Like in Conversational Discourse--A Valuable Device

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Introduction

> *In recent years, like has become a filler, a throwaway word used constantly in the speech of many persons, especially young people: 'You know, I want to, like I said, try to do better, but something always, like, gets in the way.' One can sympathize with the nervousness and ignorance that presumably causes this misuse and overuse, but one can also avoid the practice himself.* (Shaw, 1987, p.15)

This entry is obviously a criticism of those speakers in whose discourse *like* appears. Shaw is, in essence, labeling all who use *like*, whose function in discourse has only recently deviated, as "*nervous*" and "*ignorant.*" Robert Underhill (1988) states that the use of nonstandard *like* is neither random nor mindless. The purpose of this paper is to examine the distribution of *like* in naturally occurring conversational discourse and come to some conclusions about where it appears, how it is used and why it is used. In doing so, data will be presented showing the use of the nonstandard like as a common conversational device used in normal face-to-face interaction that occurs in very specific, defined contexts. It should not be considered as a throwaway word reflecting the ignorance of the speaker.

The concern of this paper is with the conversational uses of *like* not standardly listed in dictionaries, for example: (a university student asking assistance on how to check out a book from the library using the computer system): So...do you have to **like**...go up to the terminal and punch in just the title of the book?

Background

The standard uses of *like* mentioned in the Random House Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged Version (1987, p.1022) are listed below.

1. as a **noun**:
   They grow oranges, lemons, and the *like*.
   No one has seen his *like* in a long time.

2. as a transitive **verb**:
   We all *liked* the concert.
   His parents *like* me and I like them.

3. as an **adjective** with various meanings such as 'of the same form,' and 'likely':
   I cannot remember a *like* instance.
   It looks something *like* this.

4. as a **preposition** with several meanings including 'similar to,' 'resembling,' 'characteristic of,' and 'inclined to:'
   He works *like* a beaver.
   He is just *like* his father.

5. as an **adverb** with meanings including 'nearly' or 'approximately:'
   The house is more *like* 40 than 20 years old.
   He was just there, looking very tough-*like*.

6. as a **conjunction** usually meaning 'as if' or 'just as:'
   It happened *like* you might expect it would.
   He acted *like* he was a afraid.

Method

I collected the data from two tape-recorded conversations of approximately 30 minutes each that were set up with three native English speakers in whom this nonstandard use of *like* was observed. I invited them to go have coffee at a local cafe so that we could "just talk." Any additional data outside of these recorded conversations were found in everyday discourse, conversations which I overheard, television programs, and reports from a fellow linguist who was asked to take notice of occurrences of *like* and report back to me. These observations took place over the course of about six months in 1997 from native speakers of English in both Japan and the United States. It must be stated, however, that the majority of the individuals who used this non-standard *like* were between 18-30 years old; very rarely did I observe this use of *like* in the speech of anyone older, nor was it heard often in individuals using a more formal register.

Results

From the data that I collected and examined I found that the non-standard *like* is used in several very specific instances. Most significantly, it is used to (1) present new information, (2) focus the statement, (3) mark the focus in questions, (4) introduce an unusual notion or situation, (5) introduce a quote and (6) indicate a slight discrepancy between what is said and what is meant. Underhill (1988) labels the nonstandard *like* as an "*intrusive particle.*" This particle is entirely ungrammatical in standard English and would seem, at least from Shaw's point of view, to appear randomly. This, however, is not the case. The occurrence of *like* in conversational discourse is neither random nor patternless but rather a systematized item that occurs frequently in conversations. The use of this particle may, at least at first glance, make the speaker's sentences seem awkward and incoherent. Examples 2-5 are a few randomly chosen samples from my data:

1. (A student being asked to finish up her reading):
   Let me just ***like****...finish reading one or wo more chapters.*

2. *Have you seen* ***like*** *Eileen or Tom and Julie here?*

3. (A man and a woman talking): *Could you* ***like*** *tell us what the difference is between* ***like*** *competence and performance?*

4. (A teacher describing one of Chomsky's theories): *It's* ***like*** *this device y'know...this* ***like*** *mechanism that all humans have that lets us ...acquire language.*

5. *Have there been* ***like*** *official charges brought against her that could put her in jail?*

I have boldfaced *like* in order to be more clear as to exactly where this item occurs in the sentences. It is not to be mistaken for a stress marker. Underhill (1988) states that grammatical *like* can be stressed, as in "A whale is *like* a fish, but it isn't really a fish" while the nonstandard *like* is never stressed. This statement is consistent with the findings of my study. In most cases, *like* is unstressed and accompanied by a marked fall in intonation. This can be seen in example 6.

6. (A student in a linguistics class asking a professor about subject material for a final examination):
   2 2 2 2 1 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 3 1 2 2 2 2 3+
   Do we have to ***like*** *know all the chapters from the midterm on for the final?*

Like Used to Present New Information

It will be helpful to start with a piece of connected text taken from one of my tape-recorded conversations. The topic is a trip to Alaska that speaker B's friend will be taking this summer:

7. *Speaker A: What's Chris doing this summer?*
Speaker B: She's goin' to travel up to Alaska with her parents in a motor home, it's this motor home that's ***like*** *um thirty feet long,*
and it's gonna take ***like*** *three weeks to get there,*
And all they're gonna do is travel around Alaska and ***like*** *check out the wildlife and sightsee.*
Speaker A: I wish I could go.

The *like* in lines 3 and 4 means *'approximately,'* as the speaker is trying to describe about how long the motor home is and about how long the trip to Alaska is going to take. The *like* found in line 5, however, is used to introduce the new information in the utterance. In line 5 the listener has already heard mention of Alaska and *"going up there"* ; the new information of the sentence is to be found after the particle *like. Like* precedes the first mention of the notion wildlife and sightseeing in Alaska, and it leads to a discussion of the sights in Alaska.

8. *It's supposed to be beautiful up there, Another friend of mine went up there [to Alaska] and said he saw* ***like*** *the most beautiful trees in the world.*

In this example the new information, "trees," is preceded by *like*. The listener already knows about Alaska and is now being told what there is to see in Alaska. *Like* is used in these instances to signal new information as it is in examples 9 - 13 below:

9. (A teacher explaining the practices of a fellow teacher): *He would* ***like*** *assign each one of the students to teach the class for a day.*

10. (Someone talking about when his father will retire): *That's what he's going to do next year...he's retiring* ***like*** *next year and they're gonna buy a Winnebago and just* ***like****...travel.*

11. (Student talking about what university department her friend's father is in): *Her dad is a professor here...here...he's* ***like*** *a professor of engineering.*

12. (A woman in a copy shop telling the clerk what she needs): *So I'll need this on* ***like****...a really good quality paper.*

13. (Someone giving a friend directions): *You go past the train station and* ***like****...turn left and keep going for a couple of blocks until you get to the first stoplight and then you take a right.*

In example 13, to *turn left and keep going for a couple for blocks* is the new information in the discourse, and is highly important to the listener as it is telling him exactly what is needed to get to where he would like to go. In examples 12 and 13 *like* is followed by a brief pause. This pause accompanied by the particle *like*, marks not only the new or most important information in the statement but also that which is focused.

Like as the Focus of the Statement

Like performs another related function to that of introducing new information; it marks the focus of the statement. Coulthard (1977) defines a *focus* as a "metastatement that tells what the transaction is going to be about" (p. 33). For the purposes of this study, *focus* will be used in the way that Underhill defines it. He states that the *focus* is the most significant

information in a sentence -- often the point of the sentence. The focus usually appears at or near the end, in keeping with its status of new information. The use of *like* to mark the focus is well shown in examples 14 - 16.

14. *(Teacher talking about her students): From their diaries you can tell a lot about their* ***like*** *personalities.*

15. *(Someone complaining): I don't know why the jerk wouldn't even* ***like*** *talk to me.*

16. *(Two people talking about research grants): She got a research grant from* ***like*** *the government.*

In example 14, the personalities of the teacher's students is the most significant item in the sentence. In example 15, it is clear that the speaker thinks that the person about whom he is speaking is a jerk; the reason he is a jerk becomes evident when we find out that he wouldn't talk to her. In example 16, the focus of the statement is on exactly where the research grant is coming from--the government.

Like Used to Mark the Focus in Questions

Another related feature of the distribution of nonstandard *like* is to mark the focus in questions. It is usually found marking the point of a question. Examples 17-21 are examples of this:

17. (A student to a nurse about an appointment): *Do you have to call to get an appointment* ***like*** *two days early?*

18. (A young girl to a bus driver): *Does this go all the way to* ***like*** *Market Place?*

19. (A young waitress to a customer): *Are you ready to order or should I* ***like*** *come back?*

20. (A student to a professor): *On the last day of class, are you gonna* ***like*** *collect all the homework that we didn't turn in throughout out the semester?*

21. *Speaker A: You've gotta get this homework done soon or else it's gonna pile up at the end of the semester.*
Speaker B: ***Like*** *when am I gonna have time?*

Examples 17 - 18 can also be thought of as soliciting moves. Bellack (as cited in Coulthard 1988) describes a *soliciting move* as a move that is intended to elicit (a) an active verbal response on the part of the persons addressed; (b) a cognitive response, e.g. encouraging persons addressed to attend to something; and (c) a physical response. In example 17, the speaker is requesting an active verbal response on the part of the nurse to respond to the concept "two days early." The student is asking the nurse for information concerning the amount of time before the doctor's appointment that she must call to arrange the appointment. She is asking the nurse to (1) attend to her conjecture of two days and (2) correct this conjecture if it is in fact inaccurate. *Like* is marking the information that is to be corrected thus aiding the nurse to better understand the question and to what she must respond.

Like Used to Introduce an Unusual Notion or Situation

In the following examples *like* is used to introduce an unusual notion or situation that the speaker is reporting:

22. (Conversation about books on vampires):
Speaker A: [the book] won't make sense if you start with the second.
Speaker B: Did you get it from the library?
Speaker A: That's right.
Speaker C: Oh, ***like*** *fantasy?*
Speaker B: ***Like*** *ghost stories or something?*

23. (Someone talking about a job opportunity): *It's* ***like*** *a huge ordeal!*

24. (Two friends talking about an interpersonal relationship): *I thought he'd* ***like*** *go with some bookworm.*

25. (A very exhausted student): *I had a test on Wednesday, two papers on Friday...I'm* ***like*** *sooo tired, I could lay down on my bed and* ***like*** *sleep for a month.*

26. (Someone talking about writing a journal article): *If I double space this thing it's gonna be* ***like*** *a million pages long.*

It is possible that the *like* found in example 26 could be interpreted as the grammatical adverbial *like* that means 'approximately' but if we substitute this word for the particle *like* the absurdity of the substitution becomes obvious.

Like Used to Introduce a Quote

In example 28, line 2, the speaker uses the particle in a way not yet examined; she uses it to introduce a direct quotation. In the data *like* is often used as an enquoting device and is usually found immediately preceding the quote. This use of *like* is similar to the narrative *go* and can replace *"to say"*:

27. (Speaker recounting a precarious experience with a friend):
He got a piece of glass stuck in his foot and he asked me to ***like*** *take it out the next morning. and I'm* ***like*** *"yeah right...****like*** *I'm gonna be able to do that."*

28. Speaker A: *She was gonna write it for you?*
Speaker B: *Yeah 'cause well, we were gonna study together, and she's* ***like*** *"c'mon, c'mon, you know we'll just talk." I'm* ***like*** *"no" cause I really didn't want to go to the library, I just wanted to go home and she's* ***like*** *"just tell me what to say and I can write it for you."*

29. Speaker A: *She said, if you want to go to Alaska, go, but I hope it's not just because you think you won't be able to get a job.*
Speaker B: *And I'm* ***like*** *"yeah RIGHT!"*

30. (Woman recounting an experience in a bar):
So this guy comes up to me and is ***like*** *"Wanna dance?" and I'm* ***like*** *"no way" and he goes "you're a jerk" and I'm* ***like*** *{no words, just a facial expression of contempt},*

All of the above examples can be considered direct quotations as *like* cannot precede indirect discourse.

On interviewing several speakers about why they used "like" as an enquoting device, they responded that what they were quoting was not retrospective reports of speech but rather internal speaker reactions--what the speaker had in mind to say, or how the speaker felt, but not what he actually said. This could be a representation of the attitudes of the person being quoted. The quotations in examples 29 and 30 are not actually direct quotes. In example 30, Speaker B probably did not really say "no way;" she was just projecting the attitude that she did not want to dance with the person asking her to dance. The subjects that were interviewed also

stated that when they use *say* as an enquoting device they quote closer to verbatim, whereas they rarely quote verbatim using *like*. Using *like* to construct a dialogue and in direct quotations in these instances also makes the narration more lively for the listener.

Like Used to Indicate a Slight Discrepancy between What is Said and What is Meant

In the above examples, *like* is used as an enquoting device that in general conveys the attitudes or impressions of the person being quoted rather than stating an exact quote. Similarly, it can be used to indicate a discrepancy between what the speaker is about to say and what the speaker feels ideally should be said. The speaker could be conveying the thought *what I say is like what I mean but somehow something is preventing me from effectively conveying my thoughts to you.* This would seem to demonstrate a will on the part of the speaker to convey exactly what *is* meant.

Since there is a will to express oneself clearly and accurately, it may be that *like* is being used as a "planning marker" (Brown and Yule, 1983) which is a conversational device like "erm", "uh" and "um" that speakers use in order to give themselves time to formulate exactly what they are trying to say. On a closer review of the coffee shop tape-recorded interview, it was found that roughly one-third of the instances of *like* were followed by a short pause (0 - 1.5 seconds.) Pause length can be regarded as a function of the amount of planning that the speaker is putting into his next utterance. While giving the speaker time to think about what he is going to say, *like* may also be a sort of signal to the listener to cue him into important upcoming information, thus acting as a marker for new information.

It is interesting to consider how the use of *like* came about for the use of a new information and focus marker. Underhill hypothesizes that it developed from *like* meaning "for example," as it clearly does in examples 31-34, and may in example 35 from my data:

31. (Speaker asking a friend a question):
Have you seen **like,** Niamh or Janet here?

32. (Teacher talking about a class):
Well, it's an upper level class where people only come in for that one day . You know, **like** students from Chiba or Saitama.

33. Student A: What did you do in your class today?
Student B: We **like** played this game and studied more vocabulary.

34. (Someone telling about an interesting evening out):
There are several parts of the evening that are quite blurry...**like** getting stopped by the cops and being asked about my papers.

35. (Overheard discussion in an elevator concerning Chomsky):
It **like** has nothing to do with the difference between competence and performance.

This interpretation of *like* as *"for example"* is particularly suited to responding to or asking questions as well as narrating. It seems to be a tool that the speaker uses to demonstrate his point more clearly. This aids the speaker in responding to the pressures of spontaneous face-to-face interaction.

Conclusion

In the preceding discussion I have shown that the particle *like* is used to (1) present new information, (2) focus the statement, (3) mark the focus in questions, (4) introduce an unusual notion or situation, (5) introduce a quote and (6) indicate a slight discrepancy between what is said and what is meant. These uses of *like* suggest that its use is very well suited to conversation, where speakers often find themselves in situations where they have to formulate what they have to say without having sufficient time to plan as they do when communicating in

the written mode. First, the conversational value is that is can be used as a space filler to give time for the speaker to properly formulate his thoughts. Second, by saying that what follows will be *like* what the speaker has in mind, the speaker is suggesting that some thought may be difficult to formulate or hard to express and may silently ask the listener to attend to what is being said.

As was stated earlier, *like* is very well suited to the ongoing pressures of conversational discourse. Thus it seems that Shaw (1987) can sympathize with the nervousness associated with face-to-face interaction, but it is inappropriate to label all those who use this *like* as ignorant. Such a conversational use of *like* does not lend itself well to a static entry in a dictionary but can be an effective tool used to construct dialogue and consequently make a narration more lively. *Like* does have a very clearly-defined place in conversation.

References

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