some insight into the *mechanisms* of change. Where once it was unclear whether or not *be like* represented bona fide change, these data suggest that it does. Further, the apparent time data reveal a distinct pathway of development, one that is remarkably consistent with the trajectory of grammatical change from discourse to syntax reported in Sankoff and Brown (1976).⁷ Similarly, we would like to suggest that as *be like* diffuses in the Canadian context we are beginning to see a bleaching of its pragmatic function. Where once it held its own functional niche, distinguishing internal thought from other kinds of constructed dialogue, it now appears to be extending across all functions of the quotative system. At the same time, *be like* is not an unrestricted agent within the quotative cohort. Indeed, contra previous intimations in the literature (e.g. Buchstaller 2001; Ferrara and Bell 1995; Singler 2001), the apparent time results reported here suggest quite the opposite. As this form diffuses, it appears to maintain its association with a particular syntactic environment, introducing the speech of first person interlocutors.

⁷In New Guinean Tok Pisin, the relativizer *ia* originated as a pragmatic marker and gradually developed into a complementizer.

In conclusion, of the three predictions for grammaticization outlined in Figure 2, only one pans out. Rather than neutralizing, the external constraint of speaker sex becomes more marked, increasing in strength as *be like* diffuses further into the quotative system. The internal constraint of grammatical person, on the other hand, levels off and remains stable across apparent time. It is only the pragmatic constraint, content of the quote, that meets the predictions. This constraint weakens dramatically to the point of non-significance as *be like*'s functional load broadens and this quotative serves to introduce *all* types of constructed dialogue. It will be interesting to see what the next step will be.

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