Be like and the Constant Rate Effect: from the bottom to the top of the S-curve

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Summary

The *be like* quotative emerged rapidly around the English-speaking world and has quickly saturated the quotative systems of young speakers in multiple countries. We study *be like* (and its covariants) in two communities – Toronto, Canada, and York, United Kingdom – in apparent time and at two separate points in real time. We trace the apparent-time trajectory of *be like* and its covariants from inception to saturation. We take advantage of the prodigious size of our dataset to examine understudied aspects of the linguistic factors that condition quotative variation. Building on earlier suggestions (Cukor-Avila 2002; Durham *et al.* 2012) that *be like* might show patterning over time consistent with the CONSTANT RATE EFFECT (or CRE, Kroch 1989), we argue that the CRE does indeed apply to the rise of *be like*, but needs to be handled with care. Logistic modelling assumes that the top of the S-curve is located at 100 per cent of a given variable context. In the case of *be like*, the saturation point is nearer 75–85 per cent, with minor variants retaining small semantic footholds in the system. In conjunction with our analysis, we suggest how to adapt the predictions of the CRE to changes likely to lead to saturation but not categorical use.

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