

GOSSIPING: INTRODUCING DIRECT QUOTES IN STORY RETELLING

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The language used to report direct quotes in a narrative (more commonly known as 'stories' or 'gossip') tends to be stylized. However, the forms used to introduce direct quotes can reveal something about the reporter's opinions of the people and events in a narrative, as well as the actual events. Currently, the American English system of reporting speech or thoughts in a narrative is undergoing change, increasing the emphasis on the reporter's attitude toward the events, and on the degree of certainty that quoted words were actually spoken. This change has driven a re-analysis of various words not used formerly in narrative reports. This research attempts to show that two new forms for reporting speech, *be like* and *be all*, are used and that they are functionally differentiated from the 'correct' English *say*. The study is a preliminary one, and the results were inconclusive. However, *be like* appears to be used more often when the quote was not actually verbalized by any speaker, whereas *be all* appears to be used exclusively for actual, spoken quotes.*

INTRODUCTION

1. Languages change in many different ways. One way, of course, is to introduce new words into the language either borrowed from another language (like *angst* or *ketchup*) or made up of elements already in the language (such as *latchkey* or *computational*). Another type of change occurs when people use words or phrases in the language in new ways, such as the gradual change in English of the word *hound* from meaning simply 'dog' to meaning 'a certain kind of dog': The reanalysis of existing forms. Reanalysis often begins with members of society who are not considered to be in high social standing, who are not, perhaps, 'taken seriously'; the current research looks at forms which society considers to be indicative of the speech of empty-headed young women (Blyth, Recktenwald, & Wang 1990). The form is undergoing reanalysis currently in adolescent speech (Blyth et al. 1990, Romaine & Lange 1991)—teenagers are another group not always taken seriously—but also is spreading to other age groups. The reasons why one set of changes 'catches on' and spreads through the population, while others fade out in a few years are unclear. According to Blyth et al. 1990, the forms considered here are spreading because they fill a function not filled by (current) Standard American English. After years of common use, some of the changes may work their way into dictionaries and grade-school grammars of the language: Change has occurred.

This paper explores innovations for introducing a direct quote into a narrative. The forms are (in inflected forms) *be + like* and *be + all*. The forms always precede a direct rather than indirect quote. *Be like* can be used to introduce constructed dialog (speech which the listener assumes to have been spoken during the event, or a close approximation of such speech; Tannen 1986) or a representation of an internal thought or emotion which was not vocalized (Blyth et al. 1990). By contrast, *be all* appears to introduce only clauses which were spoken. These innovations are considered by most native speakers of English to be slang or colloquial, or at any rate, not correct English; the 'correct' forms are the verbs *think* to represent unspoken thoughts and *say* to represent spoken utterances (Standard American English has no forms that allow to speaker to introduce direct quote syntax which represents an internal emotion or state). Because of the lack of prestige or convention attached to the use of *be like* and *be all*, they occur only in informal English, e.g. when friends are gossiping.

Romaine & Lange 1991 discuss two forms in addition to *say* which can introduce direct speech: *go* and *be like*, as in the following example:¹

(1) She goes, 'Mom wants to talk to you.' It's like, 'Hah, hah. You're about to get in trouble.' (230)

The authors mention that *go* appears to be older and therefore has been somewhat more extensively covered in the literature; they do not mention the use of *be all*, which therefore appears to be newer yet.

Because these three new forms are currently undergoing reanalysis, their functions are not completely stable, as one would expect.

When retelling a narrative, three essential participants are: the listener, the reporter, and the speaker (or actor). The reporter (the person giving the gossip, or telling the story) and the speaker (the person in the story) are frequently the same, e.g. when a person relates an event that happened to her/him the day before. However, when talking about events that happened to a third person, it is necessary to distinguish between 'speaker' and 'reporter'. *Be like* seems to be used to report or modulate the speaker's (not the reporter's) feelings, which may or may not have been explicitly spoken at the time of the event. In other words, if the same content were introduced by *say* or *go*, it would be more likely interpreted as a reported speech (Romaine & Lange).

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¹ Quotes used in the text without attribution were overheard by me on the University of Colorado/Boulder campus.

Reported speech is a somewhat ambiguous term as it may or may not refer to speech actually vocalized at the time of the event. A number of factors contribute to this ambiguity, including the reporter's memory. Tannen refers to 'constructed dialog' to divorce the term from any notion of verbatim reporting. Nevertheless, reported speech is felt to be an adequate representation of what was actually said by the speaker (Romaine & Lange).

The most recent study (rather than analysis) of *be like* was by Blyth et al., who conducted a series of interviews with 20 women and 10 men, ages ranging from 20 to 72 years. From their analysis of the transcribed conversations, they determined that *go* was unambiguously used to introduce constructed dialog, while *be like* could be used to introduce either constructed dialog or internal thoughts/states. Both forms were used for dramatic effect during a narrative.

The work by Romaine & Lange is more extensive, diachronic analysis of *like* (not just the quotative *be like*). Synchronically, they analyzed chiefly transcripts from various corpora of spoken or written (i.e. newspaper articles) language. In their analysis, *be like* ambiguously introduces constructed dialog or internal thoughts/states. They stress the contrast of *go* and *say*, which introduced only constructed dialog, with *be like*.

Indirect quotes have a similar function to the use of *be like*. The reporter is able to indicate his/her own feelings toward the emotions or content of what the speaker is feeling/speaking. However, indirect quotes also require a more complex use of English and lack the emotional impact of direct quotes (Blyth et al.). *Be like* combines the emotive impact of direct quotes without having to attribute the quote in fact to the speaker. Because the reporter is assuming a knowledge of internal states, *be like* is most often used with first person singular (Blyth et al.), and less often with the third person singular. Blyth et al. do not report any use with second person singular; I, myself, have only very rarely heard it used that way.

The form *be all* appears to occur with direct quotes. There is no representation of the internal state of the speaker. Laura Michaelis (personal communication) feels that the use of *be all* may indicate some negativity toward the speaker or situation on the part of the reporter. Although 'negativity' may be too strong, this seems to be correct. Some evidence suggests that *be all* may also be used to show irritation or perplexity instead, as in the following example:

(2) And he's all, 'Well, why did you come over?' And I'm all, 'Because I wanted to talk to you.' And he's all, 'Well, why didn't you say so?'

There was no indication that the reporter disliked the persons involved; but the context suggested that the event was an uncomfortable situation; one which, perhaps, the reporter would rather had not occurred.

This article reports on two experiments designed to elucidate the function of the use of *be like*, especially, and to a lesser extent, *be all*. The method was chosen to elicit naturally occurring instances of the desired forms. It is very similar to the approach used by the authors in the volume edited by Chafe (1980). Chafe and his colleagues designed a video to control the amount of knowledge participants had of a certain situation. There was no speech. In contrast, the narratives designed for the present experiments were written (not videotaped) and contained several speech events. The narratives were written from the point of view of one of the protagonists, who is relating it to the participant. Like the video in the study by Chafe et al., the narratives are a potentially natural series of events (talking about friends) presented in an experimental environment.

The operating hypothesis was that *be like* and *be all* are functionally differentiated from *say* and *go* and from each other. It was hypothesized that *be like* would be used to represent internal states/thoughts more often than constructed dialog. The corresponding null hypothesis would be that the different forms would be used interchangeably for stylistic variation.

EXPERIMENT I

2.1. SUBJECTS. Ten subjects participated as part of the requirement for an introductory psychology class: six males and four females. Their ages ranged between 17 and 23 with the mean age being 19. Subjects were paired by gender to facilitate informal language.

Two pairs (one male, one female) of subjects were friends prior to volunteering; the other subjects met their partners during the experiment.

Each subject was assigned to be either the designated talker or the designated listener.

2.2. MATERIALS

2.2.1. PRETEST. Prior to receiving instructions, all subjects received a short questionnaire, asking their age, the state or city where they were raised, how long they had lived in Boulder, and whether they belonged to a sorority or fraternity.

Both written and oral instructions were given. Separate instructions were written for the talker and the listener, but each subject received a copy of both. Oral instructions were pre-written as a script to be followed but not memorized. The language of the oral instructions was kept as close to the experimenter's natural language as possible without using any target form.

2.2.2. TEST. Each designated listener received the background to the story. Each designated talker received the background and the story itself. The story describes a short event and subsequent discussion between a couple, told from the woman's point of view. It is written in Standard American English. Efforts were made to keep tone and language neutral as regards formality. It was felt that using an informal writing style might influence the subjects' choice of words later (in fact, any style would influence a later choice of words). Also, informal speech can vary greatly between dialects; writing that would read naturally to speakers of one informal dialect would be considered inaccurate to speakers of another dialect. By keeping the English of the narrative as neutral as possible, it was hoped that dialect variance would be avoided.

There are nine direct quotes in the story: five spoken by the woman (Maggie) and four by the man (Dave). Three other statements explicitly refer to Maggie's state of mind.

Both background and story are included in Appendix A. A small tape recorder was used to record the retelling.

2.3. PROCEDURE. After subjects had signed the consent form and filled out the initial questionnaire, they were given written instructions along with the background or the background and story to read. When they had finished reading, the experimenter removed the stories, began taping, and gave oral instructions. The experimenter stressed the idea that the story should be told as if the protagonists were friends of the subjects. Subjects were told to make up their own answers to questions about the story if necessary. The experimenter left the room while the subjects discussed the story.

2.4. RESULTS. All designated talkers successfully retold the narrative given to them, making six narratives. Each narrative lasted approximately 3 to 15 minutes and contained the major elements presented in the text.

During the narratives, subjects sometimes used the pattern for direct quotes to add color or credibility to the narrative. Direct quote patterns were determined by change of tense and/or pronoun within the quoted material. Aurally, a small pause frequently occurred before the onset and full phrasal intonation used in each quote (these were not measured instrumentally and were not used to determine if a clause was a direct quote). The subjects used a total of 25 sentences that could be called direct quotes. These occurrences are broken down by the introducing form and summarized in Table 1.

	Unspoken	Spoken	Total
Like	4 (100%)		4 (16%)
All		8 (100%)	8 (32%)
Say	3 (50%)	3 (50%)	6 (24%)
O	3 (43%)	4 (57%)	7 (28%)
Total	10 (40%)	15 (60%)	25

TABLE 1. Quotative phrases

Table 1 shows the number of occurrences per form. No subject used the verb *go* to introduce a quote. The column headings, Unspoken and Spoken refer to whether the quote represented an internal state or idea, or an actual quote. An unspoken quote is a phrase which follows the criteria for a direct quote (change of tense and/or person) but which did not appear in the narrative. Because the quote had not been given in the narrative, the talker must intuit some information about the speaker's state of mind, or internal state. Although subjects were encouraged to make up missing information about the narrative, no subject created additional events or episodes. All discussion was about the narrative given. Spoken quotes refer to those which were contained as quoted material in the narrative.

In Table 1, *be like* introduces only quotes which were not explicitly contained in the narrative; *be all* introduces only quotes which were. This is in line with the hypothesis. However, *say* introduces quotes which were both explicitly included and not included in the narrative. This may be due to the nature of constructed dialog: the narrative was a product of imagination, not something actually witnessed, and subjects were encouraged to add material. Quotes introduced by *say* could have been said, but were not told to the reporter.

This experiment was not designed to give any information about how well subjects knew each other before doing the experiment and whether the subjects used informal language. However, the data clearly shows that direct quotes are more often used when the subjects were familiar with each other.

	Direct	Indirect	Total
Friends	21	4	25
Strangers	4	6	10
Total	25	10	35

TABLE 2. Direct and indirect quotes

Between strangers, *be all* was not used to introduce any quote, and *be like* was used only once. Again, there is not enough data to make this finding firm.

2.5. DISCUSSION. When speakers describe an internal state, they must have information about the internal state. The best known internal states are, of course, one's own, although one can guess about a third person's internal state—the most dangerous to guess are those of the listener (second person singular) (Romaine & Lange). The narrative used in this experiment was completely in the third person, which allowed the reporter to infer the inner states of Maggie.

The hypothesis for the use of *be all* was also consistent with the data. It was used exclusively for spoken quotes.

The verb *say* was used equally to introduce spoken and unspoken quotes. This was shown in the results to point out more clearly the functions of *be like* and *be all*. It is probable that, with more data, use of *say* would be more confined to spoken quotes.

The differences between the style of speech between friends versus that between strangers bears remarking. The greater use of direct quotes used during narratives given by friends shows greater emotive affect. Speech style is overall more informal; opinions are expressed with greater ease; more emotional words are used. Because the experiment was not designed to test these things, they were not measured directly, however the greater emotive power had an impact on the results: that is, there were far fewer direct quotes used among the 10 subjects than expected.

Perhaps due to the lack of data, the differences between the men and women were not apparent. There were two pairs of women; one pair gave a great deal of data (they were friends), but the other pair used no direct quotes (they did not know each other). Because these two pairs performed so differently, results based on sex differences cannot be drawn.

This experiment suggested that *be like* was being used by the narrator to report internal or emotional states rather than reconstructed speech. The next step is to clarify whether listeners perceive a functional difference between the different forms and whether that difference can be measured in any way. A second study, designed to elicit judgements on differences, has shown that this problem may not be easy to solve.

EXPERIMENT 2

3. In a second experiment, a narrative text similar to the previous one was recorded (see Appendix B). Because it was recorded, it was written in informal (rather than neutral) English. More importantly, all direct quotes (there were nine) were either spoken or thought by the protagonist only (Maggie); and each quote was introduced with *be like*, *go*, or *say* (use of *be all* was abandoned temporarily to reduce the number of active variables). Subjects were asked to listen to the narrative and afterward to make judgements on the direct quotes for whether they felt the quote represented an internal or external expression (i.e. whether Maggie actually said the direct quote). The results were clear: there was correlation between the use of *be like* with unspoken quotes, and no correlation between the use of *say* or *go* with spoken quotes; see Table 3. Because several pieces of literature have explored the use of *be like*, and because the findings of Experiment 1 followed theirs, the results were puzzling.

	<u>say</u>	<u>go</u>	<u>be like</u>
Narrative 1	3.88	3.75	4.29
Narrative 2	3.67	3.94	3.67
Narrative 3	3.5	3.5	4
Total	3.7	3.73	4.02

TABLE 3. Results from Experiment 2

The most likely explanation of the results of this experiment is that the methodology failed to capture the distinction in focus. The study required that subjects not only attend to the direct quotes, but that they care whether the quotes were actually vocalized. This did not occur. Apparently, although we have the capability in English to make that distinction, it may not be a very salient distinction to make, at least, not in a laboratory setting.

A second cause of the ambiguity comes from the quotes themselves. The quotes used in the follow-up study were carefully designed to be ambiguous in terms of vocalization. It may be that the quotative used to introduce direct quotes is not sufficient to distinguish whether it was actually spoken. Listeners may be attending to other, possibly stronger, cues as well, such as deixis and use of pronouns.

CONCLUSION

4. These findings show that, if further follow-up studies are pursued, a number of different methodologies should be considered. One possibility is that listeners cannot attribute vocalization without the cue of the quotative. In this case, an experiment could be run where the narratives remain the same, but the quotes listed at the end should be recorded with their quotative:

(3) She's like, 'Oh my gosh, I am so embarrassed.'

The hypothesis is that the quotative will provide enough clues to make a more certain judgement. The problem with this methodology is that, when listening to the quotes, the subjects will be attending to the introduction and *be like* is a non-standard form. Most people have only rarely thought about using *be like*, and being required to make a judgement on its use, may be more confusing than enlightening. Or, subjects may assume that because it is used in the same place as *say*, it has the same function as *say*. In short, by placing the quotative in a position where it will be attended to, subjects may attempt to cognitively interpret the form, leading to results that contradict intuitive use of *be like*.

Another possibility is to ask the subjects to listen to the quotes during the narrative: Forcing subjects to attend to the material may yield better results.

In the above studies and the above suggestions for future studies, the focus has been on controlling whether something was actually said during the initial event. It may be more fruitful to focus solely on the listeners' interpretation. It may be useful to use pre-recorded videos of talk shows or other programs where there is natural speech. Subjects would be asked to attend to any reported speech (potentially either indirect or direct quotes), giving judgements on whether they feel the speech was actually vocalized. This method seems like the best alternative for a future study.

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APPENDIX A. BACKGROUND AND NARRATIVE FOR EXPERIMENT 1

The background: Maggie and Dave are dating. Maggie is Christian, and doesn't drink. Dave likes to party. Most of the time, they do okay together, but occasionally, they will go to a party and Dave will drink too much and embarrass Maggie. She feels terrible when this happens. Dave always feels very guilty after these events, and usually doesn't drink much for the next several parties. But after a while, he usually slips, something embarrassing happens, and so forth.

Everybody likes both Maggie and Dave—they're fun people. Most of their friends can't believe that Maggie and Dave have never really talked about this problem together.

The story: This story was told to you by Maggie, who is a good friend of yours.

Last weekend, Dave slipped. He drank a huge amount of beer at a party they went to, threw up in the bushes, nearly went to sleep in Maggie's lap, tried to kiss Maggie's best friend (who didn't want it), then Maggie practically had to carry him out to the car to get him home. She was really upset—she had to apologize to her friend and it made her really embarrassed.

Maggie decided she needed to talk to Dave about his drinking. Usually, he just drinks too much, and then doesn't drink much for a while, so usually she tries not to say anything about it. This time, she wanted to talk to him.

On Sunday, Maggie decided she had to talk to Dave no matter how bad his hangover. When she saw him, she knew he was feeling really bad, but she almost didn't care. She brought up the subject of his drinking. Dave had a tremendous hangover and had trouble focusing on her words.

"Dave," she said, "it really bothers me when you get so drunk at these parties."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because you usually do something really stupid, and I feel really stupid because I'm with you."

"What do you want me to do about it?" Dave seemed to be mad, Maggie told you, but maybe it was just his hangover. Maggie said that Dave is usually really sweet and never snaps at her like that.

"Well, I think there's a few things we could do..." Maggie started.

"WE? you mean me, right?" asked Dave.

"No, I mean WE" and Maggie told him that besides simply controlling his drinking, Dave could tell her if he felt like drinking too much—and then she could leave the party early. That way, she wouldn't have to be around while he was obnoxious and drunk.

"It bothers you that bad?" asked Dave.

"Yeah, it does." said Maggie. She felt bad about telling Dave that because he seemed to be really surprised—but everything had been bothering her so much, she couldn't help it. She hopes it will all work out okay. She cares for him a lot.

APPENDIX B. BACKGROUND AND NARRATIVE FOR EXPERIMENT 2

The background: Maggie and Dave are dating. Maggie doesn't drink much and doesn't enjoy being around drunks very often. Dave, on the other hand, likes to party hard. Most of the time, they do okay together, but occasionally, they will go to a party and Dave will drink too much and do something that embarrasses Maggie. She feels terrible when this happens.

Dave always feels very guilty after these events, and usually doesn't drink much for the next several parties. But after a while, he will slip, something embarrassing will happen, and so forth.

Everybody likes both Maggie and Dave—they're fun people. Most of their friends can't believe that Maggie and Dave have never really talked about this problem together.

The narrative: I finally talked to Maggie on the phone last night and you are not going to believe what happened.

So you know how Dave's not been drinking much lately? Well, Saturday Dave got really drunk, again, and he threw up—I guess he threw up all over the bushes and everything. And he actually tried to kiss Claire, you know, Maggie's friend. Claire was totally grossed out 'cause Dave tasted like puke and I really don't blame her. And Claire tells Maggie, of course, and Maggie SAYS, "Oh my gosh, I feel really bad." And she's apologizing for everything—apologizing for Dave 'cause he's so drunk. And she GOES, "I hate it when he gets drunk like this." And she's LIKE, "Oh my gosh, this is so embarrassing."

And so finally Dave passes out on Maggie's lap and she's looking around and she sees some of his friends and wants some help getting him into the car. So Brandon comes over and she GOES, "Oh my gosh, I feel like a total derelict." And Brandon offers to help her get Dave out to the car and she's LIKE, "Oh my gosh, I wish Dave would take of himself."

And so they finally get him in the car, and they get to his house, and by that time Maggie's so mad that she just wants to leave him in the car all night. But so Dave woke up enough to be able to actually walk in the house. Which is really probably pretty good, or she might've just left him there in the car anyway.

So anyway, Maggie decides she just has to talk to him, she is really bugged. So the next day, she goes over to his house and walks in and sees him laying on the couch and at first she feels really sorry for him, 'cause he looks really dead. I mean, he looks Really Bad. So first she felt really sorry for him but then she SAYS, "I don't even care" because he had been so drunk and she was so mad.

So they're sitting there and you know, she wants to tell him what's wrong and everything, and Dave is just sitting there with his hangover, and Maggie SAYS, "I guess I really need to talk about what's bothering me" and she goes on and tells him how much it p.o.'s her that he gets so drunk and always ends up embarrassing her. And at first he seemed kinda mad that she was talking about this and wanted to know what he was supposed to do about it, like he shouldn't have to do anything at all. And Maggie gets all pissed and she GOES, "Why should I have to come up with everything?" But then she calms down and asks him if it would be okay if he told her while he's getting drunk so she could just go home, you know, before he did anything stupid. And Dave, Dave's all surprised 'cause he had no idea that this was bothering her so much. And Maggie's surprised that Dave's surprised and she's LIKE, "Oh my gosh, it's so obvious." I don't know why Maggie didn't bring it up sooner, but I guess that's her. She sometimes expects you to read her mind, y'know?

So they finally worked it out and I think they talked about it all day. And Dave finally agreed to at least tell her when he was halfway drunk, so she could leave then. I think they're going to make it, but I don't know. It's a weird situation.