

## The syntax and semantics of *be like* quotatives

Bill Haddican, Eytan Zweig and Daniel Johnson

**Introduction.** This paper focuses on cross-speaker variation in the syntax and semantics of English *be like* quotatives as in (1).

**(1) She was like, “Ok, fine.” (a) ‘She thought/felt like, “Ok, fine.”’ (b) ‘She said “Ok, fine.”’**

Recent corpus-based work on *be like* has suggested that as it has continued to spread, it has undergone semantic change (e.g. Tagliamonte & Hudson 1999): *be like* predicates, originally used exclusively to describe non-speech states of individuals as in (1a), have taken on an additional guise as descriptors of saying events as in (1b). This paper investigates these claims further using experimental data, and proposes a syntactic and semantic account of *be like* quotative predicates. Of particular relevance to the conference theme, our results best fit a semantic rather than lexical ambiguity account of variation in the event-semantics of copular *be*. Contrary to the direction of much current theory (Chomsky 2004), our results therefore indicate more rather than less syntax/semantics in grammar.

**Experiment.** We examined 121 native speakers of American English aged 18-73 ( $M=31.3$ ,  $SD=11.6$ ) in a self-paced online magnitude estimation procedure during the summer of 2009. The experiment compares scores for *be like* and *say* sentences in six environments, as illustrated in (1)-(6). The baseline context was designed with no stativity/eventivity bias, as in (1). The contexts in (2)-(5) bias event readings (Dowty 1979). A final environment with *for* adverbials, as in (6), biased atelic readings—stative, non-speech *be like* in the *be like* case.

**(2) She was being like/saying, “They’re coming tomorrow at 11:00”** (progressives)

**(3) Just be like/say, “They won't ever do it.”** (imperatives)

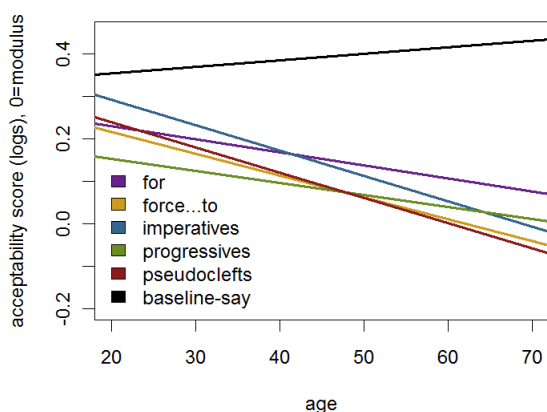
**(4) Tim forced him to say/be like, “Fine, I'll do it next week.”** (force...to)

**(5) What she needs to do is say/be like, “John already quit.”** (do pseudoclefts)

**(6) For an hour, Mark was like/said, “Let's go to McDonald's.”** (for adverbials)

Two lexicalisations were created for each environment, each assigned either to a *be like* or *say* condition yielding two test sets. Subjects were randomly assigned to test sets, and a unique random order of the 12 test sentences and 18 fillers was created for each subject.

**Results.** The results support two main findings. First, the data show continued diffusion of *be like* in both event- and state-biased contexts. Mixed effect linear models revealed



a significant age\*verb interaction for all environments except progressives; this is suggestive at  $p=.08$ . Second, as shown in Figure 1, the trajectories of change for *be like* in the *for* condition (purple) and event-biased conditions have similar slopes: linear regression analyses revealed no significant interaction between age and condition ( $p \geq .32$ ), a finding in keeping with corpus results (Buchstaller & D’Arcy 2009, Tagliamonte & D’Arcy 2007).

**Discussion.** The above results showing the diffusion of *be like* in both state- and event-biased contexts, recall the much studied availability of copula *be* in active contexts as in (8) (Partee 1973, Dowty 1979, Parsons 1990, Rothstein 1999).

**(8) John forced him to be quiet/\*be tall.**

Previous approaches to eventive guises of copula *be* have been of two kinds. Dowty (1979) and Partee (1973) propose two different lexical entries for *be*, one [+active] and one [-

active]. Rothstein (1999), instead, proposes a single lexical item for *be*, which selects for an adjectival (stative) argument, and that the availability of (8) with its eventive reading is attributable to a “repackaging” mechanism, akin to operations that make count readings out of mass nouns in the nominal domain.

The patterns of change shown in Figure 1 and previous corpus results provide support for the latter view. Much literature has shown that contextual effects are typically constant for any single abstract process of grammatical change (Kroch 1989, 1994, Pintzuk 1991, Kroch & Taylor 2000). The lockstep change of event-biased and *for* conditions in Figure 1 is therefore expected if these patterns reflect a single underlying change in the grammar, e.g. on Rothstein’s single-*be* approach, where the two interpretations are governed by an LF rule. On the Partee/Dowty approach, the similar trajectories of diffusion for the two lexical *be*’s are instead coincidental.

Our syntax for *be like* will need to accommodate these semantic facts, and for five further properties noted in the literature, which distinguish it from other English verbs of saying.

First, *be like* is unavailable in reported speech:

**(9) \* John was like that he was hungry.**

Second, when a *be like* quote is questioned *wh*-raising is not possible (Flagg 2007):

**(10) You were like what?                      (11) \*What was she like? (‘What did she say?’)**

Third, unlike other verbs of saying, *be like* does not allow quotative raising (Flagg 2007):

**(12) \*‘‘Shut up’’, Tanya was like.            (13) \*‘‘Shut up’’, was like Tanya.**

Fourth, quotative *be like* is poor under negation:

**(14) ?? Tanya wasn’t like ‘‘shut up’’ twice today.**

Finally, the *be* undergoes subject-aux inversion, even under the eventive interpretation:

**(15) Was she like ‘‘shut up’’ twice in a row?**

We assume that quotes are introduced by a *that* demonstrative (cf. Davidson 1967, Partee 1973, Etxepare 2010). In some dialects, it is overt as in (16); in others it is null (1).

**(16) And they were like that ‘‘How’re you doing, Mary.’’ Glasgow English (Macaulay 2001)**

We take the *like* of *be like* to be a garden variety manner preposition (cf. Lord 1993, Güldemann & Roncador 2002, Blain & Déchaine 2007). Something more, however, is required to account for the restrictions on movement and behavior of negation. Developing Kayne’s (2007 fn. 9) brief discussion of *be like* quotatives, we propose that this something more is a null SOMETHING, as in (17).

**(17) [<sub>TP</sub> *She* [<sub>T</sub> *was* [<sub>VP</sub> *v* [<sub>DP</sub> SOMETHING [<sub>PP</sub> *like* [<sub>DP</sub> THAT [QUOTE ]]]]]]]]]]**

This structure now resembles innovative quotatives in Icelandic which have an overt SOMETHING and share the first four above properties with English *be like*.

**(18) Hann eitthvað, ‘‘ja’’. (‘‘He was like, ‘Yes.’’)** [lit. He something ‘‘yes’’]

On the approach illustrated in (17), the unavailability of *wh*-extraction and quotative raising is reminiscent of restrictions on *wh*-raising out of *some*-quantified DPs, as in (19). Similarly, the unavailability of quotative *be like* below negation is explained by the fact that *some* is a positive polarity item, i.e. cannot scope below negation (Szabolcsi 2004).

**(19) ?? Who did you see some picture of <who>?**

**Summary.** Our analysis provides an account of previously unanalysed syntactic and semantic properties of *be like* quotatives. We argue that cross-speaker variation in acceptability of *be like* in eventive and stative, non-speech readings favours a semantic rather than lexical ambiguity approach to variation in the event semantics of couplar *be* constructions generally. The study also illustrates the utility of controlled experimental techniques for diachronic and microparametric syntax (Kayne 1975, Heycock et al 2010).