

# Evidence for ‘like’ as a Focus Marker

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## ABSTRACT

Several functions have been proposed for the colloquial discourse particle *like*. This paper examines possible evidence for *like* as a focus marker. While this hypothesis seems plausible, it has been posited with insufficient definition or detail regarding the type of focus involved. It is also not clear how this aligns with other likely functions proposed for this discourse particle: for example, as a hedge marker or an approximator. This paper reports on a preliminary empirical study with small sets of conversational data of spoken colloquial American English. Its syntactic patterns and pragmatic usage suggest that *like* is used in a manner comparable to that of additive focus markers, exemplifiers, and other discourse markers. In such cases, it can function as an additive focus marker of indirect contrast, in addition to its well attested use as a hedge marker. Sentence-initial *it's like* may have similar properties. Analyzing *like* as an additive marker allows for reconciliation of its various proposed functions by treating it as a multifunctional marker. The findings also indicate many avenues for further research.

**Keywords:** discourse particle, discourse marker, like, hedge marker, focus, focus marker, pragmatics

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## 1. Introduction

An encouraging development in recent decades is how linguists have begun to take serious interest in colloquial lexical items used in natural speech by the common person. This includes a small but growing literature on discourse particles (e.g., *oh*, *um*, *well*), including the very colloquial particle *like*, though it is often disparaged by prescriptivists and traditionalists, who unfortunately fail to appreciate the linguistic expressiveness of such terms.

In surveying the literature on different approaches to *like*, one sees two major strands in particular. The more common approach has been to treat *like* as a type of hedge marker, and its usage as a hedge marker or approximator is in fact well

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attested by empirical data and pragmatic analyses. The other approach has been to treat it as a marker of new information or focus. Unfortunately, these proposals have been put forth without explicitly identifying the type of focus involved, or how it functions in indicating focus, as focus can refer to various discoursal and pragmatic features. Also, rather little published research has attempted to provide an empirical basis or theoretical framework for this claim.

After examining previous proposals for *like*, this paper examines the information management (i.e., focus marker) approach, the possible types of focus involved with this discourse particle,<sup>1)</sup> and how this might be reconciled with its other proposed functions such as hedging. This paper attempts to show the particular functions involved with *like* by looking at some conversational data from American English to examine how it might play a role in focus marking. The research questions in this study are as follows: (1) Does credible evidence exist for the discourse particle *like* as a focus marker; and (2) if so, what type of focus or focus marking does it involve?

## 2. Literature Review

A handful of articles have addressed the discourse marker *like*, which fall into two main categories. Some have treated it as a hedge marker or approximator, i.e., a softener, which represents a more sociopragmatic approach. Others have treated it as an information management marker, namely, as a marker of focus, new information, or exemplification. The earliest significant work on this lexeme is a classic paper (Schourup, 1983) on discourse markers, in which Schourup mainly treats *like* as an informational marker, but also cites examples of it used as a hedge marker.

### 2.1. Sociopramatic functions

Many of the better known studies and descriptions of *like* focus on its softener functions. These proposals for *like* focus on hedging and related functions, e.g., as a sociopragmatic and semantic hedge, relating to speaker attitudes and mitigating

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1) The pseudo-quotative *like* is not discussed here, as it is beyond the scope of this paper; it reports or paraphrases a speaker's words or thoughts, similar to the other colloquial pseudo-quotative *go* ("He's going, blah blah blah, and I'm like, yeah, right") (Ferrara & Bell, 1995; Romaine & Lange, 1991).

content. Schourup also described it as a marker of qualification or uncertainty, and of implicature. Likewise, Underhill (1988) treats it as a marker of qualification or uncertainty and as a hedge marker, and James (1983) treats it as a “compromiser” type of hedge, and thus lumps it together with *sorta*, *kinda*, *y’know*, without distinguishing their functional differences. A typical hedge use is illustrated in (1a), where it is used to soften a request. Andersen (2000) treats *like* as an approximative marker, roughly equivalent to ‘about, approximately’ or otherwise non-identical or non-literal resemblance between the encoded and communicated concepts, i.e., between the intended message and the actual words. Generally this interpretation holds (1b), but in some cases this interpretation seems forced or uncertain (1c). Andersen (1997) also cites examples where *like* marks figurative or metaphorical uses of terms marked by *like* (1d-e); these metaphoric uses are logical extensions of the approximative.

- (1) a. Could I like borrow your sweater? (Underhill, 1988, p. 241)
- b. My lowest ever was like forty. (Andersen, 1997, p. 41)
- c. There’s like a ledge up here you know where you can ski round slowly down the mountain. (Andersen, 2000, p. 24)
- d. Yeah but you imagine it you’re going out with someone and you see them like every day. (Andersen, 2000, p. 26)
- e. Oh she’s just, you know she, she’s like sailed through [school name], she gets out of everything. (Andersen, 2000, p. 26)

It also is used as a sentence-final hedge particle in British English (2a), which Schourup (1983) treats merely as a sentential adverbial tag, but Miller and Weinert (1995) treat it more in detail as an actual particle for hedging or softening statements. This use is also well attested in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED, 2016) going back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century (2b), where the marker *like* refers back to the preceding clause.

- (2) a. How old are you, like? (Miller & Weinert, 1995, p. 391)
- b. Father grew quite uneasy, like, for fear of his Lordship’s taking offence. (OED; year: 1778)

Schourup also cites *like* as a pause or hesitation marker, although this claim has been disputed (Miller & Weinert, 1995) due to a lack of unambiguous pause functions

of *like* in their data. That is, in cases such as those above, this is attributable to another function such as hedging rather than pause marking.

All these analyses constitute one general approach, in that they refer to *like*, with varying terminology, as a type of softener or hedge marker, for face-saving and linguistic politeness, to mitigate the force of a statement, to denote approximations, and to mark intended figurative interpretations. This type of approach has been described in considerable detail in Andersen (1998, 2000, 1997), and is also supported by a careful corpus analysis of the marker *like* and its usage in conversational English (Siegel, 2002), which shows that the hedging function is most common and can be regarded as its basic primary function as a discourse marker.

## 2.2. Information management functions

The other general type of approach is to assign it information management functions, namely, focus marking, beginning with Schourup's classic study (1983), which mainly treats *like* as an evidential or an exemplifier marker, roughly equivalent to *for example*:

- (3) She got two days off in a row. Like she would work six days and then...  
(Schourup, 1983, p. 38)

This use seems most transparent and related to the original meaning of *like* as a conjunction or preposition. However, Schourup does not delineate in detail how it works as an exemplifier, differently from the standard exemplifiers such as *e.g.*, *such as*, *for example*, *etc.*, and this exemplification approach has never been well delineated or subsequently re-examined since Schourup's early work. Underhill (1988) proposes that *like* marks focused items for contrast and emphasis (4a), new information (4b), and the focus in questions (4c). Miller and Weinert's (1995) study of a conversational corpus finds that it often occurs with new information and sometimes contrastive items, and they thus treat it as a focus marker for non-contrastive new information (4d), as well as for old information repeated for emphasis or contrastive focus (4e).

- (4) a. Man, get in that car, like now. (Underhill, 1988, p. 239)  
b. After I'd go to like college... then get into a like computer program.

(Underhill, 1988, p. 237)

- c. Don't you have like a red one? (Underhill, 1988, p. 239)
- d. I mean and like you've not got any obstacles here have you? (Miller & Weinert, 1995, p. 381)
- e. Uhuh. As in ... on the lefthand side of it. You know what I mean? like going up round it on the map. (Miller & Weinert, 1995, p. 382)

The Miller and Weinert study is the most careful and extensive study thus far in analyzing *like* as a focus marker. Their analysis shows that three-quarters of their tokens of *like* could be paraphrased as pseudo-clefts (*wh*-clefts) to capture the nuance of *like*, and a fair percentage could also be paraphrased as regular clefts (*it*-clefts). They concede that such paraphrases would considerably change the intended flow and coherence of the discourse, but this paraphrase test lends credibility to the claim that *like* functions as a type of focus marker of new and contrastive information. While clefts are indeed contrastive (see discussion below) and a cleft test would support the claim that *like* is a contrastive marker, the pseudo-cleft paraphrase test does not adequately support this claim. Pseudo-clefts serve the purpose of topicalizing sets of old items (e.g., “What I would like to do is leave the country”) and thus are not related to new information. Pseudo-cleft tests would tend to support *like* as a contrastive marker rather than as a new information marker. Finally, the Miller and Weinert study is one of the few to discuss the phrase *it's like*, and described it as non-contrastive focus, but beyond that, they did not attempt to define the specific type of focus involved with the phrase.

### 2.3. Defining focus

The use of focus in these studies, however, can be problematic. The term focus refers to several linguistic features that function in the flow of information in discourse. It can refer more broadly to all new information (or broad focus), i.e., new referents and discourse content in an utterance, which are not entirely predictable from the previous utterance (Kadmon, 2001). Most often, this corresponds to the information represented by the predicate, be it the entire verb phrase, or (if the verb is not new) at least predicate constituents after the verb such as object phrases, predicate complements, and adjuncts. Focus can also refer to a pragmatic or semantic feature that aligns with prosodic stress, i.e., one specific new

lexical item that receives nuclear stress (a.k.a., sentence stress, tonic stress, pitch accent stress). Focus here refers to the prominence given to the semantic content of the stress marked lexical item in an utterance (e.g., (Chafe, 1994; Féry, 2017; Halliday, 1967; Ladd, 1996; Selkirk, 1995). Focus items that are stress-marked (or in narrow focus) tend to occur at or near the end of sentences (Jackendoff, 1972; Kadmon, 2001), most often on nouns or other content words (Chafe, 1994; Szwedek, 1986). Its placement is due to pragmatic factors (e.g., those relevant to speakers' intentions) rather than syntactic or phonological rules (Kadmon, 2001).

In contrastive or emphatic focus, a word is given special emphasis, pragmatically and prosodically, for example, when two items are compared and understood as mutually exclusive in the context (van Deemter, 1999). Similarly, special emphasis demands the listener's attention (e.g., "I said do it NOW"). Direct contrast is local, involves a direct, exclusive contrast between two lexical items (e.g., "I'll take THIS road and you'll take THAT road"), and similarly, emphasis can implicate a contrast with a stated or implied opposite (e.g., "Do it NOW," i.e., not later). These are marked with special prosodic stress, and as such, the contrastive focus, stress or intonation can only be realized on a single word, and cannot be realized on larger phrases (van Deemter, 1999).

Another type of focus can involve new information or an implicit contrast, consisting of a single word or a larger syntactic constituent that is marked with a focus marker (König, 2016) or focusing adverb (Jackendoff, 1972; Kadmon, 2001), such as *also*, *only*, *even*, *in addition*, *either*, *likewise*, and *similarly*. Focus markers precede or occasionally follow constituents over which they take semantic scope. Some are simple additive markers that add extra information to the constituent, such as *also*, *too* in (5a-d). Others are known as scalar additive markers that work via implicature to create an indirect contrast with the propositional content under the syntactic scope of the marker (König, 2016). In English, this mainly consists of the additive marker *even*. For example, *even* in the sentence "She even knows calculus" takes semantic scope over the predicate (knows calculus) and emphasizes calculus by implying a contrast or comparison between calculus and other types of math that are not explicitly mentioned. König also describes emphatic markers as a similar and related category, such as 'especially' and emphatic pronouns (e.g., 'I did it MYSELF'), which work similarly via an implied contrast and comparison over a word or a larger constituent. These various types of focus markers can take scope over a lexical item or entire syntactic constituent.

Their focus can involve indirect contrastive focus when implicature is involved,

namely, when they imply the existence of additional possibilities in the interpretation of the sentence, which are not explicitly mentioned in the context. That is, they imply more information for the interpretation beyond what is available from context or previous discussion (König, 2016). For example, the markers *too* and *also* in (5a-d) takes scope over a whole constituent (marked in brackets) and induces an additional presupposition, that there exist other unwise choices or unwise actions the speaker has committed, which may or may not have been stated in the context. The particle *even* (5e-f) implies other unwise decisions that are not explicitly stated, but that are understood by implicature, and thus emphasizes the poor decision in (5e-f) via an indirect or implicit contrast with those other unspecified decisions. These sentences can be uttered with normal nuclear (sentence) stress, or with emphatic stress on the focus marker. In the following examples, semantic scope is indicated with brackets, and nuclear stress or emphatic stress with capitalization.

- (5) a. Yeah, I voted for [HIM], too.
- b. Yeah, I voted for [him], TOO.
- c. I also [voted for that incompetent GOVERNOR].
- d. I ALSO [voted for that incompetent governor].
- e. I even [voted for that incompetent GOVERNOR].
- f. I EVEN [voted for that incompetent governor].

Several options exist of the type of focus domains supposedly invoked by the discourse particle *like*. However, the various papers on *like* as an information or focus marker have not attempted to define the specific type of focus involved, how it invokes focus, or how pervasive its focalizing functions are compared to other functions of *like*. On these matters, proponents of such analyses have been rather silent, and have not considered these important questions.

## 2.4. Summary and questions

If *like* corresponds to focus, then the question arises of which type of focus it marks: all or some of the set of new information in sentences, the primary or narrow focus (which is marked with nuclear stress), or some form of contrastive or emphatic focus. If *like* functions as a focus marker of some type, identifying the type of focus involved can help with a more precise analysis of *like* and its functions. The most plausible hypothesis would be that it functions as an additive

marker or as some other type of focus marker for new information, for several reasons: (1) it has been grammaticalized as a discourse particle in contemporary English (probably from other lexical classes)<sup>2)</sup>, just as the standard focus markers of English came about as a result of grammaticalization processes (Brinton, 1996; König, 2016); (2) as a simple marker of normal (narrow) focus, it would seem redundant with normal nuclear stress; and (3) as a marker of direct contrast or emphasis, it would seem redundant with contrastive or emphatic stress (e.g., ‘I said INput, not OUTput’). However, if *like* were to mark a broader and possibly more abstract domain of indirect contrast, as do König’s focus markers, then its usage would be non-redundant and thus theoretically justifiable.

If *like* can mark a broader range of information as focus markers do, then one would expect that it would generally occur with whole constituents and various types of constituents that bear new information or contrasts, just as the examples in (5a-f) above. As such, it would invoke a more indirect type of additive or contrastive focus, in a manner similar to König’s focus markers. For this reason, the following study examines tokens of the discourse particle *like* in colloquial American speech, to determine whether evidence exists for *like* as a focus marker, at least in some sentences. Further evidence might come from sentences starting with *it’s like*, if it also shows additive or emphatic properties.

### 3. Research Study

If *like* is some type of new information focus marker, one would expect it to consistently occur before predicate content words or larger constituents that bear nuclear stress, constituents bearing special emphatic or contrastive stress, or constituents bearing referentially new contents in sentences. Since discourse markers refer anaphorically or cataphorically to the content of constituents or items to which they refer (Schiffrin, 1987), one might expect *like* to take scope over the item it precedes and refers to. Other evidence might come from *it’s like* functioning with similar information marking functions, or with contrastive functions similar to cleft sentences; this was examined, since this form occurred regularly in the data set.

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2) Its path of grammaticalization into a discourse particle would also yield valuable insight, but that is beyond the scope of the current paper; but I plan to deal with this in a future paper.



### 3.1. Method

To investigate its prosodic, syntactic, and information bearing properties, conversational samples of *like* were collected from two small sets of conversational speech data. The first set consists of a recording of natural conversations of graduate teaching assistants (the TA data set) in a teaching assistant office for ESL instructors at a Midwestern university in the US. The interlocutors were in their twenties or thirties, one male and three females, and all were native English speakers. The recording lasts about one hour, and sentences with *like* were transcribed. The second set consists of conversations between American high school students and a comedic-style high school counselor in a commercially available set of educational videos (the SV or school video data set).<sup>3)</sup> Sentences with *like* were transcribed from two half-hour videos, as well as sentences with *it's like*. Both data sets represent colloquial, natural American English by younger speakers. These two data sets were chosen because they represent natural, conversational American speech, and also to see whether different usage patterns for *like* might exist between the two age groups (high schoolers in the school videos in their late teens, versus graduate students in their twenties or thirties).

Utterances were marked for nuclear stress in the constituents following tokens of *like*, following standard principles of sentence stress identification (e.g., Féry, 2017). The distribution of tokens of *like* and *it's like* before various syntactic constituents was noted. Patterns of informational flow and pragmatic functions of the markers were examined; the content of constituents with these markers were examined in context to determine whether they could be interpreted as contrastively (or emphatically) marked items, or as new information, or whether they interrupted the flow of new information. An attempt was also made to classify its pragmatic functions, either as a hedge marker or an information marker. This was done by examining each sentence in context, and if necessary, using a paraphrase test, for example, paraphrasing with another hedge (e.g., *so to speak*, *as if*, *sort of*, *kind of*, *somewhat*), with an exemplification test (if *like* could be replaced with *for instance* or *for example*) or with a cleft paraphrase test (e.g., 'We had a picture of like water

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3) The TA recording was made by my colleague Kate Hahn, to whom I am grateful for the data. The relevant sentences with *like* involved about 28 sentences in 18 turn-taking exchanges, totalling 710 words. The school videos are from a school guidance series called 'The Power of Choice,' specifically, the two half-hour videos on relationships and family, with relevant sentences consisting of 35 sentences in 19 exchanges, totalling 675 words (*The Power of Choice*. (n.d.). Livewire Media.).

with this dead fish' = 'It was a picture of water...that we had'). The researcher, as a native speaker of American English, relied on natural language intuitions for making linguistic judgments. The monolexical *like* is dealt with first, and then *it's like* is discussed later; *it's like* was less common, but exhibits some similar properties as *like*.

### 3.2. Results and discussion

The school video sample (SV) contains 25 tokens of *like* and 14 tokens of *it's like*; the teaching assistant sample (TA) contains 22 tokens of *like* and one token of *it's like*. The two data sets with different age groups were examined for possible differences in usage of *like*, but the only difference found was that the high schoolers used *it's like* far more often than the teaching assistants (13 versus one token, respectively). With these small data sets, it is not clear if age was the explanatory factor, or if other sociolinguistic factors influenced the usage of *it's like*. (The marker *it's like* is discussed in a later section below.) Otherwise, no differences were found between the two groups in using *like* with different types of constituents, in informational or focusing functions, or in hedging functions associated with *like*.

Possible evidence for its linguistic properties also come from its intonational patterns. About 74% of tokens of *like* in the data (16/22 tokens in the TA sample, 19/25 tokens in the SV sample) were followed by an intonational rise and a brief prosodic juncture, which is transcribed with commas in the data and examples in this paper. While the correlation is not perfect, this most often occurs with approximative or metaphorical hedges, and fairly commonly with focus marking uses, namely, executing shifts to related topics that are used additively as examples of preceding statements. It is not clear why metaphorical hedges would pattern together with this focus marker function. Perhaps in its historical development, the metaphorical hedge gave rise to use of hypothetical examples, and later to general additive use of examples and substantiation. These questions require future research with larger corpora and speech analysis tools. When relevant, in the examples below, tokens of *like* or *it's like* are underlined, constituents under their apparent scope are demarcated with square brackets, and words with nuclear stress appear in all capitals.

#### 3.2.1. Grammatical distribution

The particle *like* was found to occur sentence initially and medially (but not

sentence finally, as occasionally reported for British English). It was found to occur before most types of XP-level constituents (noun phrase, adjective phrase, adverb phrase, or prepositional phrase), even clauses (S), including dependent and independent clauses, and also before non-tensed verb phrases such as participial phrases. It thus seems to occur with and have scope over any possible level of XP, e.g., a single lexeme noun or verb, a whole noun phrase, a predicate or an entire VP, an independent clause, or a complement clause. Its positional variability indicates that it can take scope over a wide range of constituent types, in a manner similar to that of the various focus markers discussed in König (2016). In Table 1 below are examples from the teaching assistant (TA) and school video (SV) data sets.

**Table 1.** Occurrences of *like* in both data sets

Noun phrase (NP)	I was gonna bring you that uh big family picture of, like [my ENTIRE family], but I'd never got one that was outside of my album. [TA]
Adjective phrase (AP)	You know how cats walk even, they're <u>like</u> [PARANOID]. [SV]
Adverbial phrase (AdvP)	Y'know, I say thank you, but its always <u>like</u> [y'know not really with FEELING] ... [SV]
Prepositional phrase (PP)	I'm not the type of person who can go up, <u>like</u> [into a HALLWAY] and say, y'know, number, meet me Friday night, 8pm. [SV]
Verb phrase (VP)	Well, I think so because I'm a bit more willing to like [sacrifice and GIVE], instead of just feeling, y'know that I'm right ... [SV]
Participial phrase	We had a picture of like water with this dead fish and this guy standing on a, on a ... wood piece <u>like</u> [just LOOKING at it into the water]... [TA]
Independent clause or sentence (S)	It's hard, though. I mean, 'charge' and 'arrest', <u>like</u> [they could never GET it] ... [TA]
Subordinate clause (S <sub>SUB</sub> )	<u>Like</u> , [when you're a FRESHMAN], it's just hard to be a freshman. [SV]

Counts for syntactic constituents are provided in Table 2 below. NPs constitute the most common constituent with *like*, followed by clauses or sentences (S) and VPs, and the other categories much less frequently. This is generally consistent with Andersen's (1997) corpus study of *like* in London teenage speech, which shows *like* to be most common with nouns, secondly verbs, then adverbs and adjectives, and less so with other categories.

**Table 2.** Constituents following *like* in both data sets

Constituents	TA sample		SV sample	
	Tokens	% of tokens	Tokens	% of tokens
Noun phrase (NP)	9	40.9	7	28
Verb phrase (VP)	3	13.6	6	24
Prepositional phrase (PP)	2	9.1	3	12
Adjective phrase (AP)	0	–	1	4
Adverb phrase (AdvP)	0	–	1	4
Main clause (S)	4	18.2	3	12
Dependent clause (SS <sub>UB</sub> )	3	13.6	2	8
Pause	1	45.5	2	8
Total	22	100	25	100

In almost all instances, *like* precedes an entire XP or clause constituent. The only apparent exceptions are three examples of *like* exclusively and purely as a pause or hesitation marker, e.g., where the first token of *like* precedes the pause marker *uh* (6a). Otherwise, the marked constituents consistently have a nuclear stress (in upper case), be it new information stress, as in (6b), or occasionally, contrastive stress as in (6c).

- (6) a. ...and as I understand it, you can have like uh it's like I [would make xerox COPIES of things]... [TA]  
b. Maybe the next step will be like, [a CAMCORDER]. [TA]  
c. And then y'know – and you yourself y'know like [MYSELF], I hold in a lot of emotion... [SV]

The same holds true for all occurrences of *like* in these conversational data, for all types of syntactic constituents (XP or S), where it consistently precede constituents containing items under focus and sentence stress. This is true whether *like* is used as a hedge marker or only as an informational marker. This would support the claim that *like* functions as an informational or focus marker to demarcate some form of pragmatic focus, even when it also serves as a hedge marker. The fact that it precedes a number of possible types of constituents, from individual nouns to an entire clause, is consistent with an informational and focus marker hypothesis. That is, it takes scope over a range of constituents, just like additive markers (e.g., 'also, too'), markers that involve indirect contrast and implicature (e.g., 'even'), and

emphatic markers (e.g., ‘especially’). This excludes other types of focus — the new information focus associated with nuclear stress (i.e., sentence stress, tonic stress, pitch accent) or the direct contrastive focus associated with special emphatic or contrastive stress. This leads to the next sections, where we can examine its pragmatic properties that can shed more light on its possible use as a focus marker.

### 3.2.2. Functional distribution

Tokens of *like* were examined to determine if they functioned primarily (1) as hedges or softeners, e.g., to mitigate expressions or for face-politeness; or (2) as informational markers for functions related to new information such as exemplification or adding information, or for contrast and emphasis. The data show significant overlap in its functions.

At least 17 out of 47 tokens of *like* seemed to function primarily as hedge or softener markers, or more specifically, as approximative markers to indicate statements that are intended non-literally. The tokens with “leaves it up in the air” in (7a), and “paranoid” in (7b) facilitate the interpretation of these within the context as simile, idiomatic, or hyperbole. Similarly, in (7c) the speaker indicates that an example of police detention is a metaphorical comparison with a famous crime case.

- (7) a. He hates to apologize. It’s like, [rarely does he EVER], even when he y’know he’s like [leaves it up in the AIR]. [SV]
- b. You know how cats walk even, they’re like [PARANOID]. [SV]
- c. Is this like [O.J. SIMPSON]? [TA]

At least 21 tokens of *like* (45%) seemed to function primarily as an informational marker, particularly as an exemplifier to add explanatory content or examples to support or illustrate a preceding assertion (whether hypothetical, counterfactual, or factual examples). In these cases, one could perform a substitution test by replacing it with an exemplifier or additive marker (“for example, such as, as if, that is, to illustrate, i.e.”) without significantly altering the meaning (though such a substitution does alter the flow, and only serves as a linguistic diagnostic). In (8a-d), for example, instances of *like* illustrate and support assertions by the speakers: hypothetical examples (8a-b), and further explanation and supporting examples (8c-d) to elaborate on and support their points about their views of parent-child

relationships (8c) and friendships (8d). In these sentences, *like* could be substituted with another exemplifier such as ‘for example’ for a similar interpretation, showing that it functions as an exemplifier. Even in examples such as (8c-d) that are less hypothetical, the speakers may be hedging these as examples of what they believe, e.g., what they would be like as a parent (8c) or what they think a friend should be like (8d).

- (8) a. I’m not the type of person who can go up, like [into a HALLWAY] and say, y’know, number, meet me Friday night, 8pm. [SV]
- b. But even, even if they haven’t come up with a charge yet while they’re arresting... They have to have a reason for arresting. They can’t arrest you, hold you, and then they hit like [the 22nd HOUR], and go, “Okay, let’s get ’em for robbery.” [TA]
- c. A: Do you think that when you’re a parent you’ll be different?  
B: Well, I think so because I’m a bit more willing to like [sacrifice and GIVE], instead of feeling, y’know that I’m right. [SV]
- d. A real friend like, [KNOWS you], like [saying someone can know you as well as you know YOURSELF]. [SV]

This can also be seen in the following examples. In (9a), a teenager discusses parental relations, and *like* shifts the topic to himself as an example. In (9b) a graduate student discussing photos in a wedding album uses *like* to clarify and elaborate on ‘buy’ with ‘reorder’ in what might also constitute a conversational repair. Again, in many cases such as (9c) the supporting examples can be factual (sending audio tapes) or hypothetical (camcorder).

- (9) a. And then y’know – and you yourself y’know like [MYSELF], I hold in a lot of emotion... [SV]
- b. I couldn’t take it out. Which makes me wanna now go see if I can buy one, like, [REORDER that picture], ‘cuz I would like to have one outside of there.
- c. F. Well, that’s why I, like, [my sister used to send me AUDIO tapes] when I was in Germany.  
M. Maybe the next step will be like, [a CAMCORDER].

While about 80% of all tokens of *like* could be identified primarily as either as

hedge markers or as informational or focus markers, at least 20% could be interpreted equally well as either a hedge or a focus marker in context. Such tokens could be readily interpreted as both approximative and exemplifying markers, particularly in cases such as the examples above, where *like* can indicate a hypothetical example, and can hedge or qualify it as a hypothetical rather than real example. The data indicate that *like* can serve as a hedge or approximator, in addition to information marking functions. Its use in marking new information or as an exemplifier might explain its free, interchangeable, and sometimes overlapping use for information management and hedge marking. As further examples, in (10a), the speaker provides a hypothetical example (going into restrooms) and then a question that may be hypothetical, not serious, or exaggerated, marked with *like*. In (10b) the speaker seems to qualify the degree to which students did not comprehend an idea, and then qualifies the simultaneity of two procedures. In (10c) the speaker seems to qualify or hedge the statements about his feelings, e.g., to soften their directness to the listener. The hedge marker *like* in (10c) seemingly allows it to also be used for conversational repair.

- (10) a. A. Okay, do you think it's culturally normative behavior that like, [MEN don't go in women's restrooms], and women don't go in men's restrooms?  
 B. That is the norm.  
 A. But that's not like [a LAW or anything]? [TA]  
 b. It's hard, though. I mean, 'charge' and 'arrest', like [they could never GET it], 'n some of them said, well this has to be before this and others said, no, they're like [at the same TIME]. [TA]  
 c. So I find now that when I wanna go over there, it's like, [they make me feel out of PLACE]. They make me feel, like, if I'm not... I'm not – y'know, it's like, [I'm just like YOU]. [SV]

In these examples, the speakers use *like* to soften the impact of their statements, to indicate non-literal meanings, or to indicate hypothetical examples. Its use here may be equivalent to “it's as if...,” “I don't mean it literally, but it felt like this,” “as a hypothetical example,” or “metaphorically speaking,” in contrast to other contexts where it is used as a near equivalent to “for example,” “as a real example,” or “it seems like” for highlighting new contents.

In some instances, the exemplifier usage also allows it to introduce topic shifts

to related topics that serve as examples. In example (10b) above, *like* follows *I mean*, which is associated with emphasis or conversational repairs. In examples (11a-b) it is also possible that *like* serves secondarily to mitigate the topic shift, and in (11b), apparently also for repair (e.g., in shifting from first person to the sister as a subject and sentence topic).

- (11) a. Friendships and relationships tell you who you are. Like, [when you're a FRESHMAN], it's just hard to be a freshman. [SV]  
b. Well, that's why I, like, [my sister used to send me AUDIO tapes] when I was in Germany. [TA]

As mentioned, three tokens of *like* were exclusively pause markers, in that they were not followed by substantive new informational content, but were followed by incomplete phrases, other pause markers such as *uh*, as in (6a) above, or unfilled pauses.

### 3.2.3. Focus and information marking

The information management functions of *like* were further examined by looking at places of occurrence in sentences relative to the new information and contrastive items in sentences. The referentially new contents of sentences were identified in context (these were usually predicates or predicate elements), and distinguished from old, anaphoric, or previously mentioned contents. Items bearing normal nuclear stress were identified, as well as items with contrastive or emphatic stress (which were apparent from obvious semantic contrasts, or otherwise from the stronger emphatic intonation, i.e., stronger intonation contours). The research again relied on natural language intuitions as a native English speaker.

In only four cases did *like* occur immediately preceding and with scope over only the one word with nuclear stress (the main prosodic stress of the clause or sentence); in other instances, it took scope over a larger constituent. This is more consistent with *like* as a focus marker (e.g., an additive marker), and/or a hedge marker, rather than as a redundant marker of the new information focus associated with a single word under nuclear stress. Most often, it preceded the new information of a sentence. About half the time, it preceded the entire set of new information in the sentences, that is, the predicate (or object or predicate complement) contents that were new, and all contents words (nouns, adjectives, lexical verbs, adverbs) that



were referentially new in the context, as in example (12a). In over one-quarter of cases, it preceded not all the new content, but preceded part of the new content of sentences, as in (12b-d). In all such cases, whether before some or all the new contents, it took scope over the constituent that contained new information and that bore the primary focus and nuclear stress (primary focus refers to the status of the word under nuclear stress). There is also no observable correlation between occurrence of *like* before whole or partial new information bearing phrases, and its use as a hedge marker or as a purely focal marker. In examples (12a-d) below, square brackets indicate the focus-marked constituent following *like*, and curly braces indicate the entire set of referentially new information in the context. In (12a), the new information and focus-marked information are coterminous and identical, but in (12b-d) *like* does not include all the referentially new information. The results are summarized in Table 3 below.

- (12) a. So I'd walk right by her and not say anything, and like, {[she'd walk right by ME]}. [SV]
- b. I was gonna bring you that uh {big family picture of like, [my ENTIRE family]}, but I'd never got one that was outside of my album. [TA]
- c. They can't arrest you, hold you, and they {hit like [the 22<sup>nd</sup> HOUR]}, go, "Okay, let's get 'em for robbery. [TA]
- d. How you're {looking at uh like, [BACKGROUNDS of the workers} ... [TA]

**Table 3.** Informational distribution of *like*

Data set	Focal scope	Tokens	% of tokens
TA	Entire new information phrase	11	50.0
	Partial new information phrase	6	27.3
	Direct contrast / emphasis	4	18.2
	Pause	1	4.5
SV	New information phrase	10	40
	Partial new information phrase	5	20
	Direct contrast / emphasis	8	32
	Pause	2	8

In these examples, *like* sometimes marked new information, e.g., for exemplification and explanation (13a-b), and at times it occurs with instances of

contrast and emphasis in the data, with the nuclear stress on an item in the marked phrase (13c-e). In (13c), the *like*-phrase serves to emphasize and reiterate what the previous statement makes clear, the teacher's vexation over student errors after teaching them not to do so. In (13d), 'my entire family' uses repetition for emphasis and with more specific information, and more emphatic stress (with a greater intonational rise and fall) on 'entire' indicates information that is emphasized. Example (13e) shows a contrast between the marked constituent and what precedes it: 'before' versus 'at the same time' with contrastive or emphatic stress on 'same' along with the preceding *like*.

- (13) a. How you're looking at uh like, [BACKGROUNDS of the workers], like, [uh EDUCATION level] or uh internal growth... [TA]  
 b. I couldn't take it out. Which makes me wanna now go see if I can BUY one, like, [REORDER that picture], 'cuz I would like to have one outside of there. [TA]  
 c. I went over uh resumes the other day with my class... and... went over exactly what not to put into it... and... I've had three of them with exactly that stuff, like [almost like I had SAID], this is exactly what you shouldn't have. [TA]  
 d. I was gonna bring you that uh big family picture of, like [my ENTIRE family], but I'd never got one that was outside of my album. [TA]  
 e. It's hard, though. I mean, 'charge' and 'arrest,' like [they could never GET it], 'n some of them said, well this has to be before this and others said, no, they're like [at the same TIME]. [TA]

A more indirect contrast at a more meta-level occurs between topics when a speaker shifts topics mid-sentence (14a-c), and thus contrasts a new topic with *like* with the previous topic (or attempted and then repaired topic) of 'I.' This marker occurs with topic shifts with more direct contrasts (14a), but more often without direct contrast (14b-c). Sometimes *like* marks such topic shifts without direct contrasts in the data, for example, to mark a shift to a topic that serves as an example or explanation of a preceding assertion. In instances such as (14b-c), it seems to also add a nuance of emphasis, drawing listeners' attention to the examples to follow.

- (14) a. Well, that's why I, like, [my sister used to send me AUDIO tapes] when

I was in Germany. [TA]

- b. I think a lot has to do with humor, ‘cuz like [MY best friend], we laughed at the dumbest things that no one else would laugh at. [SV]
- c. Friendships and relationships tell you who you are. Like, [when you’re a FRESHMAN], it’s just hard to be a freshman. [SV]

### 3.2.4. Intonation

As mentioned, some tokens of *like* were immediately followed by a slight intonational rise, often with an extremely brief pause (though this pause may only be apparent or due to the pitch rise). Again, no clear trend emerged in the data, but two possible explanations can be briefly entertained here. The rise could be a marker of hedging, indicating uncertainty, hesitation, or a desire to not commit to strongly to a statement, much like the mid-sentence rise between clauses that may suggest continuation, hedging, or lack of certainty (e.g., “I was going to TELL you, but didn’t know how”). Example (15a) seems like a possible example, especially with an apparent repair marker like ‘I mean.’ A very different possibility is that the rise indicates emphasis or contrast, somewhat like putting emphasis on an additive marker (e.g., “I voted for him, TOO”), but since special stress on the discourse particle *like* seems rare or dispreferred (for reasons that are not clear), a rise might indicate emphasis or contrast instead. Example (15b) seems to invoke a special emphasis or contrast, and similarly, (15c). The rise is indicated with a comma after *like*, and the nuclear stress in (15b-c) is a stronger emphatic stress.

- (15) a. Or you could do all the game sat the same time, just in different places.  
I mean, like, [in different areas of the FIELD]. [TA]
- b. I was gonna bring you that uh big family picture of, like, [my ENTIRE family], but I’d never got one that was outside of my album.
- c. This is ... we finished doing X’s project, end of semester. We’re so tired and we had a picture, ‘cuz we’re doing environment. We had a picture of like, [WATER] with dead fish, and this guy standing on a, on a ... wood piece like [just LOOKING at it into the water], and we write “fishy, fishy, fishy.”

Whether *like* with these intonational properties is meant as a more unambiguous hedge, or is meant for contrast or emphasis, is unclear from the data here. This

would also raise questions of to what degree implicature, negative politeness, or positive politeness might be involved with any pragmatic functions associated with these intonational patterns. More research is required with a larger data set.

3.2.5. The *like*-cleft

Tokens of *it's like* were counted separately in this study. In these data sets, it seems to function just as the monolexical *like* as an information marker and hedge marker, but possibly also with some cleft-like properties. Most tokens of *it's like* preceded full clauses and occurred sentence-initially. It thus seems similar to sentential adverbs that modify the entire clause, reduced clauses (*I mean, y'know*) that act as discourse markers, and/or regular cleft sentences ('it's ...that' as in "It's the red one that I want"). In the data sets, 15 instances of *it's like* were found – 14 in the School Video set and one in the TA set. As shown in Table 4, it occurred less often with XP level constituents and mostly before main clauses.

**Table 4.** Occurrences of *it's like* in both data sets

Constituents	# of tokens	% of tokens
Noun phrase	2	13.3
Prepositional phrase	1	6.7
Main clause (S)	11	73.3
Dependent clause (S <sub>DEP</sub> )	1	6.7
Informational distribution	# of tokens	% of tokens
New information phrase	14	93.3
Direct contrast	1	6.7
Total	15	

It introduces entire new information phrases most often (14/15 tokens), plus one instance of a direct contrast. In at least three instances, it is also used as a hedge marker. Otherwise, it is most often used as in an exemplifying or explanatory additive function in about ten instances. Eight tokens (57%) occurred with rising prejunctural intonation, but with no clear correlation between intonation patterns and its use as a hedge or informational marker. For at least three tokens of *it's like*, the hedge and hesitant functions seem to overlap or co-occur, as in (16a), where the marked constituent serves as an example of the speaker's point, as well as a possible metaphorical hedge (i.e., approximator) for the idiomatic expression "out

of place.” In one instance, *it's like* occurred with contrastive stress, where it takes scope over a simple noun phrase constituent, in (16b). For many tokens, a clause beginning with either *it's like* or the monolexical *like* would seem equally felicitous. In fact, the same speaker may use both forms together before the same type of syntactic constituents (16c). The phrase *it's like* might be distributionally distinct from the monolexical *like* with respect to tense; the narrative in (16d) is in simple past tense, with the string ‘it was like’ interspersed among tokens of *it's like*; the phrase ‘it was like’ seems equivalent to *it's like*, as it occurs with an intonational rise and seems to function as an approximative to mitigate the metaphorical phrase ‘household from hell.’ However, this is debatable, and further analysis of more tokens from a larger data set is needed to determine whether this is simply a functional variant of *it's like*.

- (16) a. So I find now that when I wanna go over there, it's like, [they make me feel out of PLACE]. [SV]
- b. ...I mean y'know, it's like [BEST friend one day] and all that kind of stuff... [SV]
- c. It's real important to end a relationship on good terms, ‘cuz like, I went out with this guy for NINE months. I hate that I can't talk to this guy that I went out with about any of the things that we did. I mean, it's like [he pretends like they never EXISTED].
- d. Last year um all my parents – my father and I – did was fight, we just... It was my sophomore year and it was like, [the household from HELL] – all we did was fight. It's like [he realized they weren't GOIN’], and...

At least 7 tokens of *it's like* (44%) did not readily lend themselves as readily to interpretation as hedge or approximative markers, but rather served primarily for adding explanatory content or examples (hypothetical, counterfactual, or factual examples) to support or illustrate a preceding assertion. In (17), the constituent after *it's like* also bears contrastive stress.

- (17) That's what you're like when you're a junior. It's like...[ I'M not goin' ‘cuz EVERYBODY's goin’].

While Miller and Weinert (1995) focused on clause-initial tokens of *like* in their data as non-contrastive focus, the examples here show that clause-initial *it's like* also

occurs before new information just as easily as initial *like*. Miller and Weinert's intuition that *like* can be roughly equivalent to clefts, though not really quite accurate, seems valid for *it's like*. Cleft sentences (the standard “*it*-clefts”) operate as contrastive and emphatic structures to specifically compare and contrast sets of topical, old items or entire propositions, and to highlight semantic material (Givón, 1979; Weinert & Miller, 1996; Werth, 2016). For example, “It’s the red one that I want” contrasts with an implied ‘not something else’ within a discourse context. The *it* in *it's like* seems like a filler pronoun, or at most a cataphoric pronoun, like the *it* in standard *it*-clefts. Thus, *it's like* may be similar to a cleft-like construction whose emphatic and highlighting function yields a nuance of more direct emphasis than the monolexemic *like*, comparable to a contrastive or focalizing cleft construction. Not surprisingly, in the data sets here it is often used for a shift to a new topic, particularly to a new topic as the grammatical subject of the entire clause, such as for exemplification and explanation of a preceding topic. In the following examples, the topic introduced by the *like*-cleft is retained as the subject of the entire clause.

- (18) a. It's also to um be able to change with your best friend, 'cuz like, [MY best friend], we've been best friends since fifth grade, and like... But it's like, [you go through your middle school YEARS] and you're changing constantly, I mean y'know, it's like [BEST friend one day and all that kind of stuff]... But y'know it's like [we never HAD that problem]. [SV]
- b. It's like, [instead of ASKING you], y'know, a question, it's like [an ACCUSATION y'know] – did you do this, why did you do that – instead of talking to you y'know in a calm way, it's like, ...[and when you're ACCUSED of something you can't just y'know calmly just react]. [SV]

### 3.3. Summary

In most tokens in the data sets, *like* precedes the new information and seems to take scope over all or part of the set of new information. In about 40% of tokens, it seems to function as an exemplifier, roughly equivalent to *for example* or *for instance*. This includes factual, counterfactual, or hypothetical examples, and occasionally, as examples used in topic shifts. Its information marking functions for new information and exemplification overlap at least somewhat with its hedging or softening functions, for example, as an approximative to indicate hypothetical or

counterfactual examples. However, it seems to have several such functions, e.g., for exemplification, contrast, and occasionally, filled pauses and topic shifting. The phrase *it's like* exhibits similar properties for new information, including exemplification, and hedging. It also shows cleft-like properties, e.g., in taking scope over clausal constituents, and possible contrast or emphasis. Overall, the phrase *it's like* has similar properties to *like*, especially in information management. However, more study of this phrase is needed. In the above examples, *like* and *it's like* might be interpreted in different ways, because it is a multifunctional marker that seems to operate at both an informational level and a sociopragmatic level (e.g., hedging, repair, and such functions). How these different roles for *like* might be explained will be discussed in the next section.

#### 4. General Discussion

In these data sets, *like* can occur with smaller constituents such as individual nouns or adjectives, larger constituents such as whole noun phrases, verb phrases, and predicates, as well as clausal constituents. It precedes constituents that bear the main focus and nuclear stress of the sentences. It almost always precedes the referentially new information in sentences, and occasionally occurs before items with contrastive or emphatic stress. These facts are consistent with *like* as some type of information management marker for new information, or information that comes under some type of focus. It does not seem to be a redundant marker of the primary or narrow focus of nuclear stress, but a broader sort of new information marking. As an information marker, it is used fairly regularly as an exemplification marker. Yet at the same time, it is multifunctional, acting regularly as a hedge or approximator. Its approximator usage particularly overlaps with its use as an exemplifier. The phrase *it's like* shows similar focus marking and hedging properties.

Thus, the first research question is confirmed; evidence exists for *like* as a type of focus marker, in line with various previous proposals. It seems to take scope entirely over informationally new constituents, and one word in each of those constituents bear nuclear stress. It seems to function in contributing new information to the discourse, and it can exhibit information management functions such as exemplification and occasional topic shifts. As an exemplifier, it functions somewhat like the phrases *for instance*, *for example*, or *that is*, except that *like* can indicate not only factual examples but also counterfactual, putative or hypothetical examples,

while standard exemplifiers (*for example, for instance, that is*) are more often used with factual examples. The usage of *it's like* also lends support to the focus marking properties of *like*, though that phrase requires further study, including its differences and similarities with the monolexical *like*.

The second research question concerns the type of focus involved, as the various previous studies positing that *like* serves as a focus marker have not addressed that question, and have not tried to identify the specific type of focus involved. Its syntactic patterns (occurring with and seemingly taking scope over different types of constituents) and information management patterns (e.g., preceding new information) point most clearly to one class of particles that exist in English and other languages. This would be the focus marker in the sense of a focus particle, focalizer particle, or focusing adverb, as in König's (2016) analysis of markers such as *too, also, even*, and others, or similarly, focusing adverbs such as *also, only, even, in addition, either, likewise, similarly* (Jackendoff, 1972; Kadmon, 2001). Such particles can add or qualify information, and can take semantic scope over various constituent types. More specifically, this would be the class of focus markers that König (2016) identifies as markers of simple additive focus, such as *too, also, as well, either*. The marker *like* seems most similar to these additive markers, in that it can take scope over different constituents, and the constituent types can be variable, as long as *like* precedes the new information and a constituent with nuclear stress; cf. *also* in (19a), and *like* in (19b) paraphrased from (8a) above. That is, *like* occurs with new information constituents, and thus facilitates the flow of new information, much like an additive marker.

(19) a. Also, I voted for Hans. / I also voted for Hans. / I voted also for Hans.  
/ I voted for Hans, also<sup>4</sup>.

b. I, like, can't go into a hallway ... / I can't, like, go into a hallway... /  
I can't go, like, into a hallway ... / I can't go into, like, a hallway ...

Like the regular additive markers, *like* can occasionally co-occur with contrastive or emphatic stress. An additive marker can occur with emphatic stress on a word in the constituent over which it takes scope, or the marker can take the main stress itself, as in (20a). While *like* can co-occur with emphatic or contrastive stress with

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4) In certain cases, certain focus markers might follow the relevant constituent (König, 2016); here, *also* taking scope over a simple noun would follow the noun, and the additive *too* often follows its constituents.



its constituent as in (20b), *like* itself does not take the main stress. It is possible that the rising intonation sometimes heard between *like* and the following constituent may mark contrast or emphasis, but that requires further investigation.

(20) a. I voted for *Hans*, also. / I voted for Hans, *also*.

b. I was gonna bring you that big family picture of, like my *entire* family ...

As an additive marker, it can sometimes mark topic shifts explicitly to related ideas, as when a speaker changes the sentence topic and grammatical subject in mid-sentence, or more generally, minor topic shifts to new items that serve as examples or explanations of preceding content. Other occasional functions might also stem from its additive use, such as repair, contrast, emphasis, or implicature, but these require further research. As a marker of new information, it would lend itself to use sometimes for disfluencies and repair marking, and a few of the above examples from the data sets bear this out. Disfluency markers such as *uh* usually precede the new information, as these markers allow speakers time to formulate or reformulate their utterances (Arnold, Fagano & Tanenhaus, 2003), so understandably, a discourse marker of new information such as *like* could easily be exploited for such purposes as well.

The main approaches to *like* in the pragmatics literature has been to treat it as a softener or hedge marker (including approximative uses), or to treat it as an information management marker (e.g., focus marking and exemplification). The data here indicate that these two approaches are not at odds with each other, and that its informational and hedging functions actually overlap. In fact, it is not always possible to clearly tease apart its hedging and focusing functions, and more research is needed to better understand its functional overlap or multi-functionality. Its versatility as a discourse marker is probably due to its grammaticalization from other lexical categories, and thus, its morphological reanalysis and reduction from a conjunction and/or preposition to a discourse marker. This process is well documented for other discourse markers and similar phrases (e.g., Brinton, 1990, 1996, 2008), but more work on the diachronic development of the discourse marker *like* is needed. It seems to retain some sense of its earlier meaning of similarity or comparison, particularly when used as a hedge marker. From its use as a conjunction and preposition, it also retains a sense of added exemplification, illustration, and explanation when used as a focus marker. Its apparent usage as an additive focus marker may provide a hypothetical nuance (as discussed above),

or a nuance of emphasis or contrast, and it is these nuances that probably distinguish it from regular exemplifiers such as the conjunctions *for example*, *for instance*, *that is*.

Thus, *like* seems more complex than previously thought, as it can function an information management marker for additive focus marker (similar to *also*, *too*) and an exemplifier (somewhat similar to *for example*, *for instance*, *that is*), as well as an approximative marker (comparable to *sorta*, *kinda*, *kinda like*, *somewhat*, *so to speak*, *as it were*, *more or less*), especially in conjunction with its information management functions. Thus, the different analyses of *like* in the literature are not at odds with each other, and in fact, and the data here, point to overlap, multi-functionality, and complimentary informational and interpersonal uses of *like*. The phrase *it's like* seems to have similar functions, as well as possible cleft-like functions, but more research on this is needed. Finally, the two data sets showed little difference, except for more frequent use of *it's like* among the high schoolers in the SV data set.

Much more research is needed to better understand how these different uses of *like*, i.e., a full corpus study to fully validate its function as an information management marker, and to examine its complexities. Some open questions involve its possible use for contrast or emphasis, and whether such uses (as well as marking new information) involve indirect contrast and implicature, similar to the scalar marker *even* or various emphatic markers (König, 2016). It is clearly used often as a hedge marker and also as a focus marker, and sometimes as a quasi-cleft marker (especially *it's like*), or as a pause filler. Like other hedges, it mitigates negative politeness (Brown et al., 1987) to soften or qualify a statement, e.g., to mitigate its force or to assuage listeners' feelings. Its frequent use among younger speakers (Anderson, 1997; Ferrara & Bell, 1995) indicates positive politeness, e.g., as a marker and statement of inclusiveness and in-group sociolinguistic identity. Since such positive politeness and in-group rapport have been suggested as sociopragmatic functions for *like*, research is needed on how these sociopragmatic functions work in connection with its information marking and hedging functions. Along these lines, more research is needed on whether it is also a marker of intersubjectivity or listener-directed speech, as has been proposed for a few discourse markers in other languages (Degand & Pander Maat, 2003; Sohn, 2015). Its varied uses indicate sociopragmatic properties; those properties, and how it functions in politeness management as well as information management, deserve more detailed and systematic investigation.

## 5. Conclusion

An examination of two small sets of natural conversational data found that *like* can mark new information and exemplification, as well as hedging. These functions can overlap, making *like* a rather multifunctional discourse particle. As a hedge maker or as an information marker, it is not so linguistically redundant or non-expressive as prescriptivists might claim.

Further research on this discourse marker is needed, with full corpus data, as a number of issues require further investigation. The methods used here require refinement, and other tests need to be developed to better identify its specific and sometimes overlapping pragmatic functions in different contexts. More systematic analysis of its prosodic patterns is also needed for understanding its informational and discourse management functions. This researcher also intends to design pragmatic perception studies with native speakers in order to better understand how English speakers interpret it in context. For such a discourse marker, the relevant sociopragmatic aspects need to be studied and delineated, such as its specific politeness functions and use of implicature in connection with its information marking functions. For that, different contexts need to be examined to determine if its usage also varies according to context, speaker age and gender. A separate follow-up study of the clause-initial *it's like* is needed, as this has received scant attention in the literature. Finally, the historical evolution of *like* into a discourse marker and the process of grammaticalization involved would also help to understand its linguistic properties as a contemporary colloquial discourse particle. Its use as a pseudo-quotative (Romaine & Lange, 1991) has received less attention in the literature, and more analysis of that usage and its developmental connection with the discourse marker is needed.

The colloquial *like* is not semantically empty, nor does it deserve to be disparaged by prescriptivists and traditionalists. Whether as a hedge marker, focus marker, pseudo-quotative, this colloquial form has become versatile and allows speakers to effectively multi-task with a single word in different but logically related linguistic roles.

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