

# Social factors affect quotative choice<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

Quotations in spontaneous conversation are introduced by quotatives such as *say*, *be like*, *go* and *be all*. In recent years, the use of *say* in the colloquial English of some speakers has plummeted, but not vanished. We tested what listeners thought different quotation devices meant, whether they reliably interpreted devices to mean those things, and how they used devices in spontaneous speaking. We demonstrate that *say* is used when reporting the words of a speaker of high status or when retelling quotations to a listener of high status. We discuss how the devices used to introduce quotations reflect not only the relationship between the speaker and what is being reported, but also the relationship between the speaker and the addressee.

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## 1. Introduction

The verbs used to frame directly reported speech, called *quotation devices* or *quotatives*, have evolved over time, from *quoth* to *say* to *be like*, providing speakers with more flexible and effective ways of presenting utterances and internal speech (Barbieri, 2009; Fox Tree and Tomlinson, 2008; Marckwardt, 1967). Examples of this device use, taken from the current corpora, include “he said to me, ‘I think you should take the next left,’” and “she was like, ‘it’s not my turn to clean up.’” *Be like* is used by men and women, older and younger, and in a wide variety of Englishes (Blyth et al., 1990; Buchstaller, 2006; Cukor-Avila, 2002; Ferrara and Bell, 1995; Levey, 2003; Macaulay, 2001; Romaine and Lange, 1991; Tagliamonte and Hudson, 1999; Winter, 2002). Indeed, new quotatives, some with meanings similar to *be like*, are found in many languages (Foolen, 2008). It has been argued that *be like* “has replaced *said* as the quotative of choice among college students” (Fox Tree and Tomlinson, 2008:99). But is *say* truly vanishing, or is it becoming specialized?

Two widely accepted proposals for the difference between *be like* and *say* is that *say* indicates a closer relationship between the upcoming quote and the original production being quoted than *be like* does, which stems from its association with the discourse marker *like* (Levey, 2003; Buchstaller, 2001; Romaine and Lange, 1991) and that *say* is used when the subsequent quotation is less emotional (Buchstaller, 2001). Both proposals treat the quoted speech as the primary force behind quotative choice. In these *quotation-centered proposals*, the quotative provides advance information to listeners about either how closely the quotation will adhere to the quoted source or how emotional the source was, or innumerable other relationships, such as vividness, aggressiveness, or humorousness.

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Another view is that the quotation has less to do with the information quoted than it has to do with aspects of the social context. For example, a particular quotation device, or grammatical form of the device, may be favored in reporting the speech of speakers with particular social roles, such as between those with different levels of authority (Barbieri, 2005; Johnstone, 1987). Or, alternatively, a particular device may be favored when conversing with particular types of addressees (Barbieri, 2005). Two *social-context-centered proposals* are that *say* is used in reporting the speech of higher status speakers and that *say* is used in speaking to higher status addressees.

## 2. Accuracy of reporting

The quotation-centered proposal that devices signal differences in source faithfulness has a long history that begins with the distinction between indirect and direct quotation (Coulmas, 1986; Suñer, 2000). Grammatically, direct quotation involves the use of a quotative verb (such as *say*, *go*, or *be like*) or no verb (*zero quotative*) followed by a quotation that is not modified to fit the surrounding speech in terms of person, tense, or deixis. In written text, direct quotation is signaled by the use of quotation marks. Indirect quotation, on the other hand, consists of a verb of speech (e.g. *say*, *ask*, *tell*) with an optional complementizer (*that*) and an embedded complement phrase, which is altered to fit the speech bounding it (Coulmas, 1986). In written text, indirect quotation is not marked from the surrounding words by quotation marks.

Conceptually, the difference between these two types of quotation is that indirect quotation presents speech from the perspective of the reporter, as in “He said that he had received a noise complaint,” whereas direct quotation presents speech from the perspective of the original speaker, as in “He said, ‘I’ve had a noise complaint.’” Though in the past it was assumed that direct quotation reported the exact words of the original discourse (e.g. Volosinov, 1978), studies of real speech contradict this perception of faithfulness (Clark and Gerrig, 1990; Fludernik, 1993; Fox Tree and Tomlinson, 2008; Short et al., 2002; Tannen, 1989; Wade and Clark, 1993).

A related proposal is that quotative *be like* reduces a speaker's epistemic commitment to the reported event (Romaine and Lange, 1991). This aligns with the theory that *be like* is associated with speech that is vague or vacuous (Levey, 2003; Romaine and Lange, 1991), which connects *be like* to the discourse marker *like*, which is proposed to be a hedge (Buchstaller, 2001; but see Fox Tree, 2006, 2007 for contrasting views and for discussion of the use of *like* as a discourse marker versus quotation device). In support of this proposal, a study comparing direct and indirect quotations found that both types of speech contained significantly fewer verbatim words when they were hedged than when they were not (Wade and Clark, 1993). However, the actual relationship between quotative *be like* and accuracy remains unclear. In Wade and Clark's (1993) study, *be like* was only one of several lexical items, such as *sort of* and *whatever*, that were used to define hedges. More recently, a study investigating listener judgments of faithfulness of written quotations found lower ratings for quotations introduced with *be like*, but this was not replicated when the quotations were presented as spoken dialogue (Fox Tree and Tomlinson, 2008). The authors suggest that this discrepancy may be due to greater attention paid to *be like* when seeing it in text form, because this device is normally heard rather than written. We interpret this as meaning that noticing *be like* may cause readers to tap into a folk hypothesis that *be like* indicates vagueness. In Experiment 4, we tested interpretations of faithfulness for the same quotations with and without *be like*.

## 3. Emotionality

Another well-documented distinction between direct and indirect quotation is that direct quotation allows for a more dramatic retelling (Blyth et al., 1990). When utterances were reported as direct quotation, stories were judged to be more vivid, memorable, and persuasive (Wade and Clark, 1993; Labov, 1972; Li, 1986; Schiffrin, 1981; Tannen, 1982). Direct quotations also signaled a higher level of involvement: greater engagement, commitment, and stronger emotional connection (Chafe, 1982; Tannen, 1986, 1989).

The choice of quotative device used to introduce the quoted material is also thought to affect emotional responses. It has been suggested that *be like* is used to introduce quotations with more emotional content and that *say* is used to introduce quotations with less. In support of this quotation-centered proposal, quotative *be like* frequently introduced utterances or thoughts that displayed attitudes and emotions, where this function was determined by its co-occurrence with other emotionally charged or evaluative words and phrases (Adolphs and Carter, 2003; Buchstaller, 2001; Ferrara and Bell, 1995). In addition, *be like* and *go* introduced quotes with high levels of emotion, expressive interjections, thoughts, and non-lexical sounds (Blyth et al., 1990). In contrast to *be like*'s use in conveying a speaker's evaluation of quoted material, *say* has been thought to focus more on the words themselves, when the words reported are more important than the speaker's own opinion (Buchstaller, 2001). Because these conclusions were based on corpus analyses, however, it is difficult to determine whether it was the device itself that was related to the level of emotionality, or if it was the quoted material as a whole that conveyed the emotional information. Experimentally evaluating the differential effects of *be like* and *say* on ratings of emotionality of the same quoted material would help in elucidating whether the effect resides in the quotation device or the quotation.

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