How 'to be like' a Kiwi: Verbs of quotation in New Zealand English[1]

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1. Introduction

This project was done as the second part of the University of Canterbury New Zealand English course. For the first project of the course, students interview two speakers, who read a word list and engage in half an hour of casual conversation (Gordon & Maclagan 1995: 27). For my purposes, I examined the conversational parts of 24 recordings, both from the year 2000, the most recent data, and the earliest similar recordings available, from 1995 and 1996. This was undertaken as a pilot study, to determine whether any trends were discernible which might make further study worthwhile.

2. Background

Verbs of quotation are used to introduce reported speech, and are found especially frequently in narratives. The introduced speech is usually direct speech, but may also outline a person's inner thoughts or emotions during the event being described.

There is a great variety of verbs of quotation available to the speaker. However in speech a small number of verbs tend to be repeated, partly as a result of having less time to formulate what will be said. As will be shown below, the choice of verb may depend on factors such as age, sex and socio-economic status of the speaker and their audience, as well as narrative considerations such as the type of story being told and the effect the speaker wishes to convey. Which verb is used may also depend on the 'fashion' of the time and of the particular group to which the speaker belongs.

A continuum, or progression, of quotative verbs, between speech reported using explicit verbs such as *say* and *tell*, and speech without any formal quotative verbs at all, was proposed by Tannen in 1986 (Romaine & Lange 1991: 236). Research in the United States (as yet unpublished, but reported by Dennis Preston, personal communication) has suggested a similar continuum between five verbs of quotation used in casual speech, that have been observed to appear and grow in popularity and acceptance in a certain order:

to say → to go → to be like → to be all → to be

Examples from the present study:

1. I said 'oh Peter I've spilt 10 litres of paint through the back of your car' (Karl)

2. He goes he goes 'don't worry about the test it's okay' (Mark)

3. I was like 'you're kidding' (Reece)

4. And he's he's just all 'no no you go ahead' (Stacey)

5. I was 'oh just cruisin' '(Richard)[2]

The continuum forms an implicational hierarchy, which is demonstrated in the way the verbs appear strictly in this order, so that a speaker who uses *to be like* also uses *to go*. For instance, once *to be like* is taken into the repertoire, its use will increase until it appears as much as the other verbs of quotation. *To say* and *to go* will still be used, but proportionally less often, since the number of possible choices of verb has increased.

2.1 Other languages

Interestingly, similar verbs can be used as quotatives in languages other than English, and have made their appearance in similar orders (Dennis Preston, personal communication). This phenomenon has been found in Mexican Spanish, South American Spanish, French and German. For instance, in Venezuelan Spanish, direct speech can be introduced using any of the following (literal translations on the right):

Él dijo	he said
Él arrancó	he started (like 'to go')
Él siguió	he carried on (like 'to go')
Y depués	and then
Y entonces	and then
O sea	in other words (like 'to be like')

(Dr Erwin La Cruz, Univercidad de los Andes, personal communication)

2.2 How did these verbs develop their new meanings?

The last four verbs in the continuum for English had to take on additional meanings so that they could be used to introduce reported speech. For example, both *to go* and *to be like* developed their present meaning by metaphorical extension (Romaine & Lange 1991: 265). There may be a natural tendency for verbs of motion to also act as verbs of saying, since this happens in other languages, such as French (*ça va comme ça...*) and Swedish (*komma* meaning 'to come' is used to form quotations by young people) (Romaine and Lange 1991:241).

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[2] In the use of this verb form, the quote is introduced primarily by intonation. Other quotative verb constructions also use intonation, but also use the verb as a more formal introduction to the speech reporting.

To be like may also have been influenced by grammaticalisation (Romaine and Lange 1991:257). This is a gradual process whereby lexical forms acquire new status as grammatical or morphosyntactic forms, or grammatical forms become more grammatical. The change which occurred with *like* was an addition of the extra grammatical function of quotative complementiser to its existing repertoire which included preposition, suffix and conjunction. Other languages, such as Tok Pisin, Haitian Creole and Providence Island Creole also have complementisers that have developed from prepositions.

No work has yet been done on the forms *to be all* and *to be*. *To be* seems to be simply a trimming down of the verb construction, leaving out anything that could be inferred from the context, so that the reported speech is made separate by intonation only.

2.3 Who uses these verbs more?

Very little research has been done on the occurrence of some of the verb forms that are part of the continuum. Most work has concentrated on the *to be like* form, and none has yet been published on all of the five verb forms together.

To be like was first reported in the United States in 1985, when Tannen found that it was used 8% of instances of quotative verbs (Romaine & Lange 1991: 236). It has since been found in England, Scotland and Canada. Other studies have found its use to be age-graded, used mainly by younger people (Dailey-O'Cain 2000: 62), but there has been so far no consensus on which gender uses *to be like* more. Some studies report it appears more frequently in women's speech, others in men's speech, and still others say the two are even (Tagliamonte 1999: 151).

3. The present study

This study considers the occurrence of the five verbs in New Zealand English which form a continuum; *to say, to go, to be like, to be all,* and *to be*. In America, speakers have been found who are at the right-hand end of the continuum, using *to be* more than any other quotative verb. Are New Zealand speakers following the lead of Americans in their use of quotatives? If so, how far along the continuum are we and are there differences between different groups within society?

If the verbs following *to say* in this continuum are found, they have been introduced very recently. This is an opportunity to study linguistic change in action, and evidence will be sought to demonstrate that the change is currently underway.

3.1 The recordings

I listened to 24 half hour-long interviews taped by New Zealand English students for their first project of the course (Gordon & Maclagan 1995: 27). The recordings had an even split of sex and socio-economic groupings (Maclagan & Gordon 1999: 52). Because I wished to look at change over time, half the tapes were taken from the year 2000, and half from the years 1995 and

1996. Most of the speakers were between the ages of 20-25. The exceptions were one female speaker from 1995, who was still at school, and the four recordings of older people aged 50-55, which were included in order to check the hypothesis that these particular verbs of quotation occur exclusively in young people.

While listening to the tapes, I transcribed each incidence of the five relevant verbs over a twenty-minute timeframe, and was then able to count the occurrence of each verb, as well as examine its environment. Other verbs of quotation such as *to think* and *to tell* occurred very infrequently and were not included for the purposes of this study.

Year 2000		Years 1995/1996	
Female, Young, Professional	*Male, Young, Professional*	*Female, Young, Professional*	*Male, Young, Professional*
Bernadette	Karl	Anna	Alex
Catherine	Matthew	Margaret	Mark
Stacey	Reece	Michelle	Richard
Female, Young, Non-professional	*Male, Young, Non-professional*	*Female, Young, Non-professional*	*Male, Young, Non-professional*
Felicity	James	Jenny	Richard
Rachael	Matt	Katrina	Tama
Female, Older, Non-professional	*Male, Older, Non-professional*	*Female, Older, Non-professional*	*Male, Older, Non-professional*
Evelyn	Rodger	Gail	Paul

Table 1: *Interviewees and their social categorisations.*

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Variation between speakers

Figure 1 shows the total number of tokens of quotative verbs produced by each speaker, grouped by sex, year and age. There is a lot of variation in the number of quotative verbs used — some speakers using a lot, some very little, and none at all in one case. This indicates the random nature of the sample and suggests that the speakers use narrative styles that require different amounts of reported speech.
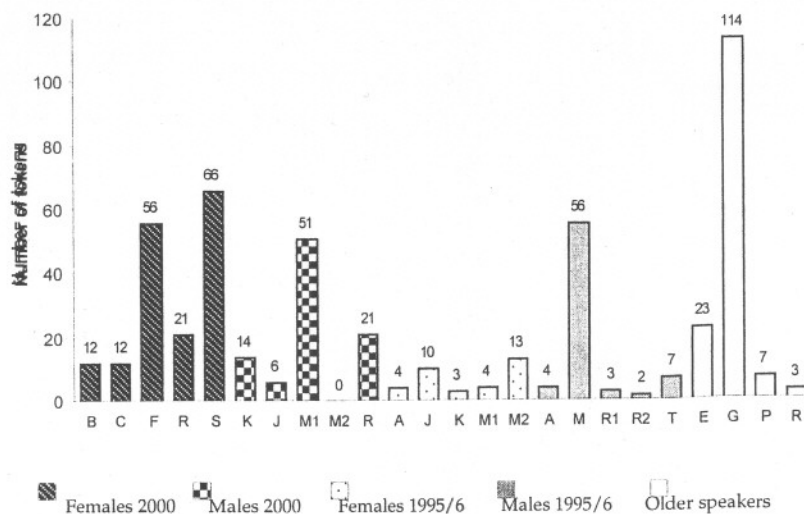
All speakers: total number of tokens

Figure 1: Total number of tokens for each speaker

It is important to realise that this amount of variation occurs when looking at the results that follow, because with such small sample sizes, one speaker can markedly distort means and percentages. A good example of this is Mark from the 1995/6 group. He has a total of 56 tokens, but the second highest in his group has only seven. His interview yielded no clues as to what in his background could explain this anomaly, although he did come across as an extremely chatty person, barely pausing for breath, so perhaps this high use is a function of his direct and lively way of speaking.

There was no discernible difference in number or type of verb use between the 'professional' and 'non-professional' groups, and so this variable is not presented separately in the analyses that follow. The two variables that seem to influence use of quotative verbs in the younger age group are therefore gender and year.

4.2 Average number of tokens by sex and year

One of the major findings is that the number of total tokens of verbs of the continuum for each group has increased over time (Figure 2). The overall total for 2000 is 214 tokens, compared with 100 from 1995/6 (including the anomaly Mark). So, telling a story seems to involve more use of reported speech than it did five years ago.
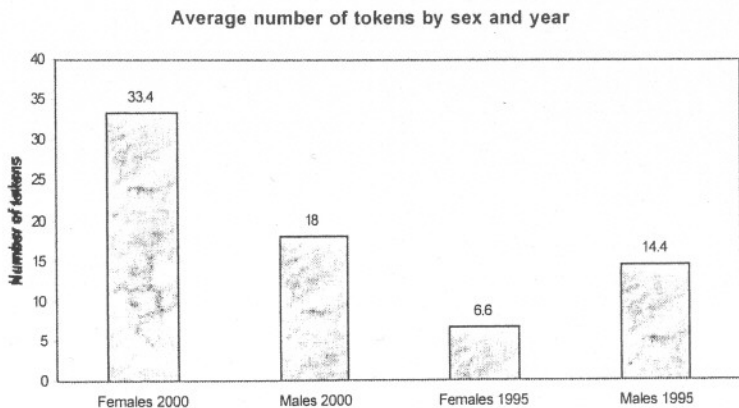
Average number of tokens by sex and year

Figure 2: Average number of total tokens each year for males and females

4.3 The continuum of quotative verbs

Figure 3 shows the frequency of occurrence of each verb of the proposed continuum separately in each year. The line for the year 2000 is higher than that for 1995/6 overall, which indicates the increase in use of the tokens.

The older speakers did seem to follow the prediction of lack of involvement in the verb progression, although they sometimes used a large number of quotative verbs. One of the four had one instance each of *to go* and *to be like*, but all other tokens were *to say*. This can be interpreted as tentative evidence for age-grading, as has been found in other countries. The quotative verb continuum may be a young person's phenomenon. To make a more coherent sample group, the older speakers have been left out of this and following analyses.

The straight trend of the lines supports the idea of a graded continuum between these verbs. The verbs at the left hand end of the progression receive the greatest usage, as they are the generally accepted ones. This is especially the case for *to say*, the only 'unmarked' quotative verb examined.

The small bulge on *to be like* for the 2000 group suggests that this is the 'in vogue' word at the moment for us: this is where we are up to in the progression. This verb is being used proportionally more than the others. The bulge on *to go* in 1995/6 indicates the same point had been reached for *to go* at that time, so the continuum was still occurring, but one verb further back. After these bulges, the line drops dramatically, so we can see that a few instances of the next verb in line are found, but it is not at all universally used as yet. The verbs even further along come up, if they do at all, only once or twice.

If the progression continues, in another five years, the bulging part of the line may have progressed to *to be all* or possibly further.
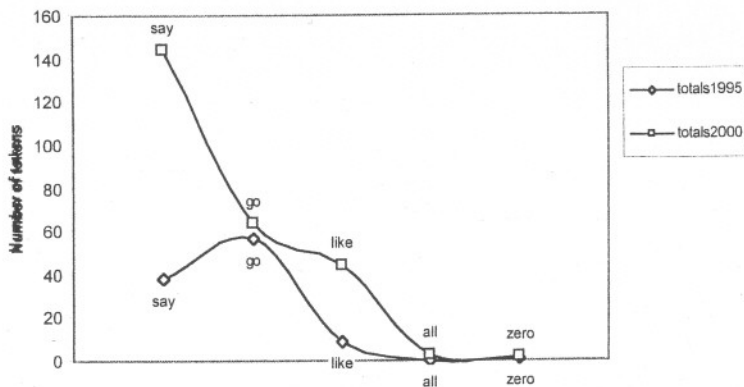
Quotative Verbs Continuum 1995 vs 2000

Figure 3: The progression along the quotative verbs continuum in 1995 and 2000

4.4 The percentage of each verb of quotation by sex and year

The analysis here shows what percentage of the time a particular verb was chosen out of all occurrences of quotative verbs (Figure 4). Percentages were used for displaying the results because this eliminates the apparent trends which result from a given group simply using a higher number of these verbs overall. The bars are grouped according to verb, with one bar appearing for each sex in each year.

Looking at each group separately, the females from 2000 follow a 'continuum distribution', all verbs occurring, but fewer of each as we move from left to right on the scale. The males of 2000 use a larger percentage of *to say*, but *to go* and *to be like* also feature prominently. In 1995/6, the females have a similar distribution to the males of 2000, although they show a greater percentage of *to go*. The anomaly is the high usage of the 1995/6 males of *to go*, which largely relates to Mark's incredibly high use of this verb.

Each group, therefore, seems to follow the trend-line indicated on the line graph in Figure 3. In 1995/6, *to be like* was emerging, but *to go* was much more accepted. By 2000, *to be like* has become widely used among this age group, and *to be all* and *to be* show small signs of coming into common usage in the future.
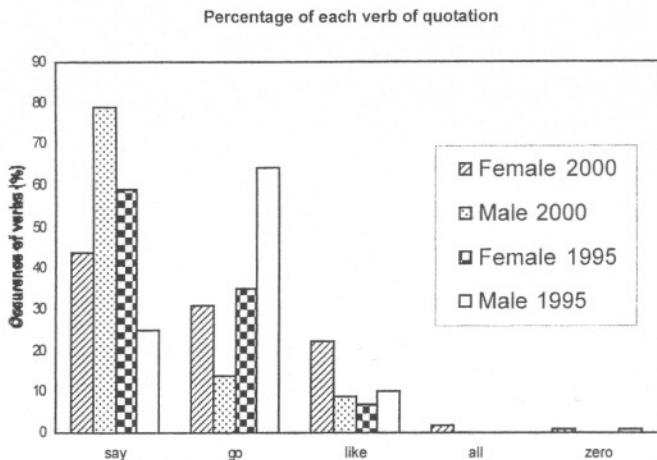
Percentage of each verb of quotation

Figure 4: *Percentage of each verb of quotation from the total number of tokens by sex and year*

4.5 Linguistic change

The difference between the sexes in this study is quite significant. It acts as a major piece of evidence that a linguistic change is in the process of taking place, since it has been shown before that young women tend to lead in introducing this kind of change (Romaine & Lange 1991: 228). A study done in the United States over four years found that the women were initially ahead in their usage of *to be like* but later found that the men had caught up and both sexes used it equally (Tagliamonte 1999: 151). This was interpreted as a demonstration of the expansion and increased acceptance of *to be like*.

Another type of evidence for ongoing change is the use of two these terms together, where they may not both act as part of the verb frame. This is a 'halfway' situation, which suggests how a word with a different function may have come closer to the verb phrase, before merging with it. The recordings examined revealed several such examples, such as, in the 1995/6 group: 'My brother said like under the covers' and 'Like I was going…' Here *like* is used close to the verb as a focuser, before becoming a quotative. In 2000, in 'And like my friend said', *like* has its comparative meaning, also very close to the quotation frame.

As other examples, we find:

'I'm going like'
'It's pretty full on and screaming like 'waah'!'
'I said like'
'She's like going to Mum'

This type of slightly ambiguous example, where it is not obvious if *like* is part of the quotation frame or merely acting as a focus marker, is a sign that reanalysis, part of the grammaticalisation process, is underway (Romaine & Lange 1991: 228).

As far as *to go* is concerned, an expression like 'She goes on to...', found in the 2000 recordings, could have directly led to *to go*, simply by being shortened. Certainly the concept of 'going' as a form of speaking was already present.

4.6 Acceptance of the terms

Parameters other than differentiation by gender and the combining of terms have been suggested to show the increasing diffusion of these verbs. One hypothesis is that the grammatical person used with the verb may show how integrated into our everyday language the use of the verb has become. Another point of reference may be the actual content of the quote following the verb.

Consider first grammatical person. Table 2 shows the percentages of first and third person pronouns used with each verb by each sex and year. For each verb, the calculations only included the people who actually used that particular verb, that is, there were no zero counts for both first and third person distorting the data.

Year	Sex	to say (%)		to go (%)		to be like (%)	
		first person	third person	first person	third person	first person	third person
2000	Female	43	57	9	91	67	33
	Male	47	53	36	67	82	18
1995/6	Female	67	33	25	75	0	100
	Male	43	57	51	49	100	0

Table 2: Percentages of each verb in the first or third person by sex and year

Progress along the continuum has been correlated with the choice of personal pronoun (Tagliamonte 1999: 152). It has been suggested that when *to go* is first introduced, it is used primarily to report the speech of other people. By contrast, *to be like* is used for the speaker's own speech, especially their own internal thoughts. The reason for this difference becomes more obvious when the expressions' creation by metaphorical extension is considered. A verb of motion, such as *to go*, seems to point outwards, projecting beyond the speaker. *To be like*, on the other hand, draws the audience towards the internal state of the speaker, moving in the opposite direction (Pagliuca 1994: 273). Catherine's recording illustrates this:

'And he rang me up last night and I was home at my parents . and he goes
um Catherine and it's like yip and he goes yeah it's Richard Fanigan here and
its like hi Richard how are you thinking why are you ringing me he goes
could you adjudicate a debate tomorrow at Shirley Boys' it's like <groan>'

Broadening of pronoun use therefore suggests a greater acceptance of the verb in question. Ferrara & Bell (1995) found *to be like* had undergone a dramatic expansion: nearly half of all its tokens were in the third person. This was interpreted as additional evidence that *to be like* had expanded rapidly since 1991, when the first survey was done (Tagliamonte 1999: 152).

This idea does not seem to fit my data much at all. In 1995/6, when *to go* otherwise seems to be accepted, the females still use predominantly third person pronouns, and the males have an almost 50:50 split. By 2000, both sexes have increased their preference for the third person, although *to go* is used even more widely. Perhaps the point is that both forms do appear, although which is used may depend on the story being told, and whether the speakers were themselves involved in it.

In 1995/6, *to be like* is used 100% in the third person for the females and 100% in the first person for the males. The relevance of this data is questionable: there were very few instances of *to be like*, three for the females and seven for the males. By 2000, the expression is a lot more accepted, as shown by the number of tokens, however both males and females predominantly use the first person. The female result shows a slightly more even split, consistent with their leading of the trend.

The low proportion of *to be like* in third person for males and females of 2000 is balanced by a higher proportion of third person with *to go*. This demonstrates that these verb forms still have their own functions in reported speech regarding the demarcation of speaker and audience. This method of measuring diffusion does not seem to be a valid one in New Zealand. Over time, the boundaries between first and third persons may perhaps become blurred, but it is also possible that the New Zealand speaker may prefer, in a subconscious way, to keep the distinction between the self and others in their speech.

As another potential factor influencing variation, consider the content of the quotation. Patterns in the content of what *to go* and *to be like* were used to report were noticed as early as the 1980s (Tagliamonte 1999: 152). A greater variety of types of following dialogue are thought to show greater diffusion of the verb. *To go* can be used both for direct speech as well as sounds and onomatopoeic expressions when it first occurs (Romaine & Lange 1991: 239). *To be like* is similar in that it can also be used for sounds, but it mainly encodes the speaker's inner thoughts and emotions, which may not have been lexicalised at the time of the event. Around ten years later, in 1995, the second phase was reached in the United States, Ferrara & Bell reporting the common use of *to be like* for direct speech.

As found above, the 1995/6 speakers use both *to go* and *to be like* to demonstrate sounds:

1. It goes 'crrr crrr crrr' (Katrina)
2. Cause when I go out there and meet him it's gonna be like <gasp> 'oh no' (Tama)

To go is used mostly for direct speech and *to be like* for emotion or inner thoughts, but they also sometimes encroach on each other's territory. Consider the following case of *to be like*:

3. Cause I was like 'you said I could' (Tama)

This example shows how ambiguous the classification of the 'content' of what is said can be. Personal interpretation can play rather too large a role. In (3) above, Tama uses a whiney tone, so that while he is reporting direct speech (and could be expected to use *to go*), the way it is said reflects quite a bit of emotion.

By 2000, not much has changed. The *to go* and *to be like* categories are still mainly kept separate, but can be occasionally mixed. Karl and James use *to be like* when they want to show a strong response, which usually involves swearing. Catherine only uses *to be like* for short exclamations, such as 'yip', 'excellent', oh no' or 'oh you bastard'. Both Felicity and Stacey, the highest users of *to be like*, use it especially when telling exciting, involved stories, but can also use *to go* for inner thoughts. *To be like* is also used, by most speakers, for direct speech reporting.

Aside from the above examples, *to go* and *to be like* have retained their distinct uses. We seem to have made no progress in the use of quotative verbs by content, as defined by the literature. Perhaps such changes may, as with the grammatical person parameter, simply take a little longer. After all, the United States studies were 10 years apart. Alternatively, New Zealanders may wish to keep more clear-cut categories within their speech than Americans. We may keep separate the different functions of *to go* and *to be like* so that they can still be used to emphasise aspects of the speech we are reporting.

4.7 Narrative style

Telling a story, or narrative, is an important part of having a conversation. The way a story is told can reflect who the speaker and their audience are, what the story is about, and what effect the narrator is trying to convey.

Direct, or reported speech, is often associated with a lively style of narrative which Goffman calls a 'replay' (Cortazzi 1993: 39). A story is performed rather than just told, so that the audience is able to experience it instead of just hearing it. Indeed, I did find that the recordings that used more reported speech were more interesting to listen to. The quotations will often be acted out using a different voice or sound effects, such as we find here on the tapes with *to go* and *to be like*.

Another common characteristic of such performances is the use of the historical present (Chafe 1994: 218). Switching between it and the past tense may be used to divide up the flow of action, much as switches between *to go* and *to be like* can demarcate the representation of different speakers (Toolan 1988: 167). It is also used in narratives to describe past events in a more vivid and immediate manner (Fludernik 1993: 415).

Figure 5 shows the percentage of total verbs counted that were in the historical present. There seems to be no great trend over time: the males have decreased in usage, whereas the females have remained very much the same. There was no correlation between an individual's number of verbs of quotation and use of the historical present. The most significant observation here is the overall difference between the sexes: females use the historical present very much more than males, which relates well to their more frequent use of quotative verbs, especially those further along the continuum. This suggests a difference in narrative style.
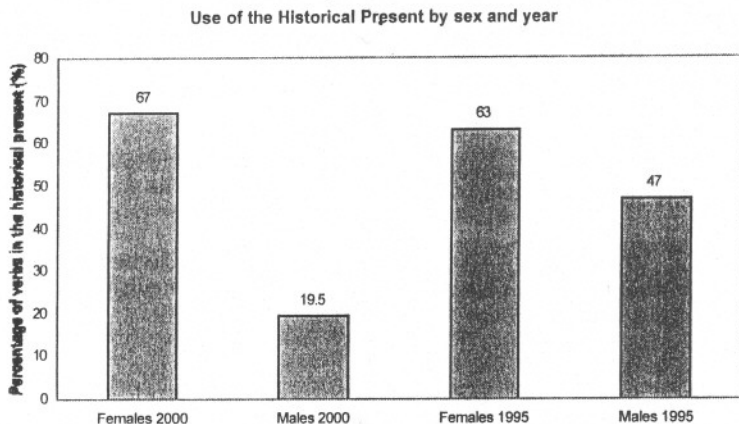
Use of the Historical Present by sex and year

Figure 5: Percentage of verbs in the historical present by sex and year

So if females display more of a tendency to use a 'replay' form of narrative than males (as shown by their greater use of quotation and historical present), what it is that endears this technique to them? The answer here may relate to the different ways groups of women and men interact. The difference develops in adolescence, when socialising usually occurs in single sex groups (Romaine & Lange 1991: 269). Men have more of an emphasis on competition and conflict, whereas women rely more on communicating and emotional involvement, appealing to group concerns. Hence there is a higher usage of the 'replay' technique, which aims for involvement in a shared experience. And so females may be more likely to be open to picking up new expressions which lend themselves to a more visual representation of speech, such as *to go*, or one that leads to more involvement of the audience in the story, such as *to be like*.

5.Conclusion

This introductory study has demonstrated that a continuum between quotative verbs exists in the speech of the young people of New Zealand. This is the same hierarchy as has been found in the speech of Americans:

to say → to go → to be like → to be all → to be

There has been a definite advancement along the scale in the past five years, which can be characterised as a linguistic change underway. Overall, the number of quotative verbs used has increased over time. These particular verbs are used almost exclusively by young people, suggesting an age-grading effect. Females use more quotative verbs than males, and seem to be leading the way along the continuum. Females also exhibit a greater use of the historical present, which combines with their higher use of quotative verbs to produce a different narrative style from that of the males.

We still have a fair distance to progress before using quotative verbs in the same way as the Americans. Since their speech will no doubt also carry on changing, and some of the above analyses have suggested we may prefer (subconsciously) to demarcate our speech more clearly, it is quite possible we never shall. It will be very interesting to see whether, in the next five to ten years, the *to be all* and *to be* forms of the quotatives do become as widespread as the *to go* and *to be like* forms are now.

This progression is an exciting opportunity to follow worldwide language change and formulate theories as to how this comes about. The changes that have occurred in New Zealand have happened unusually quickly on a linguistic time scale. This may be indicative of the increasingly global nature of communication systems, and the popularity of leisure activities such as television. Supporting this idea is the fact that the spread of linguistic features does not always follow geographical lines of transmission: a study comparing England and Canada showed that the English used *to be like* more often than the Canadians did (Tagliamonte 1999: 117).

How much a trend catches on might depend on our (subconscious) attitude toward, and the amount of our exposure to, the nation responsible for starting it, in this case, the United States. This kind of trend may simply show that large political and economic powers influence language, both their own and other languages, along with the behaviour and habits of people everywhere.

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