chong
newztel
media_watch
Phone | +64 9 6340463
clientservices@chong.co.nz

The Press 08/11/2008
Mainland Page 11
Region: National
Frequency: Daily AM
Circulation: 89,027
Height: 14.98 cms
Width: 17.66 cms
Size: 117.23 sq.cms.

Like it's versatile

Elizabeth Osmers Gordon

'Like the first hour I was like totally fine, like I wasn't like drunk." I didn't invent this sentence. It comes from data collected by Dr Alex D'Arcy of the University of Canterbury Linguistics Department. She's an expert on "like". She wrote her PhD in Canada on it.

Several people have asked me about "like". Peter Green wrote: "We older people have all observed the development during the last couple of decades of the extreme widespread practice of randomly peppering all spoken communication with this little word, so that every sentence includes it at least once or maybe even more."

Is Peter Green right? If he is, then the use of "like" breaks a golden rule of linguistics which says that language is not random or chaotic. Everything is governed by rules and the different forms of "like" in everyday speech are actually used with great precision. D'Arcy says we currently suffer from what she calls "the forest for the trees syndrome". Because "like" can appear in so many places it looks random but it actually isn't. If we step back we can see it's used in very particular ways.

Is the use of "like" a new development? Peter Green says he's heard it in the past 20 years but D'Arcy tells us that it's been around for over 200 years. The vernacular uses of "like" are complex and historically long-standing features of English dialects.

All information contained herein is protected by copyright. You may not copy, reproduce, record, retransmit, sell, publish, distribute, share or store this information in any form or by any means without the prior written consent of the Print Media Copyright Agency. You may not remove any copyright notice or proprietary notices. Ph (04) 498-4487 or email info@pmca.co.nz for further information.

chong
newztel
media_watch
Phone | +64 9 6340463
clientservices@chong.co.nz

The Press 08/11/2008
Mainland Page 11
Region: National
Frequency: Daily AM
Circulation: 89,027
Height: 11.92 cms
Width: 12.25 cms
Size: 120.01 sq.cms.

And she's found examples of it in recordings collected in New Zealand in the 1940s. Thomas Steel, born in Te Awamutu in 1874, says: "Like until his death he used to write to me frequently." Catherine Dudley, born in Cardrona in 1886, says: "You know like you would be going to the hotel to stay." This evidence shows that it isn't something which recently originated in North America as some people seem to think.

Peter Green has also noticed another use of "like" and he gives some examples. "I said 'yeah' becomes 'I was like yeah'; 'he said you've made my dream' becomes 'he was like you've made my dream'." He asks how this change happened.

"Be like" before speech has a technical name. It's called a quotative verb. Other quotative verbs are "say" "think" and "go" — "he said, 'you've made my dream'"; "he thought, 'you've made my dream;'" "he goes, 'you've made my dream.'" And now we also have "like".

According to D'Arcy, the quotative "like" seems to have emerged around 1980 in California and from here it spread quickly through American English. After about 1990 it started to be heard in other Englishes around the world. So young people in Canada, Singapore, India and South Africa were saying things like, "I was like, 'where did that come from?' " And they were also saying this in Australia, Great Britain and New Zealand. And the quotative "like" isn't just in English. Apparently it's also appeared in French, German, Swedish, and Hebrew. So what we are hearing in New Zealand is part of a world-wide development.

Peter Green asks where quotative "like" comes from. D'Arcy says that it seems to have developed from "like" as a conjunction before a clause. "It felt like everything had dropped away." She thinks it's been successful because it's so versatile. If you use "say" this can be followed by words only, and if you use "think" it must be followed by thoughts. But "like" can appear before words, thoughts, sounds, gestures and even writing. (And the same thing can be said for "go".)

D'Arcy is a world expert on "like" so I'll let her have the final word. "These uses are not simply 'a girl thing', or 'a teenager thing', nor strictly 'an American thing'. Instead to a certain extent these forms are everybody's thing."

words@press.co.nz

All information contained herein is protected by copyright. You may not copy, reproduce, record, retransmit, sell, publish, distribute, share or store this information in any form or by any means without the prior written consent of the Print Media Copyright Agency. You may not remove any copyright notice or proprietary notices. Ph (04) 498-4487 or email info@pmca.co.nz for further information.