The Syntax of *be like* Quotatives

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1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the syntax and semantics of English *be like* quotative constructions, as illustrated in (1).

(1) Aaron was like "Ok, fine."
    a.   'Aaron thought/felt like saying "Ok, fine."'
    b.   'Aaron said "Ok, fine."'

In particular, we make two main claims about the syntax of sentences such as (1). First, we relate the ambiguity between direct speech and reported thought *be like* in (1) to the availability of copula *be* in active contexts as in (2) and (3) (Partee 1977, Dowty 1979, Parsons 1990, Rothstein 1999).

(2) John forced him to be quiet.
(3) Jane is being polite.

We extend Rothstein's (1999) proposal for adjectival predicates under copula *be* to the variation between speech and non-speech interpretations of *be like* quotatives in (1). In particular, we propose that copula *be* always selects for an adjectival (stative) argument, and that the availability of eventive readings as in (1b), (2) and (3) is attributable to a semantic coercion mechanism[1], akin to operations that make count readings out of mass nouns in the nominal domain.

Second, developing Kayne's (2007 fn. 9) brief discussion of *be like* quotatives, we propose that a range of syntactic properties of *be like* that distinguish it from other verbs of saying, including its opacity to *wh*-extraction and quote-raising, are accounted for by the presence of a null SOMETHING under *be*. This null indefinite takes a *like*-headed PP which introduces the quoted material. This approach is lent plausibility by their similarity to innovative quotative constructions in Dutch with an overt indefinite quantifier (*zoiets*) (van Craenenbroeck 2002).

The paper is organised as follows. In section two, we discuss some syntactic differences between *be like* and *say*-type quote introducers. Section three argues for an aspectual coercion approach to the ambiguity between (1a) and (1b), drawing on Rothstein (1999). Section four develops the syntactic and semantic proposals. Section five compares English *be like* quotatives to *hebben zoiets van* quotative constructions in contemporary Dutch.

2. Differences between *be like* and *say*-type quote introducers

Be like quotatives differ syntactically and semantically from other quote introducers in English in at least six main ways. A first difference is the direct speech/reported thought ambiguity mentioned above. Example (1) shows that *be like* quotatives are ambiguous between readings where the speaker says the quote and a reading where the speaker only seems to be thinking the following quote. *Say-*

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[1] Rothstein refers to this as a "repackaging" mechanism.

type quote introducers (*declare, ask, mutter* etc.) lack this ambiguity. (4), for example, is available on a reading where Aaron actually says "Ok, fine," but not if Aaron merely thinks "Ok, fine".

(4) Aaron said "Ok, fine."
    a. *'Aaron seemed to be thinking, "Ok, fine."'
    b. 'Aaron said "Ok, fine."'

Second, *be like* differs from *say*-type verbs in that it cannot introduce indirect speech, as shown in (5) and (6).

(5) *John was like that he was hungry.
(6) John said that he was hungry.

Third, as noted by Flagg (2007), *be like* differs from *say* in that when a quote introduced by *be like* is questioned, the question word cannot extract. This difference is illustrated in (7)-(9). Example (7), with *what* in situ*,* is fine on both a direct speech interpretation and on an interpretation where the questioner is asking about some salient state of Aaron. In (8), on the other hand, *what* extracts and the result is poor on a quotative interpretation but not a stative interpretation. *Say* in quotative contexts shows no such opacity to *wh*-extraction, as shown in (9).

(7) Aaron was like what?
    a.   OK 'What did Aaron say?'
    b.   OK 'What was Aaron's state?'
(8) What was Aaron like?
    a.   * 'What did Aaron say?'
    b.   OK: 'What was Aaron's state?'
(9) What did Aaron say?

Fourth, unlike other verbs of saying, *be like* does not allow for quotative raising (Flagg 2007). Examples (10) and (11) show that quotes can precede *say*, with or without an inverted subject (Collins 1997, Suñer 2000).

(10) "Shut up," Aaron said.
(11) "Shut up," said Aaron.

Be like quotatives on the other hand never allow raising with or without inversion, as shown in (12) and (13).

(12) *"Shut up," Aaron was like.
(13) *"Shut up," was like Aaron.

Fifth, while stative *be like* meaning survives under negation, eventive readings do not. In (14), *be like* happily co-occurs with negation, but requires a stative, thought/feeling interpretation. On a direct speech interpretation, forced by the inclusion of *loudly* as in (15), the sentence is poor.

(14) Aaron wasn't like "shut up."
(15)?? Aaron wasn't like "shut up" loudly.

Sixth and finally, *be like* quotatives on a direct speech interpretation are most naturally interpreted not as reporting a verbatim quote, but rather a close paraphrase (Buchstaller 2004:111). In particular, (16) shows that quotatives with *say* are felicitously preceded with phrases like *word for word* and *exactly* which force verbatim interpretations. The examples in (17) show that counterpart sentences with *be like* are odd.

(16) a. Word for word, she said, "I-didn't-plagiarize."
    b. She said exactly, "I promise to be there."

(17) a. # Word for word, she was like, "I-didn't-plagiarize."
    b. #She was exactly like, "I promise to be there."

This "mere paraphrase" component of *be like* quotatives does not appear to be asserted, but rather shows properties of being an implicature[2]. These include the fact that it can be explicitly cancelled by later discourse, at which point the verbatim interpretation arises, as seen in (18), as well as the fact that it is susceptible to *in fact* cancellation as in (19).

(18) A: She was like, "I-didn't-plagiarize."
     B: Word for word?
     A: Yes.
 (19) She was like "I like bananas" – in fact, that was exactly what she said.

We develop an account of these differences in sections 3 and 4, below.

3. One *be* or two?

Our analysis departs from the goal of reconciling the eventive and stative interpretations of *be like* with the ambiguity between stative *be* and "*be* of activity" in copular contexts. It is a well-established fact that copula *be*, while typically characterized as a stative verb, can take eventive readings in certain contexts. For example:

(20) John is being silly.

(20) features two occurrences of *be*. The first is a banal auxiliary *be* that precedes V+-*ing* forms in progressives. The second, which appears in progressive form, is unusual in that while it selects an adjective, the overall meaning imparted is not stative. Parsons (1990) refers to this as the "*be* of activity". Note that while the most common context for identifying the *be* of activity is the progressive, it can also appear in other contexts such as (21) below, which is ambiguous between a stative reading where Mary asked John to adopt a new characteristic, and an eventive reading where she requested that he act in a silly manner:

(21) Mary asked John to be silly.

Early accounts of the *be* of activity (Partee 1977, Dowty 1979, Parsons 1990) proposed that it is a case of lexical ambiguity, wherein English has a lexical item *be* that means something like *act*. There are at least two disadvantages to this approach to the *be* of *be like* constructions. A first is that, from the perspective of contemporary approaches to agentivity (Chomsky 1995, Kratzer 1996), we expect "*be* of activity" not to be a T element like its auxiliary homophone, but rather merged lower in the functional sequence in V or perhaps v. The *be* of *be like*, however, behaves unambiguously like a T element even on eventive readings. One kind of evidence to this effect comes from subject-auxiliary inversion, which is otherwise available only to auxiliaries and modals in English. (22) shows that subject-auxiliary inversion is fine with *be like* on direct speech interpretations.

(22) Was Mary like, "Ok, fine"? ('Did Mary say, "Ok, fine."?')

Simlarly, unlike lexical verbs, the *be* of *be like* cannot co-occur with a modal or other auxiliary.[3]

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[2] One question that is left unanswered here is what conditions this implicature. As far as we can see, there are two clear possibilities. The first is that it is a manner implicature, associated with the choice of the colloquial register. The second option is that it is a scalar implicature, as "say something similar to X" is weaker than "say X verbatim". This may be supported by the fact that "John did not say exactly X" seems to implicate "John said something like X"; however, investigating the existence of such a scale and where exactly *be like* belongs on it has to be left as a matter for future research.
[3] We thank Richie Kayne for pointing this out to us.

(23) a. Did Mary be like, "Ok, fine"? (# 'Did Mary say, "Ok, fine."')
    b. Mary could be like "Ok, fine"? (# 'Mary could say, "Ok, fine."')

A final kind of evidence to this effect comes from the placement of VP adverbs like *quickly*, which can appear to the right of modals/auxiliaries as in (24). Main verbs, on the other hand, don't take *quickly*-type adverbs to their right, as shown in (25) (Jackendoff 1972, Potsdam 1998).

(24) George was quickly finishing his dinner.   (Aux-*quickly*)
(25) *Jeremy ate quickly the soup   (V-*quickly*)

The *be* of *be like*, again behaves like a true auxiliary in allowing *quickly* to appear to its right on direct speech interpretations.

(26) She was quickly like, "Shut up." ('She quickly said, "Shut up."')

A second disadvantage of the lexical ambiguity approach to *be like* comes from diachronic evidence. *Be like* quotatives are innovative in many varieties of English, with younger speakers tending toward *be like* forms more than older speakers. Recent corpus and experimental evidence suggest similar rates of diffusion of reported thought and direct speech interpretations (Durham et al to appear, Tagliamonte & D'Arcy 2007). The parallel diffusion of the two guises of *be like* is consistent with an approach that treats their spread as a single abstract process of change. Much previous historical syntax literature has shown that for any single abstract process of syntactic change, contextual effects are typically constant over time—a phenomenon known as the *constant rate effect* (Kroch 1989, 1994, 2001, Pintzuk 1991, Santorini 1992, Freuhwald et al 2009). Kroch (1989, 2001) attributes this constancy to individuals' grammar-external faculty for tracking frequencies of experienced events. As learners acquire and increment new forms, they will learn from input sources the relative propensities of use of variants in different contexts, with the consequence that contextual effects will be propagated across generations of speakers, all other things being equal. Occasionally, linguistic factors can come to interact with social factors in new ways which may have the effect of changing the effects across time, but this is the exception rather than the rule, to judge from the published literature (Kroch 1989, 2000). From the perspective of this literature, the parallel diffusion of eventive and stative guises of *be like* is explained if they are different contexts in a single abstract process of change. On a lexical ambiguity approach, this parallel diffusion is instead coincidental.

For these reasons, we will not adopt the lexical ambiguity approach to stative/active *be*. Rather, in the spirit of Rothstein's analysis of *be*+AP configurations, we will propose that there is a single, stative, copula *be* whose denotation contains a contextually dependent variable that can be used to give it an eventive meaning. Rothstein (1999) assumes a neo-Davidsonian event semantics, with a basic onthological distinction between states and eventualities. Adjectives such as *happy* denote predicates over states, while (agentive) verbs denote predicates over events. In this system, *be* is a function from an adjective denotation to a verb denotation. It has the following denotation:

(27) $[[be]] = \lambda S \lambda e \lambda x. \exists s \in S[e = \text{LOCALE}(s) \text{ \& } \text{ARGUMENT}(x,e)]$

What (27) does is take a property of states S, and localise it into an event. In (28a) below, for example, it serves to locate a state of hunger to a short-term event that is occurring at the time of speech, and is experienced by John. In (28b), however, the event that is picked out by the LOCALE function is a much longer one that extends throughout most of John's life so far:

(28) a. John is hungry (now).
    b. John is silly.

The localisation function LOCALE will return an event that is plausible both given the semantics of the complement of *be* and the context of utterance. In certain cases, this can be used to coerce the meaning from an experiencer event to an agentive one:

(29) John is being silly.

(29), like (28a), localises the state in a short-term event; but, as Rothstein points out, this event assigns an agentive role to the subject.

This account allows for a straightforward extension to *be like*. In the state reading, *be like* is simply a stage level use of the copula, localised to the event in which the subject of *be* exhibited the relevant behaviour. The eventive reading arises when the event mapped to is an agentive one, where the most plausible event of an agent behaving in a quotative manner is the relevant speech act. This proposal has the advantage of not having to propose any lexical ambiguity for *be*, a welcome result for reasons discussed above.

4. Kayne's (2007) null indefinite analysis of *be like*

Ignoring for the moment the "mere paraphrase" meaning of *be like*, we take a view in the spirit of Davidson (1967), that the quote has to be the same as the speech event, where "same-saying" allows for contextually agreed upon vectors of variation (for example, if the subject of the sentence spoke with a lisp, the person quoting them does not have to replicate this lisp to count as saying the same). We also adapt Davidson's proposal in assuming that the quote is introduced by a demonstrative THAT.[4] (See also Partee (1973), Munro (1982) and Etxepare (2010) for likeminded proposals.) In most dialects, this demontrative is null, though in a few other varieties, including Glasgow English, it is optionally overt as in (30).

(30) And they were like that "How're you doing, Mary." Glasgow English (Macaulay 2001:13)

We take the *like* of *be like* to be a garden variety manner preposition as illustrated in (31). On these assumptions, a sentence like (1) will have, as a first approximation, the representation in (31).

(31) [$_{TP}$ Aaron [$_{T'}$ was [$_{PP}$ like [$_{DP}$ THAT [QUOTE]]]]]

On this approach, the fact that *be like* is unavailable with reported speech is therefore explained as a consequence of the fact that it introduces mimesis. Something more, however, is required to account for additional properties of *be like* in its direct speech guise, namely (i) its opacity to extraction, (ii) its incompatibility with clausal negation, and (iii) the "mere paraphrase" implicature. Developing Kayne's (2007 fn. 9) brief discussion of *be like* quotatives, we propose that this something else is a null SOMETHING. Specifically, Kayne proposes that *be like* quotatives involve a null SOMETHING merged as the complement of a null GOING verb, which provides the eventive interpretation. On Kayne's approach, a sentence like (32) for example, will have the structure given in (33) (both from Kayne 2007, fn.9).

(32) She was like, "He's gotta be kidding."
(33) She was GOING SOMETHING like, "He's gotta be kidding."

We follow Kayne in assuming that *be like* predicates involve a null SOMETHING, for reasons to be spelled out shortly. We depart from Kayne, however, in not assuming a null GO main verb. One reason for this has to do with temporal semantic differences between *be like* quotatives and counterpart sentences with an overt GO in the progressive. In particular, (34) and (35) show that *be like* quotatives do not interact with temporal adverbial clauses as expected, if they contain a verb in the progressive.

(34) Amy was like, "He's gotta be kidding," when I walked in.
(35) Amy was GOING SOMETHING like, "He's gotta be kidding," when I walked in.

In (34), Amy is understood to begin her quote after the speaker walked in. In (35), with an overt GOING, the speaker is understood to have walked in when Amy is midway through the quote. The interpretation of (34) is unexplained if sentences like (32) contain a null GO—or any other quotative verb—in the progressive.

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[4] See Buchstaller 2004 for discussions of the use of *be like* in explicitly mimetic contexts.

A second reason for eschewing Kayne's null GO proposal is theory internal. Kayne's null GO is incompatible with a unified approach to *be like* and other cases of "agentive *be*" as discussed above in that there is no apparent motivation for supposing a null GO in other agentive *be* contexts such as (36).

(36) a.   Jane is polite.
   b.   Jane is being polite.   (Rothstein 1999: 356)

Abandoning Kayne's null GO proposal, and assuming that a more general phenomenon is responsible for the agentive interpretation of *be like* quotatives accommodates a unified synchronic syntax of agentive *be* and eventive *be like* as discussed above. It also suggests a fairly simple process of syntactic change: once quotes came to be available as descriptors of states, eventive *be like* interpretations fall out, with the additional enrichment of a null SOMETHING.

Our proposals for eventive and stative *be like* are illustrated in (37) and (38), which give structures for a sentence like (1) on reported thought and direct speech interpretations respectively.

(37) ***Stative (reported thought) interpretation***
   [$_{TP}$ Aaron [$_{T'}$ was [$_{PP}$ like [$_{DP}$ THAT [QUOTE]]]]]
(38) ***Eventive (direct speech) interpretation***
   [$_{TP}$ She [$_{T'}$ was [$_{DP}$ SOMETHING [$_{PP}$ like [$_{DP}$ THAT [QUOTE]]]]]]

On this approach, the unavailability of *wh*-extraction with direct speech readings will be reminiscent of restrictions on *wh*-raising out of *some*-quantified DPs, as in (39).

(39) ?? Who did you see some picture of <who>?

The fact that *be like* is transparent to *wh*-extraction on a stative interpretation is furthermore explained since this context will lack a null SOMETHING-headed DP layer.

Similarly, the contrast between eventive and stative readings with respect to negation is explained by the fact that *some* is a positive polarity item, i.e. cannot scope below negation, as in (40) (Szabolcsi 2004). Again, because the null SOMETHING is present only in eventive contexts, negation is fine with stative, non-speech interpretations.

(40) I didn't see some boy. *¬>∃ 'I didn't see any boy.'

Finally, the "mere paraphrase" implicature of *be like* quotatives follows straightforwardly from syntax in (38), which asserts that the speaker said *something like* the given quote. Again, the statement in (1) is true in contexts in which the quote is verbatim, but pragmatically odd, particularly if the faithfulness of the quote is contextually salient. On this approach, quotative *be like* sentences implicate a mere paraphrase understanding of the reported quote in the same way that (41) implicates that cougars are merely similar to mountain lions.

(41) A cougar is something like a mountain lion.

The incompatibility of *exactly* and *word for word* with *be like* quotatives might now be related to the presence of Kayne's null SOMETHING. In particular, on this approach, the oddness of (17a,b), might be understood in the same way that (42) is odd, whereby the speaker at once weakens and strengthens the epistemic commitment to the comparison.

(42) #A cougar is exactly something like a mountain lion.

That the presence of a null SOMETHING in (17a,b) and an overt *something* in (42) is implicated in their oddness is suggested by the fact that the same infelicity does not arise in sentences like (43) without an overt *something*.

(43) A cougar is exactly like a mountain lion.

To summarize, we have adopted from Kayne's (2007 fn.9) discussion of *be like*, the idea that such constructions involve a null SOMETHING indefinite on direct speech but not reported thought interpretations. This approach, together with the assumption of a deictic THAT element—null in most *be like* dialects—correctly expresses a range of idiosyncratic properties of *be like* as a quote introducer in English. In the remaining discussion, we compare English *be like* to a similar quotative construction in Dutch, whose overt morphology lends plausibility to the analysis of English *be like* presented so far.

5. *zoeits van* **quotatives in Dutch**

From the perspective of the above proposal, English *be like* is reminiscent of innovative quotative constructions in Dutch with an overt 'something' quantifier, *iets,* which is often preceded by *zo*, 'so'. In the remaining discussion we discuss similarities between Dutch zoeits van quotatives and English *be like*, which lend plausibility to the analysis of English presented above.

Dutch *zoeits* quotatives can involve an overt verb of saying as in (44), but can also co-occur with *hebben* 'have' as in (45). In this section we will focus on the latter construction.

(44) Hij zei zoeits van, "laat me gerust."
    He said so-something of leave me alone
    'He said something like, "Leave me alone."' (Adapted from van Craenenbroek 2002)

(45) Ik heb zoeits van, "laat me gerust."
    I have so-something of leave me alone
    a. 'I thought something like, "Leave me alone."'
    b. 'I said something like, "Leave me alone."'

In (45), *hebben* appears with present tense morphology and describes a previous event, which suggests the possibility that such sentences conceal a null *say*-type main verb participle. Several facts, however, indicate that such sentences are not covert perfectives, but rather "historical present" sentences, i.e. uses of present tense in narrating a past event. One kind of evidence to this effect is that these sentences do not have perfective readings in other tenses. In (46), for example, where *hebben* has past tense morphology, the interpretation is past tense rather than past of past.

(46) Toen had ik zoeits van, "laat me gerust."
    Then had I so-something of leave me alone
    'Then I was like, "Leave me alone."'   (van Craenenbroeck, p.c.)

Similarly, with future modals, the interpretation is simple future rather than future perfect:

(47) Dan zal ik waarschijnlijk zoeits habben van "laat me gerust."
    Then had I so-something of leave me alone
    'Then I was like, "Leave me alone."'   (van Craenenbroeck, p.c.)

Finally, with present tense morphology generic/habitual present interpretations are also available, as in (48).

(48) Hij heeft altijd zoeits van "laat me gerust."
    He has   always something of leave me alone
    'He is always like "Leave me alone."'

These facts therefore suggest that Dutch *hebben zoeits van* constructions, like English *be like* constructions, do not have a null *say*-type participial main verb. In addition, Dutch *hebben zoeits van* constructions share three other properties of English *be like* quotatives described above. First, like English *be like,* the Dutch *hebben zoeits van* construction is ambiguous between direct speech and reported thought interpretations as reflected in the translations in (45).

Second, as discussed by van Craenenbroeck (2002), Dutch *hebben zoeits van* constructions are most natural on an interpretation where the quote is not a verbatim report of the utterance, but rather a

paraphrase. (45), for example, is most readily understood not to mean that the speaker said 'Leave me alone' verbatim, but rather something close in meaning in some relevant sense.

Third and finally, Dutch *hebben zoiets van* constructions disallow quotative inversion unlike *say*-type verbs as illustrated in (49) and (50).

(49) "Ik ben de allerbeste", zei hij.   (50) *"Ik ben de allerbeste", heeft hij zoiets   van.
    I am the very.best said he   I am the very.best has he so.something of
    'I am the very best he said.'   '"I am the very best", he was like.'

Dutch *hebben zoiets van* constructions nevertheless differ from English *be like* constructions in three ways. First, as illustrated in the above examples, Dutch *hebben zoiets van* constructions do not involve a copula, but rather possessive/auxiliary 'have' *hebben.* Second, unlike English *be like*, Dutch *hebben zoiets van* cooccurs with negation as in (51). This difference is plausibly related to the further fact that Dutch *iets*, unlike English *something* can scope below negation as in (52).

(51) Niemand heft zoiets   van "laat me gerust."   (52) Niemand deed iets.
    Nobody   has so.something of, leave me alone   Nobody   did anything.
    'Nobody was like "leave me alone."'   'Nobody did anything.'

Third and finally, unlike English *be like*, *wh*-extraction in Dutch is not sensitive to the interpretive difference between reported thought and direct speech; *wh*-extraction is simply bad on any interpretation.

(53) *Wat heeft hij zoiets   van?
     What has   he so.something of?
    a.   'What has he said?'
    b.   'What is he like?'

We propose that Dutch *hebben zoiets van* constructions have a structure similar to that proposed for English *be like* in (37) and (38). We assume, in particular, that *zoiets* takes a PP complement headed by *van*. This preposition takes as its sister a DP containing a null demonstrative introducing the quote. Dutch and English will differ in that, in Dutch, the 'something' quantifier is overt and will be merged in both direct speech and reported thought contexts. This proposal is illustrated in (54).

(54) [$_{TP}$ Ik [$_{T'}$ hebben [$_{DP}$ zoiets [$_{PP}$ van [$_{DP}$ THAT [QUOTE]]]]]]

Something more is required to account for the fact that Dutch construction has *hebben* rather than *zijn* 'be'. Following Benveniste (1966), Kayne (2000) and many others, one possibility is that Dutch *hebben* spells out a copula plus an incorporated preposition. We set aside here the question of what the semantic contribution of this preposition is, and why English and Dutch differ in this regard.

In addition, as in the case of English *be like*, something further is needed to explain the agentive meaning in direct speech contexts, and following the above analysis of *be like* we propose that that this meaning is produced by a coercion mechanism, the LOCALE function formalized in (27). This approach, in turn, leads us to expect the availability of active meanings of *be/have* in other contexts and in fact this expectation is borne out: like English, Dutch allows for active interpretations of copula+adjectival predicates in imperative and causative contexts, as in (55) and (56).

(55) Wees stil!   (56) ?Ik deed hen   stil zijn
    be-imp. Quiet   I   made them quiet be
    'be quiet.'   'I made them be quiet.'

These facts from Dutch *hebben zoiets van* quotatives, semantically and syntactically similar to English *be like*, therefore support one component of the *be like* analysis presented above in lending plausibility to the hypothesis of a indefinite quantifier in such constructions. Future work might usefully explore the comparability of other manner deictic quotatives cross-linguistically.

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