

5. Discussion & Conclusion

In this chapter, we will take the information obtained and presented in the chapter Results and interpret it in light of a theoretical framework which may be used to explain the most notable characteristics of the results found. Additionally, the results of the chi square significance test will be mentioned to confirm their importance to this study.

5.1 Predominance of quotatives in *like*

The most significant figures in this entire study came from the analysis of the actual proportion of the quotative function when compared to the other functions of *like*. This directly addresses one of the study's primary research questions: "How has quotative *like* evolved compared to the other functions of *like*? Has its use increased or decreased?" The results show that the quotative function's use has increased to higher numbers than the other functions of *like* presented. As seen in the pie chart for *be like* (Figure 3 in section 4.2 *Be like as a quotative*) most functions of *be like* seem to share an equal place in it, except for the quotative function, which has been distinctly above them since 2003 and possibly earlier. As time passes, its great and rapid increase (in 12 years it was 5 times the raw frequency compared to the beginning) goes farther and farther away from the other functions, until it completely dominates the chart. It's clear that not only its "chances of survival in the lexicon" have improved, as Blyth, Recktenwald, & Wang pondered back in 1990 (p. 215), but it has actually been helping it endure against time and even potentially outlive its fellow quotatives, such as *go*, whose earliest proper reports were in the early 80's (Butters, 1980; 1982; as mentioned in Macaulay, 2001, p. 5), and which seems to be

already dying out in certain places (Tagliamonte & D'Arcy, 2004, p. 501). This effect seems to apply to all conjugations of *be like* in the study, since none of the charts ended with a downslope.

5.2 Be like – Direct Speech and Internal Thought

As shown in Figure 3 (in the Results chapter), both uses of *be like* are almost equally represented in the quotative category of *like*, which becomes even more evident after observing the raw frequency numbers of each. Direct Speech has a total number of 795, while Internal Thought has 745, which means barely 50 tokens of difference. And though it seemed like Internal Thought had fewer numbers in the years 2009 and 2011 (as shown in Figure 1), it quickly returned to having almost the same numbers Direct Speech had in 2013. Observing closely Table 4, Direct Speech reported in that year 128 tokens, while Internal Thought had 124. This means there were only 4 tokens of difference in this year, which made it not all that surprising when Internal Thought finally surpassed Direct Speech in 2015, the last year. All in all, the closeness of both uses in the chart show neither of them is falling out of use.

5.3 Influence of grammatical tense on *be like* as a quotative

For this study, the Past Tense category is composed of the forms *I was like*, *He was like*, *She was like* to provide a form where the speakers narrated a personal experience and another where the event was experienced by someone else. Similarly, the Present Tense category is composed of *I'm like*, *He's like*, and *She's like*. Thanks to this categorization, it is possible to observe the general evolution of quotative *be like* in a certain tense. In particular, the Past tense, which, as previously shown in the Table 16 (where the total

frequency of quotative *be like* is 804) and Table 17 (where the total is 736) in the Results section, has higher numbers than in the Present tense category. This goes against previous studies done by other researchers in America, which suggested that new quotatives “are more likely to occur in the present tense than in the past” (Blyth, Recktenwald, and Wang 1990; Ferrara and Bell 1995; Singler 2001, as mentioned by Barbieri, 2005, p. 229). In addition, in Figure 15 we can see that in this tense, both uses (Direct Speech, and Internal Thought) of quotative *be like* have around the same frequency of use, following the most common pattern until the 2013 downslope, where Internal Thought becomes dominant. The reason for this is found comparing the tables for both *I was like* and *He / She was like*, where we can see Internal Thought is vastly overrepresented in *I was like*. Counting this, the raw total of each category for both tables would be much closer to each other, though in *I was like* the general use of *be like* increases much greater than in *He / She was like*. This trend becomes even more noticeable when the high quantity of numbers for Internal Thought (most of which come from *I was like*) completely surpass Direct Speech, which had been preferred by both Persons during the evolution of the chart. This essentially means Internal Thought has quickly surpassed Direct Speech in a much shorter period of time than the time span it took quotative *be like* to surpass other quotatives, which lasted for several years.

5.4 Influence of grammatical person on *be like* as a quotative

In 1st person singular (see section 4.4.1 in the Results chapter), Direct Speech represents around a third of the total of quotatives, while Internal Thought represents two thirds. In 3rd person singular (in section 4.4.2 in the Results chapter), on the other hand, Direct Speech

represents around 5/6 and Internal Thought only 1/6. As this pattern persists despite tense (see section 4.3 of the Results chapter), it ‘balances’ both uses and gives them similar numbers, which accounts for the equal use of quotative *be like* to report Direct Speech and Internal Thought mentioned earlier in section 5.2 of this chapter. The reason for this balance may be due to the grammatical person. With 1st Person Singular, which consists of *I was like* and *I’m like*, the story told by the speaker had to necessarily happen to them, and for obvious reasons, the narrator knew his own thoughts at that moment. Therefore, reporting Internal Thought becomes very common, even more than Direct Speech. On the other hand, when using 3rd Person Singular, which includes *He was like*, *He’s like*, *She was like*, and *She’s like*, the narrator is telling an event which happened to someone else. It’s possible that they may have not been there themselves and are only retelling something that was once told by them, which makes it harder for them to know what these people were thinking at the time the reported comment was uttered. Assuming their thoughts would also give them some sort of responsibility over their words, they evidently don’t know for sure what someone else is thinking. As just reporting words takes this authority off their shoulders, it follows that reporting Direct Speech is much more common than Internal Thought when talking about events that happened to someone else.

5.5 Future research

What does this mean for future studies about *be like*? Much of the conclusions derived from this work are purely speculative, as there is not much literature that focuses exclusively on the two uses of quotative like. Instead, the focus is on the speakers and other quotatives as a comparison to *be like*. While in this study Reaction Phrases were put in their own category,

they belong in the quotative category, therefore the use of monitor corpora to observe and assess whether they belong to Direct Speech or Internal Thought would certainly make the numbers more true to reality, probably higher, and therefore, more representative. The decrease in 2005 and 2013, which appeared several times in the charts, should also be a good subject for further research, and using bigger corpora like the COCA can also show the general evolution quotative *be like* has undergone in order to adapt to the speakers and fulfill their narration needs, acquiring prevalence and increasing numbers in the charts.

5.6 Conclusion

Quotative *be like* has proven to be a valuable asset when narrating events, no matter who the protagonist is. Over the years, it has become the primary function of the word *like*, and one of the most used (if not THE most used) quotatives, as explained in Chapter 2. This means good things for its future, as its fast increase in use does not seem to be stopping anytime soon. Compared to the other functions of the word *like* (see section 4.1 of the Results chapter), its function as a quotative has completely dominated the others since 2003 (more than a decade ago), and has surpassed functions that have been around for a longer time. Even more importantly, the general evolution of this function indicated this use is alive and well, as the ‘dips’ reported (in the years 2005 and 2013) were very light and were also quickly compensated in the next year. This paragraph answers succinctly the first bullet in the Research Questions section: “How has quotative *like* evolved compared to the other functions of *like*? Has its use increased or decreased?”

The results of this study also show that quotative *like* has been on the increase since 2003 and possibly earlier, staying dominant ever since and seeming to continue upwards as

seen in the latest year, 2015. Its use has increased at a fast rate, and it seems it will keep on being the main function of *like* in spoken American English for a while at the very least.

The second bullet in the Research Questions section for this study focused on the two uses of quotative *be like*: one to express what had been said previously by one of the persons involved in the narration, which is named Direct Speech, and another to express what ran through the mind of these individuals, which is deemed as Internal Thought. In both cases, the protagonist of the narration may be the narrator himself or other people, which brings up an important variable: the probability of assuming what another person was thinking, in the case of reporting Internal Thought in the 3rd Person Singular. This opened the possibility that reporting Direct Speech was the predominant use of quotative *be like* in the third person, which was confirmed by the results, and thus, suggested that *be like* to report Internal Thought was in danger of disappearing. This answers the two questions in the second bullet of the Research Questions section: “How have the uses of quotative *like* (Direct Speech and Internal Thought) evolved compared to each other? Are any of them in danger of disappearing?”

However, the overwhelming use of reporting Internal Thought in the 1st Person Singular proved that both uses have been consistently employed in an equal manner, and that Internal Thought actually had higher numbers than Direct Speech, as shown in Figure 1 in the Results chapter. This is explained by quotative *be like*'s flexibility, since, as shown in this study, it is possible to use it to report both Direct Speech (utterances actually said) and Internal Thought (what someone was feeling or thinking). Speakers seem to notice this too, and that is why this study has found both uses are dominant in certain conjugations: they have found their place in reporting and narration. Internal Thought, which is prevalent only in 1st Person Singular, is mostly used to recount one's own experiences, because narrating

others' has the disadvantage of not truly knowing (or not being able to skillfully convey) what they could have thought during these experiences. On the other hand, the use of *I'm like* allows the listeners to sympathize with the protagonist of the event, which is useful if the protagonist is also the current narrator. This is relevant because despite Internal Thought only being dominant in two conjugations (*I was like* and *I'm like*), their numbers are much higher than the ones found in the 3rd Person Singular charts.

Regarding this study's usefulness to other fields in linguistics, the rules that are behind the use of *be like* as a quotative may be of interest to ESL teachers. As this study suggests, the use of *be like* has increased in the last years, and teenagers tend to be the primary users. People who may want to learn modern spoken English in informal contexts may also find the Literature section useful, as it mentions other quotatives and some of their characteristics. In addition, Table 1 shows other quotatives (in many cases, equivalent) in other languages, which could aid ESL teachers when explaining the concept and function of quotatives.

In short, the quotative function in *be like* is in the rise in spoken American English, most probably due to the fact that it can be used to report both actual words spoken and internal emotions of the characters in a narration, unlike other quotatives, which tend to focus on one or the other. Supporting this, speakers employ both of these uses almost equally, which means that neither of them is going to disappear anytime soon, especially since the latest year showed the highest increase in their timeline. Naturally, this could still change in the future, but for now, quotative *be like* has not only been here for quite a while, but it seems it is also here to stay.