

**Beyond the speech community:
Quotative *be like* and the ‘linguistic virtual collective’**

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This paper evaluates the concept of the speech community, in light of the diffusion of quotative *be like* in present day English, e.g. ‘I was like, no way!’. Presumed to be of Californian origin (Macaulay, 2001:3), this feature has spread rapidly across the English speaking world, into British and Canadian English (Tagliamonte & D’Arcy, 2004; Tagliamonte & Hudson, 1999), and Glaswegian English (Macaulay, 2001), among others. This has occurred – especially in Britain – with very little actual interaction with Americans, but a disproportionately intense input from film, television, music etc.

The problem for sociolinguistics is that in each case, despite a possible media influence, quotative *be like* appears to be following perfectly normal routes of diffusion across the speech community: through successive age and gender groups. In this sense it looks like a normal linguistic innovation; it just happens to be springing up in different places. This tends to overshadow the possible rôle of the media. The question remains, however, of where exactly quotative *be like* came from in the first place; and this is left largely as speculation or presumption in Tagliamonte & D’Arcy (2004), Tagliamonte & Hudson (1999), and Macaulay (2001). By concentrating on interpersonal interaction, these authors have no place for the media. Nevertheless, Macaulay (2001:17-8) is drawn to briefly ponder its effect, especially in terms of American film.

I will argue that the media can still play a rôle, but a very different one to interpersonal interaction, and that this deserves a reappraisal of the concept of the speech community. The media, I will argue, occupies a space between otherwise fairly discrete speech communities, allowing the transmission of linguistic innovations between them, whereupon those innovations diffuse across the speech community as per normal. This supra-speech-community language grouping, linked together predominantly by the media, I will call the ‘linguistic virtual collective’.

References

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