

## Language Investigations in spoken English

### Like it's teenage talk - or is it?

Do you use *like* as a discourse marker?  
People often think it's only teenagers who use *like* this way, but research in the USA by Christopher Odato\* has found that young children now use *like* too - even children as young as 4.

What about children in the UK though?

You could investigate this, seeing whether young children in your part of the country use the discourse marker *like*.



**CAREFUL!** If you are recording young children there are special ethical issues to think about. It's best to prepare a sheet of paper describing the research you want to do, and then ask the child's parent or other caregiver to sign the sheet to show that they've given you permission to record their child.

#### How to investigate?

Christopher Odato recorded children while they were playing with a friend, and then listened to the recording later. You could do this too, perhaps recording young children aged about 8 and then older children aged about 10 or 11, for comparison.



Or you could ask a child to tell you a story or describe their journey to school - or anything that might get them to talk at some length. You'll need to record what they say; and again it would be a good idea to record children of different ages.

Try to record at least 2 children in each age group. The more the better!





**TIP:** it's a good idea to try recording just one child first to check that they use *like* as a discourse marker. If they don't, you may prefer to change your mind about investigating children's uses of *like*. Instead, you could record teenagers - they are bound to use *like*! Then you can follow the same steps (below) for your analysis. You'll end up with a systematic analysis of how young people in your area of the country use *like* as a discourse marker.

### Collect your corpus of discourse marker *like*



**CAREFUL AGAIN!** There are many different *likes* in the English language! You are only interested in the discourse marker, so ignore

- the verb *like* (e.g. *I like playing Lego*);
- the conjunction *like* (*I was crying like a baby*);
- and phrases such as *I don't want to look like that*.

In all these examples, if you leave *like* out of the sentence, what's left won't make sense (you can't say *I playing Lego*, *I crying like a baby* or *I don't want to look that*).

It will be simpler too if you ignore any examples of the new quotative *BE like* (*I was like "ugh"* or *I was like "what shall we do now?"*).



**TIP:** you can find examples of most of these different *likes* in the recording and discussion of 8 year old Madeleine, and Dafne and Nandita on our English Language Teaching Resources archive website: <http://linguistics.sllf.qmul.ac.uk/english-language-teaching/madeleine-dressing>; and <http://linguistics.sllf.qmul.ac.uk/node/49>

What you are looking for is the discourse marker *like*; for example:

- *I used to like wear little white socks*
- *Like you go around the corner*
- *I saw like a little teddy bear*

In all these examples you could leave *like* out and the sentence would

still make perfect sense.

Make a note of all the discourse marker *likes* that the children use. Write down the few words that come before *like*, and the few words that come after it (you'll see why in a minute). If you are investigating children's use of *like*, be sure to note down how old the child was who uttered each one of the *likes* in your corpus.



**How to analyse?** Odato found that older children used the discourse marker *like* more often than younger children. So, first of all, work out how often children of different ages use discourse marker *like*. If you have transcribed their speech, you can work out how many times they use *like* every 100 words. If you didn't transcribe their speech, you can time how long they spoke for and then work out how many times they use *like* every 60 seconds. If you are focusing on **teenagers**, do this for each of the different speakers you recorded.

This is only a rough and ready part of your analysis though. Whether or not someone says *like* depends on what they are talking about, who they are talking to and all kinds of other things. It is more revealing to analyse HOW children (or teenagers) use *like*. For this you need to look at the examples you've noted down and see whether the discourse marker occurs:

- at the beginning of the clause e.g. *you walk down the street and like you go across the road*
- before a determiner phrase (a part of the clause containing a word like *a, the, this* or *my* followed by a noun e.g. *you pass like a big oak tree; I wear like my best shoes*)
- before a verb e.g. *she was like running all the way home*
- before a prepositional phrase e.g. *look at how my plane landed like in the crack of the chair*)
- somewhere else?

Odato found that when children were just beginning to acquire *like*, they used it at the beginning of a clause and before a determiner phrase. They only used *like* in other positions when they had become more sophisticated in their language use. So by seeing how the

children you recorded use *like*, you can get an idea of how far along they are in their acquisition of *like* as a discourse marker.

If you are analyzing teenage speech, in this way you can see how systematic they are in their use of *like*. Despite what people often think, this discourse marker doesn't occur just anywhere - there are only certain positions in the clause where it can be used.

If you can, try to see what the function of *like* is. People often think it is just a filler, but it can also be a hedge, or draw attention to something that hasn't been mentioned before, or show that what the speaker is going to say is an example of what they've just been talking about. *Like* can also add emphasis to what comes after it... *like* has many discourse functions (perhaps that's why young people use it so often!)

Finally, if you recorded boys and girls you can see whether there are any gender differences in their use of *like*.

### **In conclusion**

If you analysed children's speech, did your investigation confirm Odató's findings? If you analysed teenagers' speech, what did you discover about how they use *like*?

### **Reading**

Odató, Christopher V. (2013) The development of children's use of discourse *like* in peer interaction. *American Speech* 88(2): 117-143. You can read a summary here.

Alexandra D'Arcy has done a lot of research on *like* (mainly on Canadian English but her research is relevant to *like* in English generally). Many of her publications can be downloaded from her website (<http://web.uvic.ca/~adarcy/>), including this one: <http://web.uvic.ca/~adarcy/web%20documents/Darcy-like-Anglistik%20proofs.pdf>. There is a short report of some of her research on *like* here: (<http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200805/language-yikes>)