



The use of the discourse-pragmatic marker ‘like’ by native and non-native speakers of English in Ireland

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Abstract

This paper investigates the use of ‘like’ as a discourse-pragmatic marker by recently-arrived Polish and Chinese migrants in Dublin, Ireland. The data comprises 14 hours of audio-recorded sociolinguistic interviews with 42 participants, including a control sample of six native Irish English speakers. The frequency of ‘like’ is investigated, along with its variable positioning within the clause, and its discourse-pragmatic function. In total 926 tokens are examined, and statistical tests, including fixed and mixed effects regression models, are used to determine the significance of the results. The results show that the frequency of ‘like’ among the non-native speakers reaches the levels of the native speakers after approximately three years of residence in Ireland. Proficiency in English is not found to be significant, suggesting that it is exposure to native speaker input that drives this acquisition. The results also show that ‘like’ in clause-final position, considered to be an emblematic feature of Irish English (and a ‘non-standard’ feature of world Englishes more generally), was employed significantly more often by the native Dubliners, with no effect in this instance for length of residence among the migrants. As regards the function of ‘like’, it was found to be used predominantly to illustrate, explain or introduce information. ‘Like’ in clause-final position was also found to be used as a mitigator or hedge, predominantly by the Irish, and particularly in short statements of personal opinion that could be perceived as face-threatening or opposing the interlocutor’s views.

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1. Introduction

In a copper mine it’s all like in a solid rock, like he learned how to drive those huge machines underground, like two kilometres underground (Pawel).

The discourse-pragmatic marker (DPM) ‘like’ has been the object of research for a number of decades, and descriptions of its functions have been diverse. These range from views that it is “ungrammatical” (Underhill, 1988: 234), to those identifying its importance in relaying new information, exemplifying, and expressing approximate quantities (Jucker and Smith, 1998), in countering objections and false assumptions on the part of the hearer (Miller and Weinert, 1995) and, more recently, its capacity to introduce reported speech, functioning as the quotative complementizer ‘be like’ (see Tagliamonte et al., 2016 for an overview). The use of ‘like’ has also been found to be sociolinguistically stratified, with its use being associated with the speech of adolescents (Andersen, 2001) and young females (Dailey-O’Cain, 2000; Tagliamonte, 2005; D’Arcy, 2007). Across the English-speaking world, its use has been shown to be stigmatised and

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perceived negatively within the media and popular opinion (D'Arcy, 2007; Buchstaller, 2014; Hesson and Shellgren, 2015). A focus on its function as a filler or hesitation marker has linked it to discourses on the “degeneration” of language (D'Arcy, 2007: 386), and views that its users are ‘lazy’ or incoherent (Nestor, 2013: 52).

While there exists a wealth of existing research on ‘like’ among native speakers of English (also cross-dialectally – see Siemund et al., 2009), comparatively little attention has been given to its use among non-native speakers of English (but see Müller, 2005; Corrigan, 2015; Nestor and Regan, 2015), despite ever-increasing numbers of speakers of English as a lingua franca on a global scale. Aijmer (2002: 3) claims that infrequent or non-native use of DPMs by non-native speakers may lead to misunderstandings, and Mosegaard Hansen writes that this can be “less significant but certainly far less easy to resolve than the incorrect use of a content word” (1998: 199). This echoes Svartvik, who commented on the importance of DPMs for successful communication between native and non-native speakers:

If a foreign language learner says “five sheeps” or “he goed”, he can be corrected by practically every native speaker. If, on the other hand, he omits a *well*, the likely reaction will be that he is dogmatic, impolite, boring, awkward to talk to etc., but a native speaker cannot pinpoint an ‘error’.

(Svartvik, 1980: 171)

This study contributes to the study of DPMs in Irish English, as well as to the understanding of how non-native speakers acquire features of local vernacular in the L2 (see Adamson and Regan, 1991; Sankoff et al., 1997; Mougeon et al., 2004; Davydova and Buchstaller, 2015) by reporting on the use of ‘like’ by recently-arrived Polish and Chinese migrants in Dublin, Ireland. The data comprises 14 hours of audio-recorded sociolinguistic interviews with 36 migrants, and a control sample of six native Irish English speakers. A total of 926 tokens of ‘like’ are examined for their frequency, position within the clause and discourse-pragmatic function. In addition, a variety of extralinguistic variables such as speaker sex, length of residence, and proficiency in English are included in the analysis. Research questions include: (1) How frequent is ‘like’ among native and non-native speakers in Ireland? (2) Do factors such as speaker sex, length of residence, and proficiency in English have an effect? (3) Does the syntactic positioning of ‘like’ vary across speaker groups? (4) Does the function of ‘like’ differ across speaker groups?

This paper is structured as follows: Section 2 provides an overview of previous research, focusing on discourse-pragmatic variation, DPMs among non-native speakers, and the use of ‘like’ in Irish English; Section 3 describes the data collection and methodology; Section 4 discusses the results of the analyses of ‘like’ as regards its frequency, position within the clause, and its function; Section 5 provides a discussion of these results, situates them in the current literature on ‘like’ and DPMs, and puts forward some concluding words and suggestions for future research.

2. Previous research

2.1. Discourse-pragmatic variation

DPMs such as ‘like’, ‘you know’, ‘I mean’ and ‘I think’ are characterised by many defining features, including orality, high frequency, stylistic stigma, phonological reduction, semantic shallowness, and optionality (Brinton, 1996: 33). However, current research does not always agree on which parts of speech can qualify as a DPM, and the range of terminology employed includes ‘discourse marker’, ‘pragmatic marker’, ‘discourse particle’, ‘connective’, etc. DPMs are reported to fulfil a variety of functions in discourse, including “signalling transitions”, “indexing the relation of an utterance to the preceding context” and “indicating an interactive relationship between speaker, hearer and message” (Fung and Carter, 2007: 411). Thus they perform functions both pertaining to the structuring of the discourse itself, and to pragmatic issues, such as establishing solidarity, or conveying politeness. ‘Like’ is also functional across these two domains, occupying ‘discourse’ functions such as illustrating or expanding (Underhill, 1988), exemplifying (Schourup, 1985), filling or hesitating (Andersen, 2001), marking approximation (Jucker and Smith, 1998), self-correcting or repairing; and ‘pragmatic’ functions such as mitigating or hedging (Miller and Weinert, 1995). As such, it is referred to as a ‘discourse-pragmatic marker’ (DPM) throughout the present paper. With the exception of ‘like’ as used in repair sequences, the remaining functions of ‘like’ that are analysed in this paper have been previously identified in the literature, and thus a top-down approach is adopted.

Of particular importance among DPMs is their position within the clause, utterance or turn sequence. Although Fraser (1999: 938) stated that “[...] almost all DMs occur in initial position (*though* being an exception), fewer occur in medial position and still fewer occur in final position”, this view has been contested by Degand (2014), inter alia, who argue that DPMs on the right versus the left periphery may be less exceptional than originally posited in earlier work on DPMs. Overall, research indicates that the position of DPMs vis-à-vis the clause is crucial for textual, epistemic and even symbolic (identity) purposes. This is particularly pertinent for the use of ‘like’ in Irish English, as its use in clause-final position has been found to be particularly conducive to mitigating, hedging, or reducing the force of the preceding utterance (Miller and Weinert, 1995; Kallen, 2006).

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