

# On the meaning, function and stereotypes behind focuser and quotative like in English

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Žaper, Marijana

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*Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj:* **Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences / Sveučilište Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku, Filozofski fakultet**

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Sveučilište Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku

Filozofski fakultet

Preddiplomski studij Engleskog jezika i književnosti  
i njemačkog jezika i književnosti

Marijana Žaper

On the meaning, function and stereotypes behind focuser and  
quotative *like* in English

Završni rad

Mentor: izv.prof.dr.sc. Gabrijela Buljan

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**Summary:**

This paper is a selective overview of the literature on two variants of the word *like*, the so-called focuser and quotative *like*. The focus is on their linguistic and sociolinguistic features, as well as their actual distribution in American, English, Canadian, Scottish, and New Zealand English. Among others, I will survey the stereotypes, largely concerning the personality traits, that have been associated with the usage of *like*.

**Key words:** sociolinguistics, *be like*, discourse marker, stereotypes, focuser like, quotative like, grammaticalization



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## 1. Introduction

The linguistic item *like* has become an object of interest of many linguists in the past few decades. It has been known that *like* is a multifunctional lexeme; however, some new functions have been uncovered. The most recent ones are its focuser and quotative role as exemplified in 1 and 2:

1. I'd see her *like* banging this ehmm calculator to get it on during the exam.
2. I'm *like*'urgh' you know.

Of particular importance is the question of the origin and provenance of this discourse marker. It has been generally believed that new variants of *like* appeared in the USA in the 1980s. However, research by Tagliamonte (2004) suggests that it is also found in other varieties of English, namely it extends its usage to the global level of English speaking countries. On that note, it is also noteworthy that the rapid expansion and development of this innovative usage of *like* has been recognized by William Labov as:

one of the most striking and dramatic linguistic changes of the past three decades, offering sociolinguists an opportunity to study rapid language change in progress on a large scale in order to address the general questions on the mechanism, the causation, and the consequences of change. (Labov 2000, personal communication in Cukor-Avila 2002: 21-22)

A considerable amount of literature has been published on the topic of the two variants of *like*; therefore, the focus of this paper is on the review of some research into focuser and quotative *like*. The present research paper builds on existing knowledge in the field of sociolinguistics, in other words, a survey of both social and linguistic features of these variables will be provided. Due to the fact that *like* is commonly associated with youth, the female gender and American English, we will present the findings which demonstrate whether the mentioned views are correct or are merely stereotypes. As a side, but equally important concern, we will also look into the development of *like* and its features, i.e. the process of its grammaticalization.

This paper is divided into four main parts: firstly, the functions of *like* are listed and its usage explained. Secondly, particular sociolinguistic stereotypes are explained, which are commonly associated with the innovative forms. Thirdly, the actual distribution of focuser and quotative *like* is analysed in American English, its origin English variety, and some other varieties of English. The last section will cover the development of the quotative variant.

## 2. Functions of *like*

The lexical item *like* has a number of functions within English grammar. In this section we will look at all meanings and uses of *like* in English. First of all, *like* as a main verb, in the meaning ‘to enjoy’, can be combined with: noun phrase, -ing participial, -to infinitive, and with wh-clause, according to Cambridge online dictionary. These usages of *like* are exemplified below.

3. She really *likes* the singing of Luciano Pavarotti.

4. He *likes* telling jokes.

5. I don't *like* to cycle in the dark.

6. We *liked* how they cooked the fish.

Other significant grammatical functions of *like* are: as a preposition, meaning ‘similar to’, as a conjunction, and as a suffix. The examples of these functions are listed hereafter.

7. My sister is *like* my mother.

8. *Like* any good cook book will tell you, don't let the milk boil.

9. There is something child-*like* about Marianne.

It is of great importance to mention that the lexical item *like* is used in the context of offers and requests in combination with ‘would’, or its abbreviation ‘d, which is more frequently used. What follows after ‘would/’d like’ is a nominal phrase or a verb phrase in to-infinitive form. This function of *like* is used to offer or ask somebody something politely, as exemplified in 10, 11, and 12.

10. Would you *like* another coffee?

11. Would you *like* to watch a DVD?

12. I'd *like* a cheese burger and fries please.

Furthermore, *like* can be used to talk or inquire about one's character or personality. This usage demands an auxiliary verb ‘to be’, and questions require an interrogative word ‘what’. Examples 13 and 14 depict this particular usage of *like*.

13. What's your brother *like*?

14. He's very *like* me but taller and older!

According to Cambridge online dictionary *like* is often used in informal spoken English, where it also has a number of functions. Those functions are: filler, focusing attention, asking for an example, softening what has just been said, saying something is like something else, and reported speech. The first function of *like* is a 'filler', in other words, *like* is used in order to fill in the silence. It is used in the situations when one needs time to think about what to say next. The next mentioned function is 'focusing attention', i.e. *like* can be used to emphasize the most relevant part of the sentence. Furthermore, it can function as an instrument for comparison and questions, as shown above. The most noteworthy function of the above mentioned is the quotative function, about which more will be said below. The above listed usage of *like* in informal spoken English is presented in examples 15 to 20, which have been taken from Cambridge online dictionary.

15. I want to ... *like* ... I think we need to think carefully about it.

16. There were *like* five hundred guests at the wedding. (*like* brings focus to the large number of guests)

17. Funny things? *Like* what?

18. I hated the film. It was very violent, *like*.

19. It's *like* when you go to the airport and you keep thinking that you have forgotten something important.

20. Jason was *like* 'I'm not going to Alma's party because Chris is going to be there' and I'm *like* 'he's so afraid of Chris'.

*Like* is a frequent topic of much sociolinguistic research today due to its new functions. The following quote describes the functions of focuser and quotative *like* briefly: "the first is used generally for non-contrastive focus, as a highlighting device, [...] and the second is as a quotative, used to cite reported speech or thought [...]" (O'Cain 2000: 60). The functions of focuser and quotative *like* are depicted in the following examples, which are taken from O'Cain (2000).

21. "And there were *like* people blocking, you know?"



22. “Maya’s *like*, Kim come over here and be with me and Brett.”

Interestingly, these functions occur not only in English but also “in Swedish, where the marker *ba* (English ‘just’) occurs with both focuser and quotative functions (Eriksson 1995); Tok Pisin, where *olsem* (English ‘thus’) occurs with both focuser and quotative variant (Woolford 1979); and Bislama, where *olsem* (English ‘like; same’) occurs with the focuser function (Meywehoff and Niedzielski 1995)” (O’Cain 2000:61). In the following sections we will zoom in on the features of two new variants of *like*, focuser and quotative, and how they differ from one another.

### 2.1. *Focuser like*

A comparative study by O’Cain (2000) found that the focuser and quotative *like* are connected; however, they do not share syntactic functions. It has been conclusively shown that focuser *like* is “a discourse or pragmatic marker, similar to *you know* or *well*” (O’Cain 2000: 61). As such, it is only natural that focuser *like* should exhibit some features of discourse markers. For instance, it is considered to be optional in a sentence due to the fact that it does not have a clear grammatical function and has an empty lexical meaning (Ibid.).

It is of great theoretical and practical importance to mention the pragmatic point of view. Pragmatically, focuser *like* “can serve a great many purposes, such as to initiate, sustain, or repair discourse, to mark boundary or sequential dependence between discourse segments, or to denote either new or old information in informal speech“ (Ibid.). In sum, it appears that focuser *like* functions as an indicator of both new information and highlighted part of the sentence (Ibid.).

The above mentioned study by O’Cain has revealed that focuser *like* can occur before six distinctive syntactic forms. In order to appear in those positions *like* has to precede new information. Focuser *like* comes before a noun phrase, a predicate adjective or adjective phrase, an adverb, an adverb phrase or prepositional phrase functioning adverbially, a verb phrase, a subordinate clause, and before the entire sentence. It has also been suggested that focuser *like* can take place before numerical expressions (Ibid.). A list of example sentences for each of the respective linguistic contexts of focuser *like*, is given below.

23. “Do we have to read *like* the chapters covered on the midterm for the final?”

24. “Well, it’s not *like* wonderful, but it’s okay.”
25. “Man, get in the car, *like* now.”
26. “I have to *like* go out and drive your car after dinner.”
27. “He was explaining *like* what you do when you go into the Metro.”
28. “*Like* what do you mean?”
29. “I’m *like* six feet tall.”

As this section covered the function and usage of focuser *like*, the following section will present the second variant - the quotative *like*.

## 2. 2. Quotative *like*

In comparison to focuser *like*, the research to date has tended to focus more on quotative *like*. The form of quotative *like* consists of auxiliary verb *be* and *like*, therefore the term *be like* is used sometimes instead of quotative *like*. It has been demonstrated that this variant of *like* “does have a much more specific meaning and arguably also a clear grammatical function, as a quotative” (O’Cain 2000: 61).

Moreover, quotative *like* can take only two related syntactic functions: before an implicit thought or internal dialogue in first person and before a direct quotation in third person (Ibid.). Examples of each are given below.

30. “I’m *like*, I know this stuff. I got a 77 last time.”
31. “My dad was constantly down on me. It’s *like*, ‘Get a job.’ ”

In order to better understand other sections of this paper, it needs to be explained why features of the quotative *like* differ constantly. Simply put, *be like* is in the process of grammaticalization. According to Tagliamonte (2004), who bases her finding on Meehan (1991), Romaine and Lange (1991), and Ferrara and Bell (1995), quotative *like* needs to undergo a change in meaning and function. Data from above mentioned studies has identified the process of *grammaticalization* concerning quotative *like*. This development includes three transitions: layering, specialization, and persistence. These stages of transformation are

explained in the following definition. According to Tagliamonte and Meillet's explanation, grammaticalization is:

the process by which grammatical morphemes develop out of earlier lexical forms (Meillet 1921) - involves a number of concomitant processes, all of which result in either the emergence of innovative linguistic patterns or older ones becoming encoded in a new way. Importantly, new forms replace old forms and old forms take on new functions. As a consequence, form/function correspondences may be fluid for quite some time as forms re-organize, shifting territories and domains of use as their functions coalesce. (Tagliamonte 2004: 496)

As mentioned above, quotative *like* is still in the process of grammaticalization; therefore its features are yet to be defined. In the following sections (see sections 4 and 5) it will be shown how its features have changed during the last few decades. Moreover, it will be interesting to observe how its features differ between the alleged country of origin, the USA, and other English varieties (see sections 4 and 5).

### 3. Sociolinguistic stereotypes

A considerable amount of literature has been published on subjective attitudes toward the innovative variant *like*. Previous studies reveal specific sociolinguistic stereotypes associated with *like*, its actual and perceived distribution. Former research papers were focused on its origin, and the age, gender, and personality traits that are related to the users of *like*. Thus, this section will zoom in on the studies concerned with sociolinguistic stereotypes of newcomer *like*.

It has been conclusively shown by numerous studies that focuser and quotative *like* are more frequently used by younger people than the older ones (O'Cain 2000; Buchstaller 2006; Maculay 2001). More specifically, it is generally believed that "*like* is used in the casual speech of middle-class American teenagers" (O'Cain 2000: 62). Buchstaller has confirmed this statement by declaring "the use of *be like* to be indicative of middle-class teenage girls" (Buchstaller 2006: 364). In addition, evidence of *like* being associated solely with the youth can be already found in the title of some studies, e.g. *You're like 'why not?'* *The quotative expressions of Glasgow adolescents* (2001), or *Be like et al. beyond America: The quotative system in British and Canadian youth* (1999).

However, although *like* is undoubtedly a youth trend, O’Cain has revealed that the number of users of all age groups is rising (O’Cain 2000: 62), (for more detail see section 5).

As far as the gender of the *like* users is concerned, there has been disagreement among scholars about which gender is in the lead when it comes to use of *like*. Over the years, research on *like* has not given consistent results, according to O’Cain (2000), who bases this finding on: Lange (1986), Blyth, Recktenwald, and Wang (1990), Romaine and Lange (1991), Ferrara and Bell (1995), and Dougherty and Strassel (1998). Firstly, it was observed that male gender used *like* more frequently (e.g. in Blyth, Recktenwald, and Wang 1990). Only a year after, studies by Romaine et al. and Ferrara et al. revealed that the female gender dominated in the usage. Later research by Ferrara and Bell (1995) showed that *like* is equally frequently used by both genders.

Nonetheless, the findings over the years show that “regardless of the actual findings, people tend to *perceive* that the use of like is more common among women“ (O’Cain 2000: 63). This finding suggests that stereotypically *like* has become a female feature in spite of the results which indicate the neutralization of sex difference (Lange 1986; Blyth, et al. 1990; Dougherty, et al. 1998).

In addition to speaker-directed sociolinguistic stereotypes, the discourse marker and the quotative *like* is also typically associated with a particular English variety. While it has not been possible to provide a definitive answer to the question of the origin of *like*, it is generally believed that the first usage appeared in the USA, more specifically in California. Numerous studies have shown that *like* is related to *Valley speech* or *Valley girl* (Buchstaller 2009; O’Cain 2000). Moreover, when informants were asked to describe a *like* user, typical epithets were “vacuous, silly, airheaded, [and] California” (Buchstaller 2006: 364).

The majority assumes *like* is only used in America; however, its usage has been reported in many other English varieties (O’Cain 2000: 70). According to Buchstaller et al. the usage of *be like* has been reported in various varieties of English, such as Australian, British, New Zealand, Canadian English, etc. Thus, the association of *like* with only American English appears to be merely a stereotype.

### *Personality traits*

*Like* has stereotypes associated not only with age, gender, and nationality but also with personal characteristics of the user of focuser and quotative *like*. Detailed research by Isabelle Buchstaller (2006) has suggested that *like* triggers a number of associations. Among these associations are specific personality traits, which fall into either of two broad categories, “social attractiveness or solidarity traits” (Buchstaller 2006: 363).

Buchstaller’s research essentially showed how users of *be like* are judged and which traits are attributed to them. A list the following traits was offered to the interviewees to choose among: “calm - giddy; trendy/cool - old-fashioned; educated - uneducated; annoying - pleasant; British - non-British; animated - boring; intelligent - stupid; confident - non-confident; extroverted - introverted; professional - unambitious; glamorous - dull; popular - unpopular“ (Ibid. 371).

The list of personality traits of a *like* user was based on the characteristics that the interviewee had chosen, from which only six were taken into the study. Table 1 shows that the chosen traits are both positive and negative. The *like* user is judged as giddy, animated, and trendy/cool, but on the other hand, the speaker is also judged as less educated, ambitious, and less pleasant. The negative traits are quite interesting due to the fact that the *like* users in the study were university students (Ibid.).

**Table 1:** Personality judgments for *like*

Trait	<i>F</i> (1, 178)
The use of <i>be like</i> is associated with the speaker seeming <i>more</i> :	
giddy	26.383 <sup>***</sup>
animated	6.129 <sup>*</sup>
trendy/cool	8.334 <sup>*</sup>
The use of <i>be like</i> is associated with the speakers seeming <i>less</i> :	
educated	4.152 <sup>*</sup>
ambitious	6.785 <sup>**</sup>
pleasant	13.819 <sup>***</sup>

Note: Means are from 5-point scales. Higher values indicate higher values of the variables.

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

In sum, the speakers who use *like* may seem cool and amusing; however, one might be judged as being less educated, if their interlocutor is not informed of their background (Buchstaller 2006: 372).

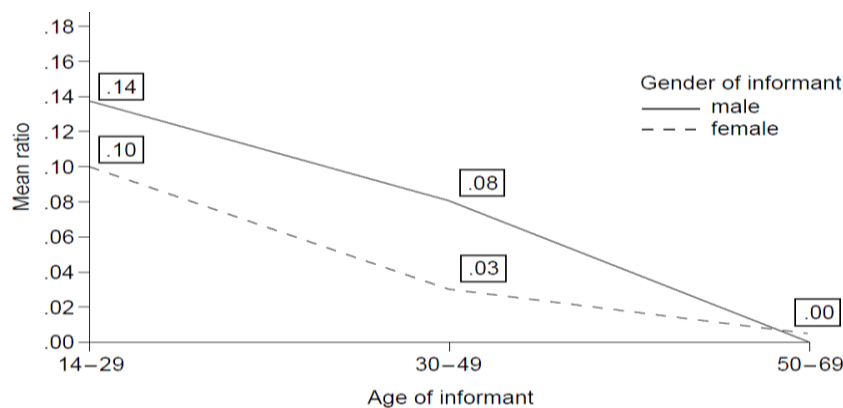
In addition, the usage of *like* is likely to be perceived as negative. According to O’Cain, there are positive as well as negative associations with *like*. Nevertheless, the interviewees described their interlocutors who did not use *like* as “less polite and less friendly” (O’Cain 2000: 74). On the other hand, the results also showed that people tend to avoid *like* in order not to appear less educated. In sum, it seems that it is more important to appear well-educated than friendly, attractive, and cheerful (O’Cain 2000: 75).

In this section we showed how *like* users are perceived and its sociolinguistic stereotypes, the following section will demonstrate its actual sociolinguistic usage in different varieties of English.

#### **4. Actual distribution in the USA**

There is a divergence in usage of *like* between American English and other varieties of English (Buchstaller 2009). Therefore, since *like* was first studied in the USA, research on the sociolinguistic distribution in America will be presented in this section, while the next one will cover *like* usage in other varieties of English. This section is based on the studies by O’Cain (2000) and Buchstaller et al. (2009). It is noteworthy to mention that O’Cain’s research studied both focuser and quotative *like*, while Buchstaller examined only the quotative variant.

Firstly, the results concerning the gender distinction will be presented. Contrary to popular belief that *like* is a female feature, O’Cain (2000) reveals a higher number of male users. Even though it is not very significant, there is a gender distinction between the users. The following figure illustrates the usage of focuser *like*, which shows that male speakers use it slightly more frequently than women. It is important to mention that Figure 1 can also apply to the results of quotative *like* (O’Cain 2000: 66).



**Figure 1:** Focuser *like* usage by age and gender

On the other hand, Buchstaller's study (2009) reveals the opposite results. As far as the gender of speakers is concerned, *like* is characteristic of the female gender in American English. There has been much controversy over a typical *like* user, which is clearly indicated by these two studies with contradictory results.

As far as the age distinction is concerned, there seems to be a significant amount of individual variation in the use of *like*, with some speakers not using it at all, and others using it more than a hundred times, according to O'Cain (2000). Still, general patterns are clearly discernible. It is apparent from Figure 1 that the number of *like* users varies not only by gender, but also age. In other words, this study found that the use of *like* is less in evidence among older age groups and that *like* is a definite youth trend. Thus, the stereotype regarding the age proved to be correct (O'Cain 2000: 66).

Additionally, Buchstaller's study has offered some more precise results concerning the age of the speakers. The overall distribution of quotative *like* has been examined among younger and older speakers in American, British, and New Zealand English. The findings show high frequency in the usage of the American speakers. The American youth represents the most frequent *be like* users among other examined varieties of English (Buchstaller 2009: 309).

We continue this section with a report of O'Cain's (2000) results for the sociolinguistic distribution of focuser and quotative *like* in the USA. It was observed that the speakers did not use both *like* variants equally frequently. Focuser *like*, as a marker of internal thought, was found to be used much more often in comparison to quotative *like*, which serves as a maker for an actual direct quote. The results showed that more than a half of the speakers did not use quotative *like* at all, while others used it mostly once. The highest number of

quotative *like* occurrence by a speaker is 19, what suggests low frequency in contrast to the focuser variant (O’Cain 2006: 67-68). In order to understand this statement, it should be considered that “quoted speech or quoted internal thought occurs far less frequently in natural speech than new information in any of the possible contexts for focuser *like*” (Ibid. 67).

The following table serves to demonstrate both age distinction and low frequency in usage of quotative speech, and therefore of quotative *like*. It is evident from Table 2 that there is age distinction in both numbers of the quoted speech or thought overall and number of quotative *like*. The youngest group uses quotative *like* an average of 5.8 times per conversation, while other groups use it much less frequent, 0.9 and 0 times per conversation (O’Cain 2006: 66-67).

**Table 2:** Number of occurrences of quoted speech or thought and of quotative *like* by age

Age of speaker	Mean number of occurrences of quoted speech or thought overall	Mean number of occurrences of quotative <i>like</i>
14–29	12.4	5.8
30–49	10.3	0.9
50–69	4.8	0

In sum, there is a significant age variation between the *like* users, whereas gender distinction did not prove to be substantial. The last noteworthy result of this study is that focuser *like* is used far more frequently than the quotative variant. Interestingly, much research has put focus on only the quotative *like* although it is less frequently used.

This study presented the distribution and the features of both focuser and quotative variants of *like* in the USA. In the following section we will look at the studies based on other varieties of English.

## 5. Actual distribution in other varieties of English

The similarities and differences between American English and other varieties of English will be presented in this section. To illustrate the distribution of *like* in other varieties of English,



data on the following varieties will be presented: British English, Canadian English, and New Zealand English. The purpose of this section is to give insight into predicted features of *like*, as well as information on how *like* expands in other varieties of English. This section is based on the findings from Sali Tagliamonte et al. (1999) and Isabelle Buchstaller et al. (2009). It is noteworthy to mention that both studies have only studied the quotative variant.

The study *Localized globalization: A multi-local, multivariate investigation of quotative be like* (2009) has proved that *be like* has spread to a number of varieties of English. Thus, this study provides an analysis of three representative varieties. They are American, British, and New Zealand English, which represent three continental regions. The other study *Quotative system in British and Canadian youth* (1999) has examined features and expansion of quotative *like*. The emphasis was on the distribution of *be like* which would provide evidence of language change and diffusion. With the purpose of evaluating the current stage of development in Canada and Great Britain, three factors were observed: grammatical person, context of the quote, and speaker sex (Tagliamonte, et al. 1999: 154). In addition, the analysis in Tagliamonte's study is concerned with the expansion and diffusion of *be like*, as predicted by Ferrara and Bell (1995), (see Figure 2).

<b>Measure</b>	<b>Initial stage</b>	<b>Later stage</b>
<b>Sex</b>	<b><i>be like</i> use by females more than males</b>	<b>Neutralization of sex difference (sociolinguistic expansion of <i>be like</i>)</b>
<b>Grammatical person</b>	<b><i>be like</i> used with 1st person</b>	<b>Expansion into 3rd person</b>
<b>Content of quote</b>	<b><i>be like</i> used for dramatic effect: non-lexicalized sound and internal dialogue</b>	<b>Expansion of use to direct speech</b>

**Figure 2:** Summary of observations for an increase in the spread of quotative *like*

In contrast to earlier findings by O'Cain, Tagliamonte's study (1999) demonstrated that quotative *like* is favoured by women. It was predicted that both genders will use it equally frequently, as seen in Figure 2; however, data from the study reveals that the preference by female gender is statistically significant in British English. The results apply to Canadian English as well. Even though they are not statistically significant, it is apparent that the female gender favours quotative *like* slightly more than the male in Canadian English (Tagliamonte, et al. 1999: 151).

According to Buchstaller, there is a divergence between American English and the other two varieties, British and New Zealand English, as far as the gender of speakers is concerned. *Be like* is characteristic of females only in the American variety in comparison to other varieties, where the male gender dominates in usage. Therefore, it is apparent that the results are again inconsistent; however, it is noteworthy to observe the change in the British English. The dominance of the gender has altered, which might lead to the predicted neutralization of gender difference.

As for the co-occurrence of quotative *like* with different grammatical persons, the results do not indicate any expansion into third person contexts. The study indicates that the context of the first person for quotative *like* is used in both British and Canadian English predominantly (Tagliamonte, et al. 1999: 152). The other study has presented the same findings. Results have also shown that first person subjects are used more frequently than third in each of the varieties; thus, no evidence of expansion is evident (Buchstaller, et. 2009: 306).

Moreover, as shown in Figure 2, it was assumed that the content of the quote will be expanded to the usage of direct speech from the usage of non-lexicalized sounds, such as *whoosh*, *bloop*, *urgh*, and of internal dialogue. Contrary to expectations, this study did not find a significant expansion into direct speech in either British English or Canadian English (Tagliamonte, et al. 1999: 152). There is a consistency in the results between these two studies. Buchstaller reports, as far as the content of the quote is concerned, thought dominates over speech, in other words, speakers tend to quote their thoughts rather than other persons' words. Nonetheless, there is evidence of the change in the content of the quote in other studies, according to Buchstaller.

In sum, the results of these studies indicate that quotative *like* is indeed used in other varieties of English. Therefore, the stereotype regarding the national provenance of *like* is not valid. It is evident that some features of *be like* are inconsistent, for instance, the gender-preference for *like*. There is also similarity in the results concerning the grammatical person and the content of the quote. Namely both studies have shown a consistency in usage of the first person context, and therefore the usage of the internal thought is preferable over the direct speech. Although some of the results proved to be contradictory, it is of great relevance to examine them further in order to determine conclusively the features of quotative *like*. The

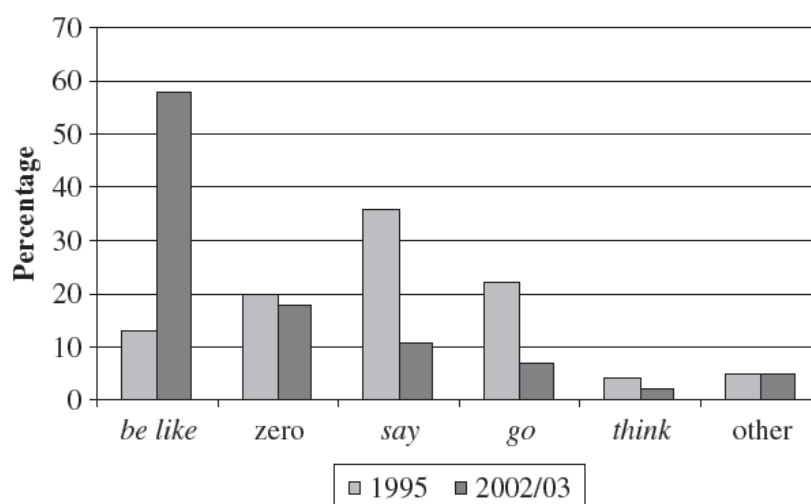
following section presents the development of the quotative *like*, where we can observe the process of grammaticalization.

## 6. Development

In this section we present the findings of a study which attempted to trace the development of *like* in Canadian English over a time-span of nine years (Sali Tagliamonte and Alex D'Arcy 2004). In this study the authors set out to examine 'new' features of English, among which is the quotative *like*. The focus was put on the current stage of development of the quotative system in Toronto, by comparing its distribution to that of 1995. The same factors were used: grammatical person, gender, and content of the quote. The authors not only used the same factors for the analysis of the features of *like*, but also relied on the predictions about the development of *be like* made by Ferrara and Bell (Tagliamonte, et al. 2004: 497-498).

First of all, the overall distribution of quotative *like* in 1995 is presented. In the British quotative system the form *be like* accounted for 18 percent of all quotative verbs; while in Canadian English it only accounted for 13 percent. This result reflects the fact that in spite of geographic proximity *be like* is less frequent in Canada in comparison with Britain, according to Tagliamonte and Hudson. It is proved that "the spread of linguistic features does not necessarily follow geographic lines of transmission" (Tagliamonte, et al. 1999: 167).

A comparison of the two developmental stages revealed that the usage of the innovative form *be like* has risen significantly. The data in Figure 3 indicates that "the proportion of *be like* has increased by more than four and a half times in the last seven years" (Tagliamonte, et al. 2004: 501). More specifically, in 1995 quotative *like* represented only 13 percent of the quotative system, while in 2002/03 it represented 68 percent of the total number of quotative verbs. Based on these results, it can be argued that the quotative system, including *be like*, is fascinating because it allows us to observe dramatic linguistic expansion and diffusion (Ibid.).



**Figure 3:** Distribution of quotatives in Canadian English in 1995 and 2002/03

Furthermore, the majority of the findings in the present study are consistent with the findings of the one from 1995, i.e. all age groups favour first person contexts and in all groups female gender dominates in the usage. In other words, the predictions by Ferrara and Bell (1995) have not been realized yet. There is no evidence of neutralization of sex difference, nor expansion into third person subject (Tagliamonte, et al. 2004: 503).

However, one noteworthy development was discovered. As far as the content of the quote is concerned, speakers in the age group of first year of university students prefer using quotative *like* with direct speech over internal dialogue. According to Tagliamonte and D'Arcy, this finding may be seen as a beginning of grammaticalization. The findings of Canadian quotative system in 1995 showed no evidence of grammaticalization of *be like* due to unfulfilled predictions of expansion. More recent findings revealed potential evidence of grammatical change due to the dramatic expansion in usage by both genders and probable change to direct speech (Ibid.: 504-507).

This study showed the relatively recent development in usage of quotative *like* in Canadian English. This argument suggests that it gradually becomes more relevant in the English quotative system. Additionally, there is evidence that *be like* has developed not only in usage but also in form, which will be presented in the following section.

### *Development in form*

It is of the great theoretical and practical importance to examine the development of the form of *be like* as it is transferred to other varieties of English. In other words, we will have an insight in the process of passing the innovation such as quotative *like* in other varieties. The study *The quotative expressions of Glasgow adolescents* (2001) by Ronald Macaulay serves as a great example to show divergence between the primary and developed stage of usage originated in other varieties of English.

Among English varieties only Scottish English revealed “evidence of some innovation or confusion in the transmission” (Macaulay 2001: 9). The innovation lies in adding *that* in the form of quotative *like*. It is evident that *that* in this form is “the demonstrative pronoun and not the complementizer” (Ibid.). In other words, the function of *that* in quotative *like* is to emphasize the following information. This newly developed form is used mostly in the past tense, what is demonstrated in the examples from 30 to 32 (Ibid.).

32. “I was *like that* ‘On you go’,

33. and Amanda was *like that* ‘Batter him’.

34. you were *like that* ‘Aw shut up man’” (Macaulay 2001: 9).

This study is relevant due to the fact that it presented a perhaps nationally-specific development in the form of *be like*. Scottish English reveals “some distortion in the transmission process” (Ibid.: 18). Namely it has become evident that the transmission to other varieties of English changes its features, i.e. adds new ones. These new features are of great relevance in the research of innovative linguistic items.

### **7. Conclusion**

The purpose of the present paper was to demonstrate the current findings concerning the sociolinguistic distribution of quotative and focuser *like*. It has been shown that the lexeme *like* is indeed multifunctional. Due to the fact that focuser *like* is optional in a sentence, the majority of research has focused more on the quotative variant.

As far as stereotypes associated with *like* are concerned, there has been inconsistency in results. The stereotype regarding the gender of users suggests that the female gender tends

to use it more frequently. The results have shown that over the years there has been much controversy over the typical user of *like*. Some studies present the male gender as a more frequent user, while others claim it is the female gender that uses *like* predominantly. However, the results have also, surprisingly, shown that in some cases the usage of *like* is not gender specific. In other words, *like* was equally present in both male and female conversational patterns.

Nevertheless, the majority of the findings indicate that *like* is a feature of the female speech. In addition to these facts, it is relevant to mention the growth of *like* users in general which may lead to the neutralization of gender difference. Additionally, due to the fact that some studies have researched occurrence in other varieties of English, it is safe to state that the stereotype, which claims *like* as only American feature, is merely a stereotype.

Moreover, the last stereotype associated with *like* is related to the age of users. Each presented study in this research has conclusively shown that both focuser and quotative variants are characteristic of younger speakers. Hence, *like* as a definite youth trend is evident in every examined variety of English in this paper. However, the study of quotative system in Canadian English by Tagliamonte and D'Arcy demonstrated the rapid expansion in usage by both young and adult speakers, i.e. the number of *like* users increases constantly. Therefore, it is likely that future research will reveal neutralization of age difference as well. Furthermore, some studies of the reception of *like* suggest that people associate specific personality traits with *like*, mainly that the user is cool and giddy. On the other hand, the user may at the same time appear to be less well-educated or less ambitious, which is paradoxical due to the fact that the majority of the *like* users studied are high school or university students.

Additionally, the development of its features and usage has been examined in some varieties of English. There are studies which make predictions about the future development of the features of *like* (Ferrara and Bell, 1995). When it comes to the factors of gender of the speaker, grammatical person, and content of the quote, the authors predicted that it will come to the neutralization of sex difference, expansion into third person and into direct speech. However, the studies so far have shown the following preferences: speakers prefer first person subject over the third, thus they combine it with their thoughts rather than with direct speech. It is relevant to mention that the results have shown inconsistency in features, which implies that *like* is still in the process of grammaticalization.

In addition to the rapid expansion, a study on *like* distribution in Scottish English showed development in the form of the quotative variant. Scottish speakers added *that* before *be like*, which makes this variant of quotative *like* unique among the national varieties. It is argued that this divergence occurs due to confusion in the spread. Hence, in comparison to the American variety, the features of some of the other varieties of English are not shared; however, there are features which are consistent in each variety. Although particular factors proved to be dissimilar, it is of great relevance to examine them further.

It is clear that much additional work will be required before fully understanding the linguistic and sociolinguistics of *like*. To achieve that goal, future research needs to be consistent in including the same features of focuser and quotative *like* in order to better determine their profile across the different national varieties.

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