Contemporary Use of *Like* and its effects on non-native English speakers

Huijin Yan
Structure of English
Prof. Barr

Part I: Introduction

One phenomenon in American oral English that can be easily noticed by non-native speakers (NNESs) is the surprisingly broad use of *like*. The contemporary use of *like* is far beyond a verb, a noun or a preposition, which is what the NNESs have learned in their traditional English classes. For example:

(1) “I was walking into the south side, *like*, Anderson, the front desk, and it was really *like, like* two o’clock in the morning. Some kids was carrying a Natty’s can, *like*, a beer can, and the front desk people were *like*, what is that in your hand? He was *like*, oh, that’s a soda can. And, he was just really being stupid. And his friend was *like*, are you dumb? *Like*, what the hell are you doing? So, it’s really funny.” (An AU undergraduate student’s description of a funny conversation heard on April 15th, 2008)

(2) “So, we just kissed and then I was *like* ‘bye’. But if I had known he had a girlfriend…” (Overheard at AU, AU facebook)

(3) Declarative sentences – so-called because they used to, *like*, you know, declare things to be true? OK? As opposed to other things that are *like*, totally, you know, NOT? They’ve been infected by their tragically cool and totally hip interrogative tone? As if I’m saying, don’t think I’m a nerd just cauz I’ve noticed this, OK? I’ve nothing personally invested in my own opinions. I’m just *like* inviting you to join me on the bandwagon of my own uncertainty? (Transcription from *Like You Know*, Taylor Mali, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SCNIBV87wV4&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SCNIBV87wV4&feature=related))

(4) Yeah, you learn a standard language in a class, but when you go abroad, and you study in this country, there’s, all these things that you don’t know, and you are *like*, what the heck, *like*, I’ve never learnt it. And you are, *like*, they don’t expect you to learn it, but I guess, as you are *like*, around, just walking around, you pick it up and you learn it. (Parts of an interview taken on April 15th, 2008)

Despite the assertion that it is “entirely ungrammatical in standard English and makes sentences seem disjointed to many listeners” (Underhill, 1988, p. 234), the non-standard
use of *like* is used pervasively in contemporary English. This stimulates great interest among many linguists, who examine its usage and its functions and have reached a consensus that *like* has two pragmatic functions in contemporary use: *like* as a focus marker (Underhill, 1988) and the quotative *like* (Blyth, Recktenwald & Wang, 1990), which is also referred to as a dialogue introducer (Johnstone, 1987).

As Underhill (1988) pointed out, *like* functions as a focus marker in many situations to “introduce new concepts or identities” (p. 236) or to mark focused information (p. 237). It can be located before a variety of constituents: a NP, before a predicated adjective or adjective phrase, before an AP, or before a PP functioning adverbially, before a VP, before an embedded sentence, or before the entire sentence (pp. 243-244). We can easily match these functions with our previous examples:

- I was walking into the south side, *like*, Anderson (focus on new concept, before NP) [example (1)]
- *Like*, what the hell are you doing? (focus, emphasis, sentence initial) [example (1)]
- Declarative sentences – so-called because they used to, *like*, you know, declare things to be true. (mark focused information, before a VP) [example (3)]

The second function of *like* is a dialogue introducer when it is combined with *be* in reported speech. *Be+like* is less strongly informative than *say* or *go* in reported speech. This is probably because one meaning of *like* is “approximately”, as Underhill (1988, p. 235) mentioned when he discussed *like* as a focus marker. When using *be+like*, the
speaker is less responsible for the exact utterance of the speech and thus is allowed to add his/her own emotional nuance.

Unlike *say* or *go*, which function as introducers of a real utterance, *be+like* can function as an introducer of both real utterances and the speaker’s inner monologue, thus “allowing the speakers to express an attitude, reaction, or thought, as well as something actually said.” (Blyth et al., 1990) For example, “So, we just kissed and then I was *like*, bye” (example 2) can be something said or only thought by the speaker. Linguists Ferrara and Bell also claim that *be+like* is “a flexible discourse that can introduce internal dialogue, gesture, or speech of first persons as well as third persons.” (Ferrara & Bell, 1995, p. 285). Actually, the use of *be+like* has spreading to narratives of second-person as well; examples can be found in our previous data: “there’s, all these things that you don’t know, and you are *like*, what the heck…” (example 4)

Another difference is that *say* and *go* are both punctual verbs, which focus on the action; however, *be+like* expresses a more continuous and progressive feeling, given that *be* is a stative verb, and is “ambiguous and indicates a speech act that represents either an event or a state.” (Blyth et al., 1990). Thus, the effect of “his friend was *like*, are you dumb?” (example 1) is equivalent to “his friend was saying-going, are you dumb?” in semantic meanings but it is less cumbersome syntactically.
Part II: Research

While lots of studies about the contemporary use of *like* have been done among native English speakers, linguists have paid comparably little attention to its use among non-native English speakers (NNESs). Have these two usages of *like*, i.e., *like* as a focus marker and *like* as a dialogue introducer, been spreading to NNESs? How do the NNESs characterize the people who use these forms of *like*?

**Hypothesis:** the use of *like* as a focus marker and as a dialogue introducer is spreading to NNESs and has been added to their oral English.

**Methodology:** I conducted a pilot survey among NNESs at American University, Washington, DC, to help formulate some preliminary answers to these questions, and to guide further research. Data about NNESs’ use of *like* oral production were collected from two sources: (1) TESL-527 Cultural Issues in an ESL/EFL classroom on April 15th, 2008. The whole class was audio-recorded. NNESs’ responses to questions and discussion were selected and transcribed. (2) A short interview designed to elicit narratives of reported speech from NNESs.

**The interview:** 5 NNESs were selected as interviewees on the American University main campus. They were all asked a question: “Can you tell me a funny/silly conversation you heard recently?” A follow-up question of “What do you think of people who use *like* very frequently in their oral speech?” was asked in order to collect views on the contemporary use of *like* among NNESs.
Results: *Like* as a focus marker has been expanding to oral speech of NNESs, and is frequently used by them when an entirely new information or entity is introduced or some information is especially emphasized. Five out of seven NNESs in our research used *like* as a focus marker, which is placed in front of a NP, AP, PP, Adverbial Phrase, VP or sentence initial. Examples are shown below:

- It needs to go…*like*…*like*…food for a baby. (before NP) [Appendix 4, (1)]
- I guess, it’s *like*, for international students (before PP)[ Appendix 4, (2)]
- It’s doesn’t come on the top of my head, *like*, it comes spontaneously like this. (sentence initial) [Appendix 5, (3)]
- When I heard this, it stops *like*, just right at that moment. (before Adverbial Phrase) [Appendix 5, (3)]
- I didn’t hear it, I, *like*, participated in it. (before VP) [Appendix 5, (5)]

However, the use of *like* as a dialogue introducer is less frequently employed by NNESs. Only 3 out of 7 NNESs in the research used *be+like* as a dialogue introducer in reported speech, as shown in the following examples:

- I am *like*, OK, I understand the words, but, how much it’s useful for me? (inner monologue) [appendix 4 (2)]
- We were *like*, “what?”[appendix 5 (1)] (first-person, real utterance or inner monologue)
- And they are *like*, “we are not giving you money.” [appendix 5 (5)] (third-person, real utterance)
According to the data, when using reported speech, most NNESs still prefer to use the traditional dialogue introducers *say* and *tell*, although *like* as a dialogue introducer has become a new item in their lexicon for casual speech. For example:

- Somebody walks up to them and *tells* them, “what is there a manikin sitting there over the table?” [appendix 5 (1)]
- And the guy *says*, “The man sitting there over the table.” [appendix 5 (1)]
- I *told* her “where are you last night?” And she *said*, “I spend the night at his house.” [appendix 5 (5)]
- He *told* her he still loves her, but he doesn’t want. [appendix 5 (5)]

As for the attitude towards the contemporary use of *like*, many NNESs consider it as stigmatized, uneducated and causal. They found such use “horrible, obnoxious, dumb, inappropriate and annoying,” which explains why they still choose to use *say* or *tell* in their reported speech. Such strong opinions can be easily found in our follow-up interviews about their attitude towards Americans’ use of *like*:

- It’s horrible. The usage of like for every sentence, “It’s *like*, um… It’s, *like*… um… It’s *like*, um…” is annoying. You know, it’s *like*, “come on, spit whatever you have to say.” Get your idea straight. You know. It’s annoying. It’s obnoxious. It’s OK, now, can you stopping saying *like*, especially when you are not part of the conversation. [appendix 5, (1)]

- I heard two girls speaking in the Valley Accent. And it sounded very dumb. “*like*, *like*, you know, *like*… When my make-up goes away, *like*, my short-skirt rides up, *like*…” (Can’t stop laughing). [appendix 5, (2)]

- It’s sounds very dumb…And it’s a shame. It is actually English speakers and you are right. People who get British education wouldn’t do that, or do it less frequently. It is a very American thing. [appendix 5, (2)]

- “I don’t think it’s appropriate, because you don’t say it properly. Put *like like like like*, it doesn’t mean anything. It sounds very dumb [appendix 5, (4)]
Conclusion:

In conclusion, NNESs’ use of *like* has been inevitably affected by native English speakers and has acquired more versatile functions. NNESs frequently use *like* as a focus marker to introduce new information or to emphasize important information. Like native English speakers, NNESs place the focus marker *like* in various locations: before a NP, VP, PP, AP, Adverbial Phrase, embedded sentences, or before a whole sentence.

Despite the fact that many of them find such use to be indicative of casual register and consider it to be a stigmatized form, NNESs also use *be+like* as a dialogue introducer in their narratives to report an utterance or inner thought (monologue). However, *like* as a dialogue introducer is employed much less frequently than *like* as a focus marker by NNESs. I anticipate such a difference will be more significant when more data is collected.

Again, because of the limited resources, I was only able to collect data from 7 NNESs, who are all college students at American University. Results might change if the informants were from different educational backgrounds or different age groups. Further research needs to be conducted on a large number of NNESs of various ages, both genders and different social status or educational backgrounds. We will need to collect data from a variety of sources and analyze it to see whether *like* as a dialogue introducer has become a common use among NNESs, how frequently it is used, and NNESs’ attitude towards it.
Bibliography:


Johnstone, Babara. 1987. “‘He says…so I said’”: Verb Tense Alternation and Narrative Depictions of Authority in American English.” *Linguistics* 25, 33-52

Appendix

1. Parts of an interview taken on April 15th, 2008.

I was walking into the south side, like, Anderson, the front desk, and it was really like, like two o’clock in the morning. Some kids was carrying a Nadeas can, like, a beer can, and the front desk people were like, what is that in your hand? He was like, oh, that’s a soda can. And, he was just really being stupid. And his friend was like, are you dumb? Like, what the hell are you doing? So, it’s really funny. (81 words, 8 like)


There is Standard English, like, and there’s like slang. I mean, I take Italian, and my professor’s like, something we say, She’s like, Oh, what is that mean? Like today, we were talking in class and some girl said something. She’s like, oh, did you say “Dush”? And she was like, oh, she’s like “as in shower”, cause that’s what it is in Italian. And we were like, no, that means a bad thing, like, like, just like, the limit, like, the line between real English, like standard English, and like, like the slang English, is like, really define(?), because people don’t, like, if you come to the United States from another country, you don’t understand, like, half the things that they are saying. And then in your country, like, if we learn a language for another country, we learn their standard language. Yeah, you learn a standard language in a class, but when you go abroad, and you study in this country, there’s, all these things that you don’t know, and you are like, what the heck, like, I’ve never learnt it. And you are, like, they don’t expect you to learn it, but I guess, as you are like, around, just walking around, you pick it up and you learn it. (215 words, 24 like)

3. Taylor Mali Like youknow
(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SCNIBV87wV4&feature=related)

In case, you haven’t realized
it has somehow become uncool
to sound like you know what you are talking about?
Or believe strongly in what you, like, saying?
Invisible question marks and parenthetical you know, you know what I’m saying, has been attaching themselves to the ends of our sentences, even when those sentences aren’t, like, questions?

Declarative sentences-so- called
because they used to, like, you know, declare things to be true? OK?
As opposed to other things that are like, totally, you know, NOT?
They’ve been infected by their tragically cool and totally hipp interrogative tone?
As if I’m saying, don’t think I’m a nerd just cauz I’ve noticed this, OK?
I’ve nothing personally invested in my own opinions.
I’m just like inviting you to join me on the bandwagon of my own uncertainty? (6)
4. Transcriptions of two NNESs talking about Embodied Learning from TESL 527-cultural issues in ESL classroom on April 15th, 2008.

(1) If you come from other countries, maybe (in) the country you come from, the political organization is very different, like, for example, my country, that are many parties, not just two. In the beginning, it’s confusing. It needs to go…like…like…food for a baby…he needs to chew slowly, you know, otherwise, it’s confusing. It’s my experience here. When I was, like, everyday get the most paper, the subject were…like…wow…so hard for me to understand.

(2) I guess, it’s like, for international students, when I opened an expert book, I am like, I understand the words, but, it’s like, they are taking out of contexts, I am like, OK, I understand the words, but, how much it’s useful for me?

5. Interviews with 5 NNESs at American University.

(1) NNES from Peru. “I was in the copy center working for my Structure of English class. And the people, I work in the copy center. And the people we were working there were telling me that there was a very funny instant happen yesterday….they have been working there for more than 4 hours, somebody works up to them and tells them, “what is there a manikin sitting there over the table?” We were like, “what?” And the guy says, “The man sitting there over the table.” And they just started laughing so hard because they have been working there for more than 4 hours. There had been a man sitting in front of them in front of the table by itself, without moving or doing anything, and they hadn’t even realized…

It’s horrible. The usage of like for every sentence, “It’s like, um.. It’s, like…um….It’s like, um…” is annoying. You know, it’s like, “come on, spit whatever you have to say.” Get your idea straight. You know. It’s annoying. It’s obnoxious. It’s OK, now, can you stopping saying like, especially when you are not part of the conversation.”

(2) NNES from Lebanon. “You know the Valley Accent? The American Valley Accent? So the other day, I heard two girls speaking in the Valley Accent. And it sounded very dumb. “like, like, you know, like… When my make-up goes away, like, my short-skirt rides up, like…” (Can’t stop laughing)

“It’s sounds very dumb. You have this English language, either learn it and expand your vocabulary. And it’s a shame. It is actually English speakers and you are right. People who get British education wouldn’t do that, or do it less frequently. It is a very American thing.”
(3) NNES from Vietnam. It’s doesn’t come on the top of my head, *like*, it comes spontaneously *like* this…When I heard this, it stops *like*, just right at that moment, but it doesn’t really stay in my head.”

(4) NNES from Laos. “I don’t think it’s appropriate, because you don’t say it properly. Put *like like like like*, it doesn’t mean anything. It sounds very dumb.”

(5) NNES from Algeria. “I didn’t hear it, I, *like*, participated in it. I woke up this morning, and then my roommate was very upset, because she has seen her boyfriend last night for dinner. She was upset, because you know; she still has this feeling for him. She is very sad, and I told her, I told her “where are you last night?” And she said, “I spend the night at his house.” And she is very sad, because she still loves him, but he doesn’t love her. He told her he still loves her, but he doesn’t want. But I don’t believe it. He just tells her, “Oh, I still like you, but…whatever” … I was telling her, “you should not have dinner at his house. You know, ‘cause you are not going out with him. You know, that was not a smart decision, you know…” I know her, I know, *like*, how much she loves him…”

Casual Speech: “My friend is from Azerbaijan, and he studied at Azerbaijan Association. There’s like, 8 (people in that association). And they are *like*, “we are not giving you money.” And you know the money for the association budget? They give them, *like*, 50 dollars….”