The syntax of *be like* quotatives

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This paper proposes an account of some properties of English *be like* quotatives, as in (1).  

(1) Aaron was like “Ok, fine.”
   a. ‘Aaron seemed to be thinking, “Ok, fine.”’
   b. ‘Aaron said “Ok, fine.”’

*be like* exceptionality. *be like* quotatives as in (1) differ syntactically and semantically from other English quote introducers in at least the following five ways. First, quotes introduced by *be like* unlike *say, think* etc. are ambiguous between reported speech and reported thought interpretations, as in (1).

Second, *be like* differs from *say*-type verbs in that it cannot introduce indirect speech:

(2) John {said/*was like} 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, as in (3–4). *Say* in quotative contexts is transparent to *wh*-extraction, as shown in (5).

(3) Aaron was like what?  
   a. OK ‘What did Aaron say?’  
   b. OK ‘What was Aaron’s state?’

(4) What was Aaron like?  
   a. * ‘What did Aaron say?’  
   b. OK: ‘What was Aaron’s state?’

(5) What did Aaron say?

Fourth, unlike other verbs of saying, *be like* does not allow for quotative raising (Flagg 2007, Collins 1997).

(6) “Shut up,” Aaron {said/*was like}.  
(7) “Shut up,” {said/*was like} Aaron.

Finally, while reported thought *be like* readings survive under negation, eventive, direct speech readings do not. In (8), *be like* happily co-occurs with negation, but requires a stative, thought/feeling interpretation. Direct speech interpretations, forced by *loudly* in (9), are poor.

(8) Aaron wasn’t like “shut up.”  
(9)?? Aaron wasn’t like “shut up” loudly.

Analysis. We relate the ambiguity between direct speech and reported thought *be like* in (1) to the much studied availability of copula *be* in active contexts as in (10) and (11) (Partee 1973, Dowty 1979, Parsons 1990, Rothstein 1999).

(10) John forced him to be quiet.  
(11) Jane is being polite.

We modify Rothstein’s proposal for adjectival predicates under copula *be* and extend it 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 (1), (10) and (11) is attributable to a “repackaging” mechanism, akin to operations that make count readings out of mass nouns in the nominal domain.

In the spirit of Davidson (1967), we assume the quote describes a state/speech event by mimesis and is introduced by a demonstrative *that* (Partee 1973, Munro 1982 Etxepare 2010). In most dialects, this demonstratives is null, however in a few varieties, it is optionally overt as in (11).
(11) Glasgow English (Macaulay 2001:13)
    And they were like that “How’re you doing, Mary.”

We take the *like* of *be like* to be a garden variety manner preposition which takes as its complement the DP containing *that*. On this approach, *be like*’s unavailability with reported speech is explained as a consequence of the fact that it introduces mimesis. Something more, however, is required to account for the opacity to extraction and effect of negation in the case of eventive *be like*. Developing Kayne’s (2007 fn. 9) brief discussion of *be like*, we propose that this something else is a null SOMETHING, as in (12).

(12) \[TP_{1}\text{Aaron}_{1}\text{ was DP}_{1}\text{SOMETHING}_{1}\text{like}_{1}\text{DP}_{1}\text{THAT}_{1}\text{ [QUOTE ]}]\]

On this approach, the unavailability of *wh*-extraction will be reminiscent of restrictions on *wh*-raising out of *some*-quantified DPs, as in (13).

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

The fact that *be like* is transparent to *wh*-extraction on a stative interpretation is 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. Again, because the null SOMETHING is present only in eventive contexts, negation is fine with stative, non-speech interpretations.

On this approach, *be like* quotatives will resemble innovative quotatives in Icelandic, which have an overt *something* as in (14), and German *so* (*‘like’*) as in (15). Both constructions share with English *be like* the five properties discussed above. These constructions are plausibly analysed as having the structure in (12), differing in which elements may be unpronounced.

(14) Icelandic
    Hann eithvæð, “Ja”.
    He something yes
    ‘He was like, “Yes.”’

(15) German
    Und ich so “Ja, wir glauben.”
    And I like yes we think-3pl
    ‘And I was like, “Yes, we think.”’

Word count: 746

References
Davidson, Donald. 1968. On saying *that*, *Synthese* 19, 130-146.