

Continued restructuring of the English quotative system: *it's like*

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Previous studies of quotative *be like* (Gardner et al. 2020, D'Arcy 2017) often mention rare occurrences of quotative *it's like*, as in examples 1-2 from Raleigh, NC:

- (1) *It was like* "You're gonna do what?"
- (2) I'm more Southern than I thought I was, *it's like* "Oh I don't know if I like this."

Quotative *it's like* is normally excluded from quantitative analyses because most quotative verbs cannot take an expletive subject (**it said*). In a qualitative analysis, Fox & Robles (2010) argue that *it's like* reports 'affect-laden, responsive attitude[s]'. The expletive subject normalizes the attitude, giving the sense that 'anyone in this situation' would react similarly (734). This paper reports a quantitative analysis of *it's like* in Raleigh against the backdrop of the full quotative system, especially other forms of *be like* (*I'm like*, *she was like*). All quotative constructions were coded in conversational data from 111 Raleigh natives. Of 2051 quotatives, 115 are *it's like*. The apparent-time change in the quotative system reproduces patterns in previous studies (Figure 1). The 'non-AAE speakers' panel in Figure 1 includes 75 White speakers and 8 speakers born after 1998 whose parents immigrated from African countries; these 8 speakers (triangles in Figures 1, 2), like their White peers, predominantly use *be like*. Among the 33 AAE speakers, *be like* has become the dominant quotative verb, but *say* remains frequent. In both panels in Figure 1, *it's like* rises beginning around 1950, and the rise is steeper for non-AAE speakers. Building on Fox & Robles' conclusion that *it's like* introduces 'affect-laden' attitudes, we consider whether *it's like* in Abstracts 39 Raleigh is used chiefly to report thought and hypothetical speech. D'Arcy (2021) argues that the initial ascent of quotative *be like* reflected the growing tendency to report *thought*. In Raleigh, reported thought rises in frequency after 1950. The function of *it's like* must be considered in relation to this rise. Figure 2 shows the proportion of reported thought that each quotative verb occupies. Among White speakers, *think* initially predominates but is overtaken by *be like*. In the 1980s, *be like* plateaus and *it's like* overtakes both *think* and zero. In contrast, the 8 speakers with African parents produce only 10 *it's like* tokens; *be like* and zero are more frequent. Similarly, among AAE speakers, *be like* remains the strongly dominant form for reporting thoughts; there are only 10 *it's like* tokens. Mixed effects logistic regression models for White speakers confirm that *it's like* more often reports thought than speech, relative to *be like* ($p < .001$); this is consistent with Fox & Robles. However, the interaction between birthyear and thought vs. speech is not significant; rather, **time reference** interacts with birthyear: *it's like* increasingly reports present-time thoughts, relative to *be like* ($p < .05$; fitted values in Figure 3). On the basis of these results and on Fox & Robles' account, we suspect that for White speakers, *it's like* is increasingly the vehicle for reporting current or ongoing, enduring emotion-laden attitudes and thoughts.

Figure 1

Top 5 quotative verbs, per-speaker proportions

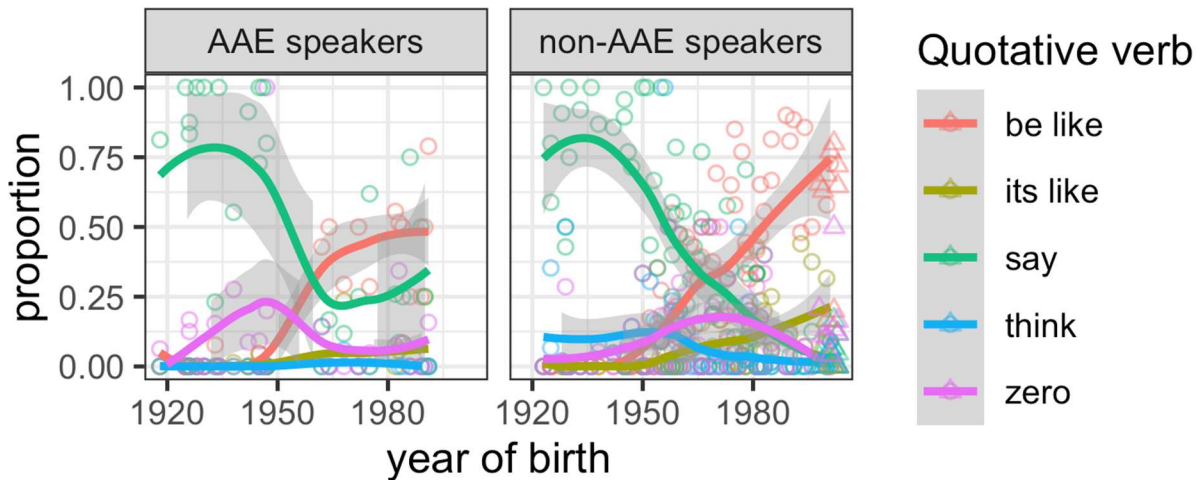


Figure 2

Quotative verbs used to report THOUGHT

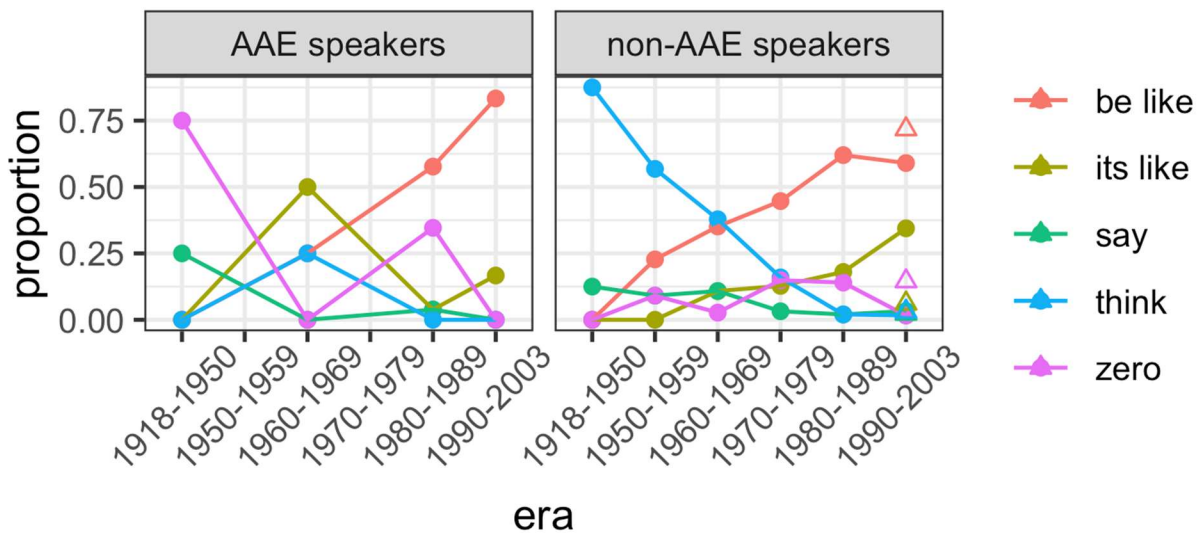
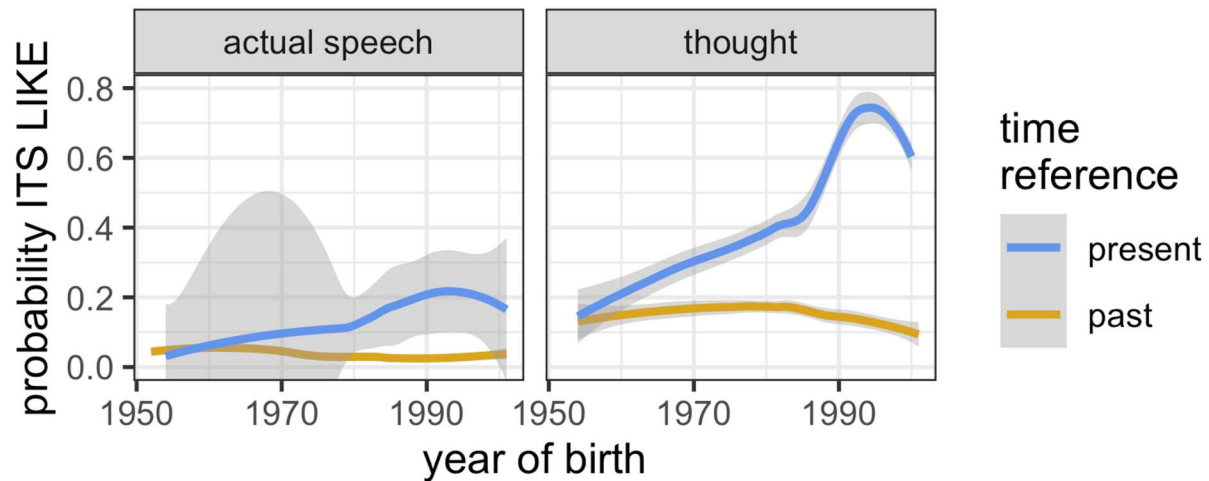


Figure 3

Fitted probability of ITS LIKE vs. other forms of BE LIKE



References

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