

# Towards a uniform treatment of *LIKE*

Alia Pugh & Raphael Salkie  
University of Brighton

The English word **like** is extraordinarily multi-functional.

- Long-established uses: **like** can be a preposition (1), verb (2), noun (3), adjective (4), conjunction (5) or suffix (6):
  - (1) She smokes **like** a chimney.
  - (2) I **like** classical music.
  - (3) I have not seen his **like** for many years.
  - (4) We were all of a **like** mind.
  - (5) Let's go swimming in the lake **like** we used to.
  - (6) He held my hand in a vice-**like** grip.
- Newer and more controversial uses: *like* can introduce reported speech (7) or nonlexicalised sounds representing an attitude or feeling (8), and function as an approximator (9) and as various kinds of discourse marker (10-14):
  - (7) I was **like**, "What are you guys doing here?"
  - (8) I was **like**, [makes inhaling, squeaky sound to indicate shock].
  - (9) But you're going to be doing something **like** 70 hours a year, which is **like** three times a week in season.
  - (10) He was **like**, totally off his rocker.
  - (11) So then I got my mum's trainer... and we started doing little things **like** we'd take walks, and then ... I started in the gym, and I kept it up, an' I be—kinda—came obsessed with it and I never thought I'd be like that.
  - (12) You don't know really know what's going on, um, **like** behind those eyes...
  - (13) So you wanna be careful, **like**.
  - (14) Well we'll have a look, that's the simple answer. So we're we're trying to rearrange the load **like**. Cos it's ten tonne short on the lorry.
- Also many multi-word expressions (MWEs), e.g.:
  - (15) **How do you like** your tea?
  - (16) We can leave now **if you like**.
  - (17) **I would like** the salad, please.
  - (18) **That's just like** him!
  - (19) He's **nothing like** as fat as his father.
  - (20) It **looks like** rain.
  - (21) **That's more like it!**
  - (22) **I like that!**
  - (23) You can do **as you like**.
  - (24) We can leave now **if you like**.

Cf. also *tell it like is / as like as not / a vice-like grip*, and many more.

- Certain uses seen as sub-standard:

(25) No one else can score goals **like** he can!

(26) He looked at me **like** I was mad.

‘Some people consider this use to be incorrect’ (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English [LDOCE]*). This use ‘is frowned upon and considered unacceptable in formal English’ (*Oxford Dictionary of English [ODE]*).

The uses of *like* in (10-12): evidence of a ‘verbal virus’ to be avoided Berkley (2002). About two-thirds of people questioned have tried to abstain from its use Fox Tree (2007).

- Written vs. spoken English. 794 instances of Discourse Marker (DM) *like* in the spoken part of the Australian International Corpus of English (ICE), but none in the written part: the figures for New Zealand ICE were 670 and zero Miller (2009). A few instances of *like* as a DM and as a marker of reported speech in the British National Corpus (BNC) (27) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) (28):

(27) He often comes in of an evenin' and he took one look at the cow and told me what to do. Ah'll tell you she was **like** dyin' -- that pumpin' job hadn't done no good at all.

(28) Well, last night he up and asked again. He was **like**, "Check it out, Faye, it's gonna be a Spike Lee night tonight-I'm talking classics like She's Gotta Have It, Do the Right Thing, Crooklyn -better join me."

- Geographical variation with DM *like*. Utterance-final *like* as in (13-14) has been reported in Scotland and parts of Northern England (Miller & Weinert 1995), as well as Australia and New Zealand (Miller 2009); it seems to be rare in North America and in South-East England.
- Mostly young people, particularly young women? Cf. the actor Robert Pattinson (born 1986) and the musician Avril Lavigne (born 1984):

(29) Yeah, when you read the ah book.. ahm... just almost on every page, just saying **like**, “His sculpted, you know, pecs, blah blah blah **like**, you know. It’s kinda this obsessive detail about the—the beauty of Edward. An’ I was **like**, uh... I kind of, you know, I look like, you know, I’ve had a um, **like**, you know, facial reconstructive surgery. (Robert Pattinson YouTube interview)

(30) You probably heard that me and my guitar player Evan were uh lit to—f—we were on a ferris wheel and we were in one cart, and there was a cart behind us that had **like**, I don’t know my security guard and **like** some other people and we—we—we hit **like** a certain spot where **like**... our window met their window, so we **like** yanked our pants down and mooned them. (Avril Lavigne YouTube interview)

- Does DM *like* have a meaning at all?

ODE: ‘a meaningless filler’

*Collins English Dictionary* (CED:) ‘non-standard’ and ‘often used as a parenthetic filler’ – *there was this policeman just staring at us, like.*

LDOCE: ‘used in speech to fill a pause while you are thinking what to say next’. All three dictionaries call it an ‘adverb’ to label the DM use. But cf. Underhill (1988), Romaine & Lange (1991), Miller & Weinert (1995), Andersen (2001), Miller (2009), and D’Arcy (2007): see Pugh (2011) for an extensive bibliography.

- Two proposals in the literature suggest ways to analyse *like* in a more coherent way.
  - A. Miller & Weinert (1995) put forward, but do not develop, the hypothesis that ‘the basic sense of *like* is “be like / be similar to”, that this basic sense gave rise to the “for example” use and that the latter in turn led to the discourse marker use’ (1995: 371, fn. 3). Does this have some synchronic validity? The two instances of *like* in (10) seem to be related in this way.

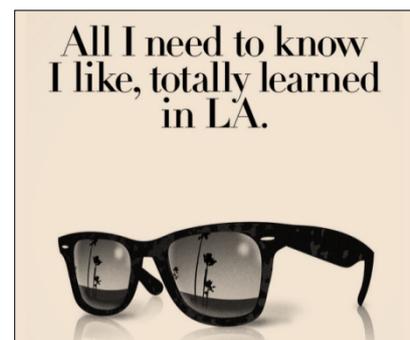
- B. Pugh (2011) distinguishes three functions: **stance management**, **information management**, and **speech production management**. Consider this example:

(31) I still have my same friends at home, an’ we’re **like** sisters ‘cause we grew up together, so I’m always on the phone with them and when we go home it’s **like** still normal, **like** we go to the show and the movies and stuff.

The first instance of *like* here can be glossed as ‘similar to (sisters)’; the second instance highlights the phrase *still normal*, the emphasising use indicating the speaker’s stance; the third *like* is equivalent to ‘for example’, and comes under ‘information management’, making explicit the relationship between what precedes and what follows. The category of ‘speech production management’ is used for examples like (32), where *like* signals a false start, and (33) where the speaker repairs what has just been said:

(32) Yeah, an’ I wanna **like**—I wanna big up British produce, so...

(33) And there was a rear—**like** a moment where a Scottish head reared up, and I felt very proud.



## Bibliography

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<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hNRxq3jDtr8>

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