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Revisiting the effect of sex and age on quotative use in American English: A corpus-based study

Over the past two decades, there has been a steady increase in studies of the quotative *be like*, both in American English (AmE) and other English varieties. These studies have typically been based on samples of sociolinguistic interviews collected in a single location, from a relatively limited number of speakers, and have shown that the use of *be like* is affected by two sociolinguistic variables: sex and age of the speaker. While there is some consensus on the effect of age, findings on the effect of sex are conflicting: recent studies of *be like* in AmE (Ferrara and Bell 1995; Dailey-O' Cain 2000) have shown no effect for sex. In contrast, Tagliamonte and Hudson (1999) and Tagliamonte and D'Arcy (2004) found that as the frequency of occurrence of *be like* increases, the sex effect becomes stronger.

The present study investigates the effect of sex and age on the use of the quotatives *be like*, *go*, *be all* and *say* in a 500,000 words corpus of American English conversation (*Longman Corpus of Spoken and Written English*, Biber et al. 1999). The corpus was collected in a wide variety of locations across the US and from speakers across all age groups. The analysis of approximately 1,000 quotatives revealed striking differences in the way that men and women below forty use quotatives. The use of *be like*, *go*, and *be all* is most frequent among young women aged 16-26, and decreases dramatically among women in their late 20s. In contrast, young men prefer *say*, and use *be like* and *go* more frequently after age 26. These findings represent a departure from previous studies of quotatives and suggest that the effect of speaker age and sex on quotative use is more complex than has been posited so far. Results will be discussed in the context of previous research on quotatives. The paper will conclude with methodological considerations on the use of spoken corpora for sociolinguistics research.

References

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