

Structural Dimensions and Communicative Functions of *Like* Occurring before Content Words: Implications for Nigerian English Usage

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Abstract

The discourse marker 'like' is a feature of English usage which reveals some sociolinguistic peculiarities and the processes of communication in English among educated Nigerians. This study investigates the occurrence of 'like' before content words in educated Nigerians' formal discourse in English. This is with a view to identifying their communicative and sociolinguistic functions in addition to their implications for public speaking in English. Labov's variability theory which explains language variation in relation to social variables was adopted for the study. Relevant data on the use of 'like' were drawn from purposively sampled radio and television programmes. Qualitative data were subjected to sociolinguistic analysis while quantitative data were analysed using frequency count. Findings revealed that there were more occurrences of 'like' before content words in the speech samples of the undergraduate participants than there were in those of the graduates. Also, 'like' occurred before nouns or noun phrases, adjectives, adverbs, and more often before verbs. When 'like' occurred before content words, it appeared to help users select appropriate content words needed in the ongoing discourse. This also helped the speaker to continue to hold on to the discourse floor. However, the occurrence of 'like' before noncomplex and commonly used content words, most of which are monosyllabic or disyllabic, is quite worrisome. Care must be taken to avoid unnecessary and preponderant use of 'like' which may result in a kind of cacophony or 'babytalk' not suitable in formal speech situations.

Keywords: discourse markers, formal discourse, communicative functions, Nigerian English usage.

Introduction

There are several markers of discourse identified by Schiffrin (1987) in her work, which is completely devoted to, and titled *Discourse Markers*. Discourse markers are many and they are of several kinds. There are those that are verbal linguistic elements. There are others that are non-verbal in nature. Yet, there are others that are verbal but have no distinct linguistic status. In fact, various elements have been grouped together as markers of discourse. Schiffrin identifies the following: *and, but, or, so, because, now, then, y' know I mean, oh, well*. Wallwork (1985:126) also identifies the following: *sort of, kind of, you know*, or noise like *Mnnmm* or *er...er*. Schiffrin (1987:41) recognises these items like *er, mmm et cetera* which Wallwork refers to as 'noise' but she does not discuss them fully in her work. Some of these markers, which are not under the 'noise' category, have certain semantic implications and they can be grouped into certain grammatical classes. For example, *and, but, or* are discourse connectives (conjunctions), *so* and *because* are markers of cause and result, *so* is sometimes conjunction and sometimes adverb. *Because* can also be a conjunction. *Now* and *then* are temporal adverbs while *y' know* is a clause.

However, markers such as *Mmmm, uhmn, er, ehm* may not fall distinctly into such grammatical and semantic categories as those above. Yet, they are markers of discourse, specifically in conversational or spoken discourse. These ones have been referred to by Sacks *et al.* (1974) and Crystal (1975) as 'discourse fillers' and simply as 'fillers' by Wallwork (1985).

As earlier mentioned, there are certain other markers of discourse that have no verbal representations (either as noise or distinct linguistic elements). They have been referred to either as gaps or unfilled pauses. Onadeko (2002: 287) submits that, 'fillers and gaps are highly systematic and serve a range of clear communicative functions'. In other words, fillers and gaps have clear functions in spoken language, which can be psychologically accounted for in specific contexts. Lewis (2011: 415) explains that 'it is frequency

and usage effects, arising in particular contexts and constructions that lead to the emergence of new semantic and syntactic properties in expressions that become discourse markers (DMs)'.

Part of the dispositions of Nigerians to English usage is the adoption of *like* as a discourse marker in formal English expressions. *Like* has been found to accompany the spoken expressions of some educated Nigerians. The observation is that the use of *like* is fast becoming a trend in Nigerian English usage. The acquisition of particular communicative practices may be through association with a local community or social group, and such communicative practices which reveal the identity of that particular group is known as sociolect as explained by Durell (2004: 200). McCarthy (1991:6) submits that 'a close observation of such behaviour of participants in talk and of patterns, which recur over a wide range of natural data' can be embarked upon.

Some Nigerians tend to prefer the use of *like* in certain ways, either because it is in vogue or because it sounds fashionable in speech, and as Labov (2012:6) puts it, 'we are programmed to learn to speak in ways that fit the general pattern of our communities'. He, therefore, explains that what obtains in our environment determines how we speak. *Like*, as used by Nigerians hold great communicative import on comparison with the manifestation of the same in the native speakers' speech. However, the various uses of the marker seem to have certain implications for grammaticality in English usage by Nigerians. Examples are the use of *like* as a substitute for content words (Olayemi, 2014), and *like* as a substitute for prepositions (Olayemi, 2017b) respectively. Another highlighted usage of *like* is its role as a quotative device in formal speech situations by educated Nigerians and its implications for the construction of appropriate reported speech (2017a).

In the light of this, the present study is inspired by the need for contributions to existing literature on language variation based on the functionalist orientation in linguistic study, particularly as it applies to the occurrence of *like* before content words in English usage in a second-language setting. The focus of this research work is a sociolinguistic exploration of language use with particular interest in the specific discourse marker – *like*, and how it operates in the spoken English of educated Nigerians. In other words, attempts are made to unravel the dynamics of language use with particular attention to the sociolinguistic factors responsible for the manifestation of *like* occurring before content words in human speech (a sociological and linguistic interpretation of communication). The communicative functions and the semantic imports of *like* occurring before content words in the speech of educated Nigerians are being explored in addition to the connection which this occurrence has with the use of English as a second language in Nigeria.

Methodology

Data on the use of *like* before content words were drawn from purposively sampled radio and television interviews of 248 educated Nigerians comprising 124 undergraduates – 59 males, 65 females, and 124 graduates – 67 males and 57 females. There were 221 participants from four Nigerian television stations and 27 participants from two Nigerian radio stations. Qualitative data were subjected to sociolinguistic analysis while quantitative data were analysed using frequency count.

This study adopts Labov's variability theory which emphasises social variables as a necessary factor in the understanding of human speech behaviour. A sociolinguistic approach to the study of language embraces the functionalist orientation which regards language as a social phenomenon. The main thrust of a sociolinguistic study therefore is that the use of language must be examined in relation to its role in human communication. Studies of language in relation to society thus naturally recognise the theory of speech variation as a central theme in the analysis of the relationship between language use and the various social patterns existing in a speech community. This present research is therefore rooted in the sociolinguistic variation theory which recognises the existence of the sociolinguistic variable as a unit of analysis. According to Milroy (1980:10), A sociolinguistic variable is a linguistic element... which covaries not only with other linguistic elements, but also with a number of extra-linguistic independent variables such as social class, age, sex, ethnic group or contextual style.

Much of the works in sociolinguistic studies based on the variation theory is dominated by the influence of the American sociolinguist, William Labov. The major underlying principle of the variationist theory is the concept of variability, which was developed by Labov and introduced into sociolinguistic theory in order to account for differences in the use of language in its social context. Labov's (1972) study in New York focuses on the use of the variability theory to determine speech among blacks.

The variability theory has two major orientations which indicate the scope of its application to language study at the micro and macro levels. The theory explains language variation in relation to social variables and their correlation with social structure. It is able to do this by providing explanation on how languages differ and the division of language according to function. It is concerned with speech evaluation and how it influences speech forms. The phonological, syntactic and semantic interference of language systems in a speech community and the modification of these language systems along with the processes of language acquisition, and conservation are also a major preoccupation of the variability theory. It also addresses issues on the basis of coexistence of language systems and the social conflicts associated with it.

Thus, in the application of Labov's variability theory to this present study, the focus is on the lexical and syntactic patterns of variation in the use of the discourse marker - *like* before content words in the data collected. This is examined in the light of the contribution of this speech style to the existing structure of the Nigerian English. Therefore, this study is central to a better understanding of the communicative and social significance of such usage in the verbal communication of EL₂ speakers in different formal communicative events.

The aspect of the sociology of language examines the social dimension of the study in terms of the use of the linguistic element – *like* by specific categories of users who can be classified in terms of age and educational status. In this regard, therefore, the variability theory is significant to the examination of the verbal behaviour of educated members of the Nigerian speech community in relation to the use of English, and specifically the use of *like* as a discourse marker.

The variability theory is descriptive like structural linguistics since it describes language as it is. The manifestation of the discourse markers – *like* in the spoken discourse of some educated Nigerian users of English indicates the existence of a variety of English. The present research is therefore aimed at investigating the occurrence of *like* before content words and its implications for the use of English among educated Nigerians.

Results

Content words are words to which independent meanings can be assigned irrespective of the sentence within which they occur and they are indispensable in language usage. *Like* is sometimes used before a content word is spoken. This is to prepare the speaker as he picks on the next appropriate word needed to enable him to express himself appropriately, within the limited time available to him in the ongoing discourse. The following samples illustrate the structural dimensions of the occurrence of *like* in the samples gathered for the study.

The Occurrence of *Like* before Content Words (Samples from Graduate and Undergraduate

Participants' Speech)

In the speech samples collected, *like* occurred at different points in the utterances of the participants. There were 195 occurrences of *like* in the speech samples of the undergraduates out of which there were 54 occurrences of *like* before content words. In the speech samples of the graduate participants, *like* occurred 12 times before content words out of a total of 124 occurrences. This indicates that there were more occurrences of *like* before content words in the speech samples of the undergraduate participants than there were in those of the graduates.

The Occurrence of *Like* before Verbs

SAMPLE 1: Every time I'm about stepping on the stage, because I believe in my God so much, I'm always **like praying** at first, praying to God (Male Undergraduate)

SAMPLE 2: (Presenting the guests – a couple) Viewers at home are watching. They are **like blushing** now. (Female Graduate)

SAMPLE 3: There was a time Fashola **was like driving** around Lagos. We gave the gist here. (Female Graduate, Presenter on a radio programme)

SAMPLE 4: I'm **like trying** to perceive what would happen. (Female Undergraduate)

SAMPLE 5: Seriously speaking, what I think that is wrong with my family as in, in the performance is that, is that they are **like giving up**. Okay? Everybody is like why must we come out for eviction all the time? (Male Undergraduate) Others are

1. I don't think INEC is ready for 2015. They are kind of **like deceiving** us. (Male, Graduate Political Analyst)
2. We were **like playing** outside as in when you go out to play football with your age mates, that's the way we are in our family. (Male Undergraduate)
3. ...and everything that we learnt, it was **like leapt out** of our brains while we were dancing. (Female Undergraduate)
4. I was **like looking** at my family dancing different steps. (Male Undergraduate)
5. My younger sister, she would **like come** on stage. She would like she is holding a kind of ehm virus powder.... (Male Undergraduate)
6. Right now, we are about to, you know, **like do** the family line up for the performance tonight. (Male Undergraduate)
7. We went on stage and we tried to make things **like look** a little bit easier for us because we didn't use much of the stage though (Male Undergraduate)
8. For me, I'm just kind of **like bring up** steps, lead. That's why. (Male Undergraduate)
9. I just **like give** him that chance to do all those kind of arrangements. (Male Undergraduate)
10. We will not just walk **like okay dance**, okay let's do these steps. We will be organised and coordinated. (Male Undergraduate)
11. We were kind of **like strolling about** when I was supposed to be sleeping by then because I had exams the next day. (Female Undergraduate)
12. So when I got home, my mum, she was **like asking** me questions in a calm way... (Male Undergraduate)
13. We were **like tasked** to our limits and at the end of the day, the leader is like wow, it's just for two minutes 30 seconds. (Male Undergraduate)
14. When they called that's when we started practice **like did**, we rehearsed only three days. ... (Male Undergraduate)

Undergraduate)

15. I was like okay, I'm **like looking** at Janelle, Janelle, two inches heel? She is going to dance on heels? (*Male Graduate*)

16. They made some changes and it kind of **like disorganised** us for a bit... (*Female Undergraduate*)

17. Everybody became confused because they were **like supposed** to follow my count.... (*Male Undergraduate*)

18. She got pregnant and the boy is **like denying** her.... (*Female Undergraduate*)

19. He had an injury on his shoulder. He kind of **like flipped** yesterday and he landed on his shoulder. (*Female Undergraduate*)

20. They said we've already ended the show but I and my friend stood up to do something again so they were **like confused** that what are they doing? (*Male Undergraduate*)

21. In pantomime, you keep dancing and you kind of **like express** yourself in the right mood. (*Male Undergraduate*)

The Occurrence of Like after the Infinitive Marker -to before Verbs

The samples below show the occurrence of *like* after the infinitive marker *-to* before verbs. These *-to* infinitive verbs are also regarded as content words.

SAMPLE 1: Most of our food is made up of carbohydrate. We eat *amala, eba, fufu* and so on. You need to take Megamin **to like bring down** the carbohydrate level. (*Female Graduate, Pharmacist*)

SAMPLE 2: ...You need **to like do** it gestures and all that (*Male Undergraduate*)

SAMPLE 3: ...I will even work on myself, work on everybody and try **to like make** everything better before the show. (*Female Undergraduate*)

SAMPLE 4: To me, the house has been very interesting. We have come **to like learn** more about dancing. (*Male Undergraduate*)

SAMPLE 5: Unlike back home where sometimes, when I want **to like go** somewhere, I will just say let me keep it secret to myself, here we are united. (*Male Undergraduate*)

Other instances are:

1. ...but we tried to make it very creative and at the end, we tried **to like act** a little drama to show the creativity stuff. (*Male Undergraduate*)

2. They told us that our size, we are big guys that when we come on stage, we are going **to like divide** the stage into two. I was like ah (*No further comments*) (*Male Undergraduate*)

3. We rehearsed only three days, got the move, then a concept and tried **to like whirl** the crowd. (*Male Undergraduate*)

4. They expect that we are meant **to like give** more power, more energy. (*Male Undergraduate*)

5. We are not really finding it easy at all as in it's trying **to like tear** my family apart seriously. (*Male Undergraduate*)

6. Just as the dance portrays, we are trying **to like portray** the Igwe (*Male Undergraduate*)

7. It's quite different because we had to put in more. We had **to like believe** in ourselves... (*Female Undergraduate*)
8. Don't keep pesticides anywhere. Keep them in pellets. This is **to like prevent** you from direct contact with them. (*Female Graduate, Medical Doctor*)
9. She wasn't around so we had **to like change** the routine but thank God we scaled through. (*Female Undergraduate*)
10. I really thank the organisers for giving me this opportunity **to like come out...** (*Female Undergraduate*)
11. ... and **to like show** myself to the world... (*Female Undergraduate*)
12. I never believed that I would have been given the opportunity **to like come out** ... (*Female Undergraduate*)

The samples above show the occurrence of *like* before *-to* infinitive verbs. This further presents the peculiar relationship of *like* with verbs.

The Occurrence of *Like* before Adjectives

SAMPLE 1: I am a student of the University of Lagos, 300 Level, studying Business Education. When I was growing up, it was just my daddy. My daddy is more or less **like very lenient**. My mummy is a disciplinarian. (*Female Undergraduate*)

SAMPLE 2: I won't say I'm disappointed. I was more of **like shocked**. (*Female Undergraduate*)

SAMPLE 3: It is the stress that is making everybody **like weak** and everything. (*Female Undergraduate*)

SAMPLE 4: You make me feel as if you guys are professionals... because your performance each time you come on this stage it's **like faultless**, it's like I don't know what to write. (*Male, Presenter Graduate*)

SAMPLE 5: ...and in the middle of bringing your brother down you know, it was **like kind of disastrous**. (*Male Graduate*)

others are:

1. It was **like great**. My mummy wasn't feeling fine. (*Female Undergraduate*)
2. This activity is supposed to be **like really strict** all through. (*Female Undergraduate*)
3. When you want to put it into practice, it's very, very **like very difficult** but with time. You know, we are coping. (*Female Undergraduate*)
4. There is something about you. It's **like priceless** and I'm just like this girl is doing it again... (*Male Graduate*)
5. The energy should be this, this (*demonstrating the levels*) so that the crowd doesn't get **like boring** to them. (*Female Graduate*)
6. My mum was like wow we are going to participate in this great show this time around.
7. Everybody was **like happy**. (*Male Undergraduate*)

The Occurrence of *Like* before Nouns or Noun Phrases

SAMPLE 1: In this academy, we have **like several guys** who can do those lifts and stunts. (*Male Undergraduate*)

SAMPLE 2: So you are coming back with Godbless. How does that make you feel after the, **like beautiful comments** from the judges? (*Female Graduate, Presenter*)

SAMPLE 3: I've been in the first four to perform but I have never been **like second to the last**, people coming in, telling me this, this. (*Female, Undergraduate*)

SAMPLE 4: Why I choose this particular family ...It's like, not really that they can't dance...but I really think they as in they have **like girls** like us and they can't really stunt like my sister can unlike the other family... (*Female, Undergraduate*) **SAMPLE 5:** I like dancing. That's **like my first hobby**. (*Female Undergraduate*)

Others are:

1. I really want them to end the show, **like number 6**. (*Female Undergraduate*)
2. The whole thing is like a couple dance but we are **like all guys** so it's been hard trying to fix one thing or the other. (*Male Undergraduate*)
3. ...my brother as well, he is trying as usual. He's always like kind of **like a director** in the family. (*Male Undergraduate*)
4. I came here for my brother. He was so happy and I was actually **like the last option**.... (*Male Undergraduate*)
5. When we got to the room, we needed to know....and me being the one in the front, I kind of missed some steps and then because I was kind of **like the leading person**. (*Female, Undergraduate*)
6. By the time we showed the instructor what we had already, we didn't have much up to the ending. We just had **like our first choreography part**.... (*Male Undergraduate*)
7. Muiyiwa, you were the one that asked **for like clean moves**. How do you think the Utogo family did? (*Female Graduate, Presenter*)

The Occurrence of *Like* before Adverbs

SAMPLE 1: I beat them when it is necessary but not **like always**. I don't bully them (*Male Undergraduate*)

SAMPLE 2: Right now, I'm going to sleep **like tomorrow**. I'm going to miss the food, the sweet touch of the makeup and *ehm* free costumes (*Female Undergraduate*)

SAMPLE 3: The class kept on improving us **like day by day** so we kept on moving on (*Male Undergraduate*)

The analyses show the dimensions of the occurrence of *like* before content words - verbs, adjectives, nouns or noun phrases, and adverbs. There were 69 instances of this kind of usage. *Like* occurred before verbs 43 times; before adjectives 11 times; before nouns 12 times; and before adverbs 3 times. There were more occurrences of *like* before verbs than before other word classes identified. This indicates that there were more occurrences of *like* before content words in the speech samples of the undergraduate participants than there were in those of the graduates

Also, there were 23 occurrences of *like* before content words in the speech samples of the female undergraduates, 33 occurrences in the male speech samples, 5 occurrences in those of the male graduates, and 7 in the speech samples of the female graduates.

Discussion

When *like* occurs before content words, it performs specific communicative functions and also holds certain implications for the use of English in Nigeria. The occurrence of *like* before content words helped users in selecting appropriate content words needed at some points in the discourse. The fact that *like* occurred more

before verbs than it occurred before other word classes (as shown in the analysis) suggests that verb usage posed a greater challenge to users who had to adopt *like* to get them to reach some appropriate verb forms needed in the ongoing discussion. This also helped the on-going speaker to continue to hold on to the discourse floor so that it does not become hijacked due to his or her inability to fill the gaps or vacuum that would have been created as a result of the delay in the emergence of an appropriate content word that is long in coming. The occurrence of *like* before content words shows the functional relevance of *like* as a discourse marker since it appeared at points where speakers needed to think of an appropriate choice of word or phrase with which to express themselves while they held the discourse floor. With the use of *like* in this manner, speakers are able to keep talking without having to create gaps that distort the flow of discourse.

However, the occurrence of *like* before content words, most of which are monosyllabic or disyllabic and are common in day-to-day discourse, is quite worrisome. Examples of these kind of content words found in the samples are verbs such as *praying, trying, driving, looking, strolling, asking, come, do, look, give,* etc.; adjectives such as *shocked, weak, faultless, great, strict, difficult,* etc., nouns such as *hobby, girls, guys,* etc. and adverbs such as *always, tomorrow,* and so on.

The use of *like* as discourse markers in the manners described so far is not without certain implications for speech, especially in formal settings. The preponderant use of *like* in the speech samples made the speeches become awkward-sounding. There was a kind of careless use of *like*, especially because it occurred before content words which are not expected to be too complex to be managed in discourse by the likes of educated Nigerians used in this study. Users seem to have been accustomed to this kind of speech mannerism which they cannot easily let go.

In an earlier study, Olayemi (2014) highlights the use of *like* as a substitute for content words in Nigerian English usage. This kind of speech style reveals the possibility of speakers' complacency with regard to the acquisition of English vocabulary needed for smooth, daily communication processes. This present study considers the use of *like* before content words in ways that depict careless usage of *like* as a discourse marker since its occurrence is at points before simple and commonly used content words and not specific context-bound registers or terminologies.

Conclusion

The occurrence of *like* before content words shows that this discourse marker is used to initiate content word selection. However, care must be taken to avoid its unnecessary and preponderant usage which may lead to a kind of chatter or prattle not suitable in formal speech situations.

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