

Reporting on reported speech:
transmission and diffusion in the Canadian English quotative system

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The quotative system has offered linguists the rare opportunity to observe a linguistic change progress from near-incipience to near-completion over an uncommonly brief time span, while at the same time diffusing over vast geographical space. Despite the prodigious body of literature on the topic, it is still unclear just how this was achieved. Here we apply variationist sociolinguistic methodology, to which quotatives have been shown to lend themselves particularly well, to the linguistic and social embedding of this change in a population of English speakers whose sociolinguistic circumstances should render them most resistant to the incursion of innovative *be like*. Using the constraint hierarchy as a key diagnostic of grammatical structure, we first examine different *states* of the quotative system at a point in time when several variants were still in robust competition, yielding a bird's-eye view of the linguistic reorganization they underwent to accommodate the incursion of the innovator, *be like*. The details of its variable conditioning reveal that this is an "under-the counter", rather than "off-the-shelf" change; yet it has been perfectly acquired by minority Anglophones in the absence of face-to-face interaction. Where did they get it? We show how the same methodology forces us to reject the standardly-cited avenues of diffusion (transmission, contact, media).