Quotation across time: West Australian English then and now

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The contemporary quotative system of Englishes around the world (exemplified in 1-4) has witnessed the emergence of ‘innovative’ forms such as be like to introduce speech, sound, thought and gesture (Buchstaller 2006: 5). Additionally, self-revelation has emerged as a discourse mode where speakers increasingly imbue their narratives with reports of their inner thoughts, attitudes and feelings. This change in narrative style has been observed for American (Ferrara & Bell 1995) and Canadian English (Tagliamonte & D’Arcy 2007) and more recently for England (Buchstaller & D’Arcy 2009) and New Zealand (D’Arcy 2012). However, little is known about the evolution of quotation in Australian English (AusE).

(1) I told my tute teacher to just like shush and she was like: ‘Excuse me?’ (Rodríguez Louro 2013: 53)
(2) I walked down the hill and as I was going down the hill I thought: ‘By Jove, I might be able to get into the Flying Corps. Wouldn’t it be lovely?’ (HBM1889)
(3) Dad had no time for religion. He reckons it was just a big, bloody business robbing all the poor people! And he says: ‘Well, that’s her thing; she can go for her life on that so long as it doesn’t interfere with me!’ (FBM1922)
(4) So you’re thinking positive and the next thing you know, they find out you’ve got a record or something. ‘Tough luck Charlie. You don’t get the job’. (TMM1970)

This study offers the first quantitative sociolinguistic analysis of the quotative system of earlier and contemporary AusE, investigating to what extent social (sex, occupation) and linguistic (grammatical person, content of the quote and tense) variables are implicated in the use of quotation across time. Collected between 1963 and 2011, the 822,144-word corpus consists of spontaneous narratives of personal experience extracted from the State Library of Western Australia oral history collection and the University of Western Australia (UWA) Corpus of English in Australia (Rodríguez Louro under construction).

A singular real time depth of 48 years and an ample apparent time perspective, with speaker ages ranging from 11 to 93, show that the Australian system of direct quotation has experienced dramatic change from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century and that – in line with D’Arcy’s (2012) findings for New Zealand English – the quotative system was in flux well before the arrival of be like. Say clearly dominated in the introduction of third-person speech encoded in the past tense, decreasing steadily as we approach contemporary times. Crucially, the expansion of the quotative system is initiated by non-professional males, in line with the view that men and covert prestige have been pivotal in the formation of AusE (Kiesling 2004: 422).

In tracking the trajectory of quotative variation and change in Australia, this study offers crucial data from a dialect of English which has received little attention from variationist sociolinguists. The adoption of tried-and-tested hypotheses and data extraction and analysis methods allows us to confidently compare findings across varieties, getting a step closer to a consistent account of discourse-pragmatic variation and change.
References


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