

## Children's Use of Vernacular Functions of *like* in Peer Conversation

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Much recent research has described the ongoing development of vernacular functions of English *like* as a discourse marker (*Like they're trying to be discreet about it*) or discourse particle (*Maybe it's like a girl thing*) and as part *BE+like* quotative construction (*He's like "I don't want to work until later"*). For example, D'Arcy (2005) shows that discourse *like*, originally a clause-initial discourse marker, developed over apparent time into a discourse particle adjoined to determiner phrases (DP) and then generalized to verb phrases (VP) and a variety of other syntactic contexts inside the clause; and Tagliamonte and D'Arcy (2007) describe a reorganization of the quotative system to include *BE+like* as an introducer of reported thought and inner dialogue. While this research has made it possible to characterize broader patterns of development in the 'community' grammar, comparatively little is known about how speakers acquire this variable. This study examines young children's use of the word *like* as a discourse marker or discourse particle, and a quotative marker, to work toward a better understanding of how these functions of *like* are incorporated into maturing grammars.

Most existing research has looked at *like* primarily in the speech of adults and teenagers. However, D'Arcy (2005) included a 10-12-year-old age group and Levey (2006) has looked at 7-8 and 10-11-year-olds; it appears that many children are fairly prolific *like* users by these ages.

In this study I look five child age groups, 3-, 4-, 5-, 6-, and 10-year-olds. The focus is on the four younger age groups, which fill a gap in the existing research, and cover the period during which the use of *like* presumably develops. The 10-year-olds are included to serve as a comparison with existing research. Data come from recorded interactions between pairs of children of the same age, one pair of boys and one pair of girls at each of the five age groups. Each pair was recorded four times, for 30 minutes per recording sessions. Comparison data from conversations between six pairs of college-aged adults are drawn from a previously existing corpus.

All tokens of *like* that functioned as a discourse marker, discourse particle, or quotative marker were extracted. Tokens of discourse *like* were further coded for the syntactic constituent they adjoined to. Tokens of *like* functioning as an approximative adverb, as well as the more standard functions as a verb, preposition, etc., were excluded from the current analysis. This paper focuses primarily on discourse *like*: when discourse *like* appears in children's speech, the syntactic positions in which it appears, and how tokens of discourse *like* are distributed across different syntactic contexts. It also looks at gender differences in children's use of *like* and briefly considers younger children's use of *like* in quotative constructions.

None of the 3-year-olds was observed to use discourse *like*, though one girl used a single token of *like* in a quotative construction. All of the girls age 4 and older used *like*. It was rare, though not categorically absent, in the boys younger than 6.

For those speakers who did use discourse *like*, there was an implicational pattern in the syntactic position in which it appeared: If speakers used discourse *like* in a more recently emerging syntactic position, then they were very likely to also use it in all of the positions that emerged earlier in time. In addition, *like* was observed in more contexts as the age of the speaker increased.

The distribution of discourse *like* tokens across syntactic contexts varied with speakers' age. Across all age groups, *like* appeared most frequently as a clause-initial discourse marker, adjoined to DP, and adjoined to VP. In adults' speech the relative frequencies of these contexts reflect the order or their emergence in apparent time (D'Arcy, 2005): the discourse marker was most common (42% of tokens), followed by DP (31%) and VP (19%). In contrast, the majority of *like* tokens produced by children ages 4 to 6 were adjoined to DP (57%), 17% were discourse markers, and 11% adjoined to VP. Of *like* tokens produced by 10-year-olds, 39% were adjoined to DP, 19% discourse markers, and 22% adjoined to VP. So, younger children strongly favor DP as an adjunction site for *like*, but the proportion of discourse markers increases with age, becoming the most frequent syntactic position in the adults' speech. This confirms a trend emerging from previous research, toward more frequent use of *like* as a discourse marker, and less frequent use as a discourse particle adjoined to determiner phrases, as speakers get older. In the current data, this trend results primarily from girls' use of *like* and is not evident in the younger boys.

Although children differed from adults in that younger children use discourse *like* in a subset of the syntactic positions that adults use, and used it with different relative frequencies, children were not observed to use discourse *like* in any ways that adults do not use it. Children did differ qualitatively from adults in their use of *like* in quotative constructions. For adults and 10-year-olds, *like* categorically appeared with some form of the verb *to be* when it was used in quotatives. However, the younger children used *BE+like* in about 50% of quotatives. In the remaining cases it appeared with another quotative verb (*go* or *say*) or on its own with no verb..

These results show evidence of early acquisition of discourse *like*, particularly by girls. This is further evidence that *like* is not an adolescent peer group phenomenon but is part of speakers' repertoires from a young age. The results also speak to the relationship between individuals' linguistic development and the development of the community grammar over time, as the order in which syntactic positions are acquired appears to mirror the development of the language. Finally, the data show that gender differences in the use of *like* are evident at a young age, which raises the possibility that children are sensitive to the fact that *like* is widely perceived to be associated with female speakers and that this sociolinguistic knowledge may be guiding their behavior.

#### References

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