Variation in Linguistic Functions of LIKE and the

Influences of Gender and Region on them

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There are many different linguistic features that characterize modern speech. Usage of the term “like” is a linguistic feature of spoken English that has shifted function over time. There are numerous different meanings of the word, aside from its dictionary definition, which according to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, is “to regard something in a favorable way” or “to be similar in comparison.” There are stereotypes floating around as to what groups of people tend to use “like” more frequently in their casual speech. These stereotypes consider factors such as gender, age, and region. The purpose of this linguistic observation is to test the credibility of these stereotypes and to pinpoint the specific factors, if any, that influence the use of “like” in natural speech. This study focuses specifically on the linguistic variables of gender and region. Once the contributing factors are determined and we answer the question of *who* uses “like,” we can further explore *how* people use “like,” and how others perceive those that frequently use “like.” Often times overuse of “like” results in a negative outlook on the speaker. However, outside sources such as BBC News and *Vanity Fair* shared their viewpoints on the linguistic perspective, and discussed various functional usages of “like” in the English Language.

This particular study was performed on a small scale, for simplicity’s sake.  Speech samples lasting one minute each were taken from five males and five females.  The participants were asked to describe their favorite movie, or talk about their day. Avoiding the use of formal interview-like questions made it more likely that they would use colloquial (natural) speech. These recordings were taken in a casual setting; inducing a comfortable environment for the participants is necessary in order to obtain information on the natural speech patterns of the speakers.  In an attempt to prevent the Observer’s Paradox, the speakers were not informed that the study was focusing on the word “like.”  Keeping this information from them ensured that they would maintain their usual manner of speaking, which is critical in terms of objective and accurate data.

After the interviews were conducted, the ten total recordings were reviewed, and the number of times “like” was used was recorded.  Each “like” was then classified based on the context in which the word was used.  The use of “like” in the context of its dictionary definition was not counted, as this observation focuses on the alternate usage of the term. The four categories included “like” as a focuser, an approximator, a quotative, or as a filler (for example, in the place of “um”).   “Like” can be used as a **focuser** (“She was like real cool”), an **approximator** (“He was like, about 6 feet”), or as a **quotative** (I was like, “Why did you do that?”) (Bayley 2/19).

Once the experimental data was collected, the results could be read several ways. Categorizing the participants in different ways allowed for different interpretations of the raw data. There seems to be a trend that when males frequently use “like” in their speech, they are more harshly criticized.  This may be because it is a common belief that females tend to use the term “like” in these alternate contexts more than males. This method of categorizing the data provides insight into the influence of gender on the linguistic variable.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Name** | **As QUOTATIVE** | **As FOCUSER** | **As APPROXIMATOR** | **As**  **FILLER** | **TOTAL** |
| Steph |  | 111 |  |  | 3 |
| Jackie | 111 | 1 |  |  | 4 |
| Grace |  | 11 | 1 | 1 | 4 |
| Andrea | 1 |  |  |  | 1 |
| Regina | 1 | 111 |  | 11 | 6 |

**Total (female): 18 Average: 3.6 times/minute**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Martin |  | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| Rock |  |  | 1 |  | 1 |
| Kevin | 11 | 11 |  | 11 | 6 |
| Matt | 1 | 1 |  |  | 2 |
| Victor | 1 |  |  |  | 1 |

**Total (male): 13 Average: 2.6 times/minute**

The recorded results reflect that women use “like” an average of 3.6 times per minute, whereas men use “like” an average of 2.6 times per minute. “Like” was most frequently used as a focuser in both male and female speech (e.g. “that was like really weird”). These results are consistent with the common belief that women use “like” more often than men. This is seen in the presence of “Valley Girl” speech, a dialect typical of Southern California, in which the use of “like” is characteristic (Bucholtz 2008). The mere fact that the stereotype is named “Valley ***Girl***,” indicates the association of these features with feminine speech.

The specific region that the speaker is from is another factor that is believed to influence this linguistic variable. As mentioned above, the excessive use of “like” in conversational speech is characteristic of the “Valley Girl” dialect, which is supposedly typical in those from Southern California (Bucholtz 2008). This theory can be tested by rearranging the collected data from gender specific, to region specific.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Name** | **As QUOTATIVE** | **As FOCUSER** | **As APPROXIMATOR** | **As**  **FILLER** | **TOTAL** |
| Steph |  | 111 |  |  | 3 |
| Andrea | 1 |  |  |  | 1 |
| Rock |  |  | 1 |  | 1 |
| Regina | 1 | 111 |  | 11 | 6 |
| Jackie | 111 | 1 |  |  | 4 |

**Southern California:** average = 3 times/minute

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Name** | **As QUOTATIVE** | **As FOCUSER** | **As APPROXIMATOR** | **As**  **FILLER** | **TOTAL** |
| Grace |  | 11 | 1 | 1 | 4 |
| Martin |  | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| Kevin | 11 | 11 |  | 11 | 6 |
| Matt | 1 | 1 |  |  | 2 |
| Victor | 1 |  |  |  | 1 |

**Northern California:** 3.2 times/minute

Categorizing by region shows that the speakers from Southern California used “like” an average of 3 times per minute, while speakers from Northern California used “like” an average of 3.2 times per minute. Because these numbers are so close, it can be assumed that region does not influence the frequency of alternate forms of “like.” This is evidence against the stereotype that Southern Californians tend to more frequently use “like.”

While the results of this experiment give a general idea of what trends are present within this linguistic variable, it by no means provides very accurate information. The limitations of this observation stem firstly from the small sample size. Because the issue of timeliness was taken into consideration, this study was done on a very small scale. A larger study with a more substantial sample size (perhaps a hundred) would provide a better likelihood of a representative sample of the population. For example, all the test subjects used here are between the ages of 19 and 25. Because the age range is held pretty constant, the results do not reflect the variability of age as a factor in linguistic difference. In addition, because this study took place on a university campus, the subjects are all students or faculty, which means that they are most likely well educated and have the capability of more formal, more “standard” speech patterns.

Additional research studies also affirm that region is not necessarily an influential factor in the use of “like.” In the PBS article, *“Do you speak American? Sez who? Like, Quote me,”* John Singler explores the origin and use of “like,” specifically its function as a quotative. The usage of “like” as a quotative is seen not only in Californians, or even Americans, but in English speakers across the globe. This “like quotative” shows up among young people in Canada, England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, and many other English speaking countries. The fact that this pattern in speech presents itself in countries all over the world suggests that there are there are probably other factors that influence usage of “like” much more than the region the speaker is from.

Furthering this experimental study could lead into an interesting segway: the linguistic perspectives that people have on usage of the term “like.” There seems to be a somewhat negative association with the overuse of “like” in its deviation from the standard dictionary meanings. In January 2010, *Vanity Fair* did an article on the use of “like” and its connotation. *“The Other L-Word”* highlights the negative characteristics of “like,” saying that “in some cases the term has become simultaneously a crutch and a tic, driving out the rest of the vocabulary as candy expels vegetables.” However, it is acknowledged that “like” may serve a useful purpose in conversational speech. It may be used as a pause or a colon or even as a hyperbole, or approximator, e.g. “I’ve done that like, a million times” (Hitchens 2010).

BBC News has also contributed to the public opinion of “like” in spoken English, recognizing that although some might find the use of “like” annoying or distracting, there are some functional purposes for the use of the term. Its function as a filler in conversation seems to be prominent; it serves as a means of stalling the conversation to give the speaker more time to think about what they want to say (Winterman 2010). “Like” may also be used as hedges that serve to soften what the speaker is saying (“I’m like, not really fond of him”), or boosters, to emphasize a statement (“She’s like really awesome”). Hedges are useful in conversations that discuss sensitive subjects; it helps to lessen the tensions or severity of the situation (BBC 2007).

What spurred the topic of choice for this linguistic observation was mere curiosity in a term that is frequently used and heard in everyday conversations. Results of the experiment ruled out region as a factor influencing the usage of “like,” and only suggested a correlation between frequent usage and gender, so that leaves many unanswered questions as to where the different functions of this simple word came from, and why it is being used so often, sometimes excessively, in younger generation speakers. The fact that such large entities such as *Vanity Fair* and *BBC News* found the issue pressing enough to discuss in their publications is an indicator of the influence it has had on modern speech. So while “like” may be a term that is thought to be unnecessary or annoying, there is no denying that it holds a capacity for many functions within the English language – not only in the United States, but in several other English-speaking countries around the world as well.

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