The Like Virus
David Grambs

For at least 20 years, the conversational filler "like" has permeated American dialogue to become part of the mainstream lexicon. "Like" is usually accompanied by "uptalk," in which statements sound like questions through a rising inflection of pitch at the end of the sentence or comment. From the language of teens and twenty-somethings, "like" has infected our conversational patterns, overrun our malls, and even invaded the workplace. In the next piece, David Grambs offers some insights on the phenomenon of "like," now that it appears to be here to stay, at least, like, for a while?

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1 And like I'm, like, really grossed out, like . . .
2 The L-word. A kind of weightless backpack word that's more and more giving us humpbacked spoken English, the lite like has been airyly clogging American sentences for years now. The war against the usage—well, it wasn't much of a war.
—has been lost for some time, and we language-conscious losers are all trying
to learn to live with the new, disjunctive babble.

Still, I believe the phenomenon is worth standing back from and taking a look
at, as opposed to shrugging or winking at its growth. What does the new, gratuitous
use of like really represent in our language, functionally and lexically? What do the
purportedly authoritative dictionaries tell us? And, as I ask myself every time I hear
it, what price is literate, listenable English paying for its increasing currency?

Like-speech, or like-orrhea, is a curious, self-contained medium. With its at-
tendant (usually) limited vocabulary and all-thumbs expressiveness, it's almost a
kind of verbal hand-gesturing or mimicry, if not a middle-class pidgin. The kids—
and more and more adults—seem locked in a kind of cawing hyperpresent tense.
Many have strangely unresonant, throat-blocked, or glottal voices and use "up-
talk," the tendency to end all sentences in a rising, questioning inflection.

Yes, they're mostly young people (though again, increasingly, exponentially, by
no means just young people). But at times I think I'm hearing the voices of Loony
Tunes and Merry Melodies creatures, each lost in rote subjectivity. At my neigh-
borhood café a few years ago, where some local prep school kids hung out, I particu-
larly remember one tall, chain-smoking girl, always dressed in black, who couldn't
go five or six words without coughing up a viral like. None of her peers batted an
eye at this. She was speaking their language—a language in which the role of the in-
dispensable L-word isn't so much to mean as it is to stylize. Or is it destylize?

Semantically, the viral like (in the new, ever-insertable usage) is far less a legi-
mitate word than a form of coping punctuation, a lame, reflexive stalling tactic for
the syntactically challenged. It's plainly what rigorous old teachers or editors might
have called "an excrescence," and it's quickly becoming the verbal security blanket
and a virtual speech impediment for an entire generation—and generations to
come—of Americans, from Generation X to Generation Z and beyond. It adds as
much to our fair English language as barnacles do to a whale or calculi to a healthy
kidney. Apologists for this speechway—rest assured, it has multitudes of shrugging,
unblinking defenders—explain that the constantly repeated word serves as a won-
derfully stylish form of ironic punctuation. And here I thought it was just a terribly
bad speech habit.

As you well know, this linguistic fifth column has been settling in since the
1980s. Its mindless use is sadly symptomatic of our slack-tongued American
zeitgeist, of what might be called our flailing, contemporary more-or-lessness or
something-like-thatness. We live, after all, in the Age of Or Whatever. It's not cool
to be too clear, articulate, or specific about things.

Where did it come from? A California beach cave? Those old Valley Girls? (A
Moon Unit Zappa song has been cited as seminal.) Saddam Hussein? MTV? A
brain softener in our reservoirs, related to the cause of attention deficit disorder?
The new like-speech has been related to the colorful old hipster use of the word, but
I think it's a horse of another, colorless color. There is doubtless an interestingly
complicated rationale for its origins linguistically and sociologically, but I'll settle
for a bluntly simple answer. I think it comes from a peculiarly infectious strain of
laziness, or mental or communicative slackness. Of course, it's hip and ironic lazi-
ness. It's, like, postmodern laziness.
Probably nothing has spread the L-word so quickly as American television has. Turn on your set nowadays and see how far into a talk show or celebrity interview you can go without hearing that hiccup vocable. (Most standup comedians can no more do without it than they can without their lame, stock “Thanks—you’ve been great!” exit escape.) It’s a whiny bug in the ear to any plain-speaking person, yet the word has acquired an almost emblematic force. It has become a watchword of glibly media-driven American pop culture. Keeping it ceaselessly in play seems to be a form of bonding between those who don’t want to appear to be too threateningly to the point, or is it too old?

One of its defenders in the New York Times a few years ago said the new use of like is really just a rhetorical device. Sometimes it is used as a phonetic punctuation mark to signal “important information ahead.” (When used two, three times in one sentence? The important information is usually, oh, a subsequent noun or an elusive adjective. It’s exhausting to the rest of us to have to be so constantly alert to momentous divulgences, or completion of a sentence.) It also replaces, the writer noted, the dramatic, silent pause, which, he quickly added, is now “passe.” (To which remark I can only ask for a moment of silence.) Or an interlaced like is really to provide a kind of postmodern “tempering” of any possible harshness of meaning. (It’s very important today to placate repeatedly in one’s conversation.) And of course it’s also a pioneering “verb form,” as in And I was like, “Whatever, you liar.” More recently, a reputable linguistics professor said we shouldn’t get all huffy about the “ironizing” usage: it now serves as a useful device to “distance” oneself from one’s own words. I must confess that distancing myself more and more from what I say has never been one of my goals in life.

And what, pray tell, would somebody such as Jane Austen or Ernest Hemingway—or H. L. Mencken—have had to say about this delightfully ironic linguistic phenomenon? Or imagine, if you will, for a little grotesque perspective, a classic play such as Oscar Wilde’s The Importance of Being Earnest performed in lit-speak. Maybe ten years from now, an avant-garde director—who knows?

As cultural archcritic John Simon says in his introduction to the sobering book Dumbing Down:

To a muddled mind, like may constitute a grace note, a bit of appoggiatura with which to decorate or even authenticate one’s discourse. To the simple soul, those likes are so many hard, gemlike rhinestones. But, as with most nonsensical things, opposite interpretations may apply just as well. Thus like may be a disavowal of responsibility: if you say “I was like minding my own business,” the like may cover you if someone discovers that you weren’t minding it... Eventually, though, the like becomes a mere unthinking habit, a verbal rut.

When a usage inexorably takes root, so do its apologists, including those who work on dictionaries. Language, and especially English, constantly changes, and so it should. (I have worked on the staffs of two U.S. dictionaries.) Yet it won’t do to say like-orrhea is just another passing, trendy neologism or speech habit. It won’t do because it’s not a mere slang or buzz word and because it’s not passing. Above all, it won’t do because of what all those likes replace or avoid, what, infectingly, they betoken: an increasingly lazy recourse to choppy, bland, dysfunctional English.
If your own speech is showing more and more late likes, you might ask yourself why your generation is the first in more than 200 years of U.S. history to have a desperate, ongoing need for a single flavorless four-letter communicational rest stop.

Then there are the two million-dollar questions:

* What in fact does the like actually mean?
* What part of speech is it? Take the sentence (please) And she’s like, “Like, it wasn’t like anything I’ve, like, ever seen.” Do the various (four) likes here all have the same part of speech?

Which is another way of inquiring, what do our contemporary lexicographers have to say about it?

The equivocal—downright waffling—way our current American dictionaries (hands-off descriptive, never prescriptive) handle the ever-morphing interloper is less than instructive, and somewhat depressing. Admittedly, dealing with it in definitional terms is not an enviable task. Unfortunately, the dictionaries’ respective definitions of the usage are not even accurately descriptive.

The leading American lexicon says that the latter-day like has two parts of speech, adverb and conjunction. You will find this in the tenth edition of *Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (1993):

like adv. . . . 3. used interjectionally in informal speech often to emphasize a word or phrase (as in “He was, like, gorgeous”) or for an apologetic, vague, or unassertive effect (as in “I need to, like, borrow some money”) 4. NEARLY: APPROXIMATELY (the actual interest is more like 18 percent)—used interjectionally in informal speech with expressions of measurement (it was, like, five feet long) (goes there every day, like).

A curious definition. It doesn’t so much provide a meaning for like as it does hold it at arm’s length and note that it is used “interjectionally.” It tells us that it is used to emphasize a word or—or?—for an apologetic, vague, or unassertive effect. A questionable, contradictory pairing of meanings to be covered under one definition. And for the dictionary to say that the word is used for an apologetic, vague, or unassertive effect suggests that it is used artfully by articulate people as some kind of intentional rhetorical device. No, not quite the truth of the matter.

Are these meanings, denotations? The word is “used,” and it is used for an “effect.” How many other adverbs used in mid-sentence have to be set off in print by commas (though they aren’t in all cases), almost as if to say that the interruptive word has no clear purpose (or meaning) in the sentence? It’s interjectional indeed.

*Merriam Webster* also parcels out an “interjectional” sense of the word under its entry for like as a conjunction. It says the viral like is used to “introduce” a quotation, paraphrase, or thought. (“And I’m like, go away!”) True enough in practice, though this is an interesting, not to say inventive, notion. And why a word deemed to “introduce” an expression would be considered a conjunction, or connective, I have no idea. What the like like primarily introduces is an implicit admission that the speaker doesn’t want to bother completing an unbroken grammatical clause, or maybe can’t—or just can’t stop using the word. Like doesn’t introduce. It supplants or forestalls, with graceless urgency.
The unabridged Random House dictionary (1987) also gives the more and more acceptable adverbial sense of "nearly, closely, approximately," as well as another sense:

like interj. . . . 28. Informal, used esp. in speech, esp. nonvolitionally or habitually, to preface a sentence, to fill a pause, to express uncertainty, or to intensify or neutralize a following adjective: Like, why didn’t you write to me? The music was, like, really great, you know?

Here we read that the all-purpose like is not an adverb. It’s not a conjunction. It’s an interjection. Now, does like express uncertainty—or expose it? Or attempt to dress it up? Or interlard pure lard? Random House doesn’t claim an "emphasizer" function for the word. Instead, it says it is used to intensify or neutralize a following adjective. Intensify or neutralize? Hmm. Another curiously contradictory pairing. Worth noting is the prefatory "used esp. in speech, esp. nonvolitionally or habitually, to preface a sentence." The most interesting, even amusingly give-away, word here is "nonvolitionally."

From these lexical tightrope acts, it’s hard not to get the sense that assigning parts of speech to the viral like leaves one, if not between a rock and a hard place, between a slippery slope and a will-o’-the-wisp.

More recently, the handsome American Heritage Dictionary (fourth edition) has shown more common sense in its handling of the viral like and backed off a bit. Instead of trying tortuously to allot the shiftly, slack usage a part or parts of speech, it covers the phenomenon as an idiom:

be like Informal To say or utter. Used chiefly in oral narration: "And he’s like, ‘Leave me alone!’"

A final "Our Living Language" note commendably points out that what follows an "I’m like . . ." expression may be an actual quotation, or a brief imitation of another person’s behavior, or a summarization of a past attitude or reaction—or it might instead signify either the speaker’s attitude at the time or what he “might have said.” Which? Exactly—make that inexactly—the point. But the AHD has nothing to say about all the other, more gratuitous placements of like pretty much anywhere within sentences in this American day and age. But if it walks like a duck and talks like a duck . . .?

If we’re not going to recognize it for the duck that it is, I’d venture to say that one can, deductively, come up with quite a few more, or competing, meanings (as opposed to "uses") for the viral like, according to the context of its various encroachments in sentences.

It can mean "possibly" (He couldn’t, like, be there). It can mean "let’s say" or "say" or "for example" (If we were to, like, meet at the movie theater, there’d be no problem). It can mean “you know” (Yeah, like, the Holocaust, it was, like, a bad thing). It can mean “responding by” or “reacting by” (And then they’re, like, running and hiding in the woods). It can mean "the situation is" or "at the beginning" (Like, all the people have been wiped out by this Death Planet). It can mean "dare I ask it" (Would you, like, marry me?). It can mean "or something like that" (It’s a social organization, like). It can mean "get this" or "I’m
not kidding" (It was, like, ten below outside). And so, like, on. Similarly, I suspect, one could make a procrustean case for the intrusive like's being just about any part of speech.

If these jokers-wild meanings can be said to have any legitimacy, what does that say about the dictionaries' handling of the problem? Maybe that the new L-word additive is not so much a word as it is an uttered wild card, and that we are in for a long, babbling game ahead.

It will certainly be interesting to see how dictionary editions ten or twenty years from now categorize and define the compulsive, drop-in like. Possibly, I fear, by noting that it is the single word—shibboleth—that most instantly identifies or characterizes an American anywhere in the world.

For now, what is more interesting, perhaps, is what today's dictionaries, with their carefully nonjudgmental hedging or tenuous best shot, don't tell you: that this "informal" usage is fundamentally an egregious, wildly contagious oral tic, and one quite infra dig in standard written English. Like-orrhea in current television or movie dialogue is usually somewhat satirical (but probably less and less so, sadly). A character whose speech is laced with lallygagging likes is invariably being pegged as immature, uneducated, thoroughly self-involved, or ditsy, if not a voluble airhead.

Except for its sense of "about" or "approximately," one could say that the new like probably, most often, has one essential meaning, and, ironically, it's a complete thought: "Uh, bear with me." Or it is: "Whoa and whew, it's kind of exhausting to get the right words together without taking a little break between them"? Or possibly: "Please, take no offense from anything that precedes or follows until my next like"?

By now, like-speech is indisputably becoming for millions a veritable pseudo-speech style. But what the usage really is, of course, is a hesitation form, along the lines of uh, well, I mean, or um. Hesitation forms are sentence litter, indeterminate words or word elements, basically meaningless and interruptive filler locutions. (Utterance that is filled with such paltering signposts is called embolalia.) Like-orrhea, no matter how numbly glib its ring, usually betokens the incessant need to pause and recalibrate or dumb down even the simplest thoughts. It's analogous to the mid-sentence constructional shift called anacoluthon, and a little like those iterated watchwords of expressional (and so expressive) insecurity: you know? right? okay? you understand what I'm saying? Actually, it's far worse because it's a microchip version: it can be tucked inside sentences wherever and whenever rather than being a mere trailing irritant. (It is indeed an "in word.")

The "meaningless like" is for John Simon a dreadful piece of detritus:

The I means, you knows, kind ofs, and sort ofs are bad enough: but they at least form a hesitation waltz to give the speaker time to gather his next thought, or focus more tightly on the current one. That bit of verbal litter, like, however, is something else—"something else" in the slang sense as well: something unconscionable, weird. It must not be mistaken for a more elegant synonym of er, with which speakers formerly tried to carpet the interstices of
thought. It is too frequent to be that; nobody erred that consistently—not even a lighter-than-airhead on Hollywood Boulevard.

To a nonlike-orrheac, hearing the speech of a like-ridden conversationalist is like enduring reflexive, repetitive name-dropping by somebody who hasn't a clue that the name being dropped, and dropped, and dropped, is known to nobody else. But well beyond its general emptiness and annoyingsness, the like virus is deplorable because of what goes along with it—what it avoids, covers up for, or necessitates. Where you find like-orrhea, you'll usually find concomitant sins:

- A knee-jerk or anxious (take your pick) "filling in" of any moment of hesitation in speech. Momentary silence—reflectiveness, that little pause for the right word, a subtle change in speech rhythm—has never been more golden.
- An inability to articulate fundamental indirect discourse, to report simple and coherently what somebody else said. Like injections generally—very generally—leave blitheringly unclear whether what follows are actual, stated words, a paraphrase of those words, or just the like user's rounded-off, subjective impression of the other person's feelings. ("And she's like, I'm not going there!")
- An eager dependency on the present tense. There is in writing the so-called historical present, of course. Because the new penchant for framing the most banal discourse in the present tense comes out of insecurity in using—or impatience with formulating?—ordinary past tenses, one could call this the hysterical present.
- A reluctance or inability to use basic elements of our rich English syntax—that is, to articulate compound or complex sentences, sentences with dependent clauses, sentences in more than one tense.
- A begging-off from the challenge to be at all interesting or persuasive to intelligent others—to think on one's feet without that four-letter stall-mate. The drone of verbiage clogged with little like blockages guarantees that, whatever the content, one will be irritating or stupefying. Or a less than thrilling job applicant.
- A limited vocabulary. Like-orrhea signals flailing approximation and avoidance of any effort at being articulate, much less eloquent. Interesting or apt words don't usually go along with it. Those happily unconscious of speaking a kind of communicable but uncommunicative mush can't spend much time around dictionaries or Updike novels.
- More words. One thing we definitely don't need in our talk-engulfed multimedia age is extra verbiage, or pandemic overuse of one word that just doesn't pay its own way.

The great English writer George Orwell, still admired for his passion about clarity and truth in language, did not favor the particularly British fondness for using the "not un-" locution, with a kind of snobbish coyness, as in "It's not uninteresting," instead of, plainly, "It's interesting." Orwell proposed a remedy for the mannerism. "One can cure one'self of the not un- formation by memorizing
this sentence: ‘A not unblack dog was chasing a not unsmall rabbit across a not ungreen field.’”

If you’ve already caught the like virus, I suggest one of three ways to cure yourself:

- One way is to memorize (as a kind of linguistic memento mori) this sentence: “Like, like as not, to tell it like it is, like Jane has no, like, liking for the like, likes of, like Dick, like it or not.”
- Or every time you catch yourself using the L-word crutch, stop—and punish yourself by repeating word for word what you just said but this time substituting for each like the word kumquat.
- Or—simplest of all—just say no. Pure abstinence. Can you do it?

Me, I’m willing to live with the viral like in the sense of about or approximately. Otherwise, it should be recognized for what it is. It’s not an adverb. It’s not a conjunction. It’s not an interjection. It’s not an artful piece of introductory rhetoric. It’s not a valid replacement for the verb to say. It’s not a compellingly hip and ironic postmodern conversational style. It’s not a trendy word that will pass. It’s contemporary America’s favorite wad of verbal bubble gum, and it’s getting stickier every day.