

The Current Usage of the Quotative *be like* in British English

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This study investigates the usage of the quotative *be + like* in current British English. The quotative *be + like* is a colloquial expression that introduces direct quotation of speech and thought (Romaine & Lange, 1991). For example, "I was like, 'Mary, what are you doing?'" (*ibid*, p. 242). It first became a subject of interest in 1980s (cf. Butters, 1982), and was researched through the 2000s. However, these studies mainly focused on American English, and there has been less research conducted over the last ten years. As a result, there is still little known about the expression's present usage differences between Anglophone countries. To elucidate on the current usage of the quotative *be + like* across English variants, this study analyzed how and by whom *be + like* is used in recent British English, specifically in regards to questions concerning the gender of the speaker, the grammatical subject of *be + like*, and the function of this expression. The data were collected from British YouTube clips uploaded from 2016 to 2018. Although most videos are based on the conversations between two or more people, a few are monologues. The topics range widely: documentaries on social problems, interviews to famous figures, young generation's lifestyles or memoirs. In the data, 100 examples of the quotative *be + like* were found in a sample of 54 speakers.

Regarding the gender difference, British people do not associate *be + like* with a particular gender as shown in Buchstaller (2006). The sample comprised of speakers from clips was divided into three cohorts: Female, Male, and Other. Note that in one program, a speaker did not identify as either Male or Female; this speaker was put into the category of Other. Results showed 9 out of 33 Female speakers (27%), 14 out of 20 Male speakers (70%), and one Other speaker used the quotative *be + like* at least once in their utterance. Though large samples will be necessary for statistical analysis, it can be concluded that both female and male speakers use the quotative *be + like*, and in similar ways.

In contrast to the research landscape twenty years ago, current research shows British English now accepts the use of *be + like* with the third person subject. While 44 examples (44%) were used with the first person singular subject, 29 examples (29%) were used with the third person singular. Thus, the present data suggests an increase in prevalence of the usage quotative *be + like* with the third person singular subject since Tagliamonte and Hudson (1999) found that *be + like* was prevalent only in first person usage in British English. Again, although more samples may be needed from the statistical point of view, it seems that the quotative *be + like* has gradually become one of the common options for quoting other's speech and thought over the past two decades.

As a function, *be + like* is used especially for the dramatic representation of how the utterance or thought is expressed visually as well as verbally. It has been considered that the quotative *be + like* is a way of reporting speech and thought vividly (Romaine & Lange, 1991). In addition to the use of *be + like*, gestures, facial expressions, and changes in tone of voice or prosody often accompanied the quotation in the data. This suggests quoted speech introduced by *be + like* goes beyond the mere literal representation of direct speech to a more multi-dimensional reproduction of the nonverbal aspects of spoken communication. Moreover, 21 examples documented hypothetical rather than actual utterances, including nonverbal aspects of what and how the utterance or inner thought would be made in the hypothetical situations. Gestures, facial expressions, and vocal features appeared in these examples as well. Thus, *be + like* represents not only what was said but also how the utterance was or would be said, regardless of whether the utterances were actually made. In this sense, the quotative *be + like* allows listeners to more directly experience the situation in which the utterance is relevant.

References

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