FUNCTIONS OF THE PRAGMATIC MARKER LIKE IN ENGLISH AND HOW MACEDONIAN LEARNERS VIEW IT

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Abstract: The study presented in this paper is a part of the research project “Developing cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics research and its practical implications” currently being implemented at Goce Delchev University in Shtip, Republic of North Macedonia. This project was partly motivated by the small number of studies in Macedonia on interlanguage pragmatics as well as by the growing need for development of new research methods. In compliance with the above, the objectives of the project are as follows: 1. increase of the pool of cross-cultural, intercultural, and interlanguage pragmatics studies; 2. development of modern methods for data collection and analysis; and 3. linking empirical research with educational and communication needs in the society. This paper in particular investigates the use of the pragmatic marker like by Macedonian learners of English. Two research questions have been posed: 1. What functions do MLE of English associate with like? and 2. How do they view speakers who use it? The standard for comparison for the first question is the native speakers’ usage of like as described in other studies. The second question was answered on the basis of an attitudinal questionnaire. The attitudinal questionnaire asked the participants to express their perception of like with respect to the age and gender of the speakers, formality of the situation, grammaticality, acceptability, distractiveness, and politeness of the utterances. They also rated users for fluency and their level of English. The participants were also asked to explain if they use like in a similar way and for what purposes as well as how they learned it. The attitudinal survey was adapted from Dailey-O’Cain (2000). The examples, however, are from my data. The participants of this study were 40 students of English enrolled at the Department of English language at Goce Delchev University, Shtip, age 19 to 25. Most of them were at B2, C1 or C2 level of English. All participants learned English for at least five years in primary school and four years at high school, which means they had English as a subject up to their graduation from high school. Very few of the students had been to an English speaking country. The findings of this investigation show that the pragmatic marker like is salient for the learners and that they use it in a similar way as native speakers. However, it is stigmatized and most learners view it negatively. Additionally, other factors that influence its usage were identified. Further research may investigate whether the use of like is influenced by the proficiency levels of English and whether a longer stay in an English speaking country influences the use of like. It would be also useful to investigate other pragmatic markers and see how they are used in learner English.

Keywords: interlanguage, pragmatic markers, functions, attitudinal questionnaire, fluency

1. INTRODUCTION

The study presented in this paper is a part of the research project “Developing cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics research and its practical implications”, which is currently being implemented at Goce Delchev University in Shtip, Republic of Macedonia. It focuses on the pragmatic marker like used by Macedonian learners of English (MLE) as in the example below:

OK, yes, but still we have to like think about the future of our country. If everybody left for … like to live abroad or to work abroad like, what would be left here? Nothing to err work for or like live the err I don’t know. I have a cousin and he like moved abroad and we didn’t even see him like I don’t know for years and years. And you just like don’t have that connection no more.

The PM like is the most common innovative feature of modern English (Andersen, 2001; Blyth et al., 1990; Buchstaller and D’Arcy, 2009; Tagliamonte and D’hui, 2004; Tagliamonte and Hudson 1999). Most of the studies of like deal with American data (Blyth et al., 1990; Fox Tree, 2006; Fuller, 2003; Jucker and Smith, 1998; Meehan, 1991; Miller and Weinert, 1995; Schourup, 1985; Tannen, 1986; Underhill, 1988). It tends to be associated with southern Californian teenage talk (Valley speak; Valley girls). It is believed that from there it spread to other English speaking countries as a result of extensive cross-cultural contact. Some in-depth research on like has also been done in Britain (Andersen, 2001; Cheshire, 2007; Dailey-O’Cain, 2000; Tagliamonte and Hudson, 1999), Canada (Tagliamonte and D’hui, 2004), as well as in Australia (Winter, 2002). An often cited study is also Buchstaller and D’hui (2009) who compared the usage of quotative like in the United States, England, and New Zealand.
The PM like is often stigmatized. In his corpus on narratives, Underhill (1988) calls the pragmatic use of like “ungrammatical in standard English”. The use of like as in we hitch a ride out of there with uh this like one crazy like music major guy is considered by many “to be superfluously sprinkled into talk, a bad habit best avoided” (Fox Tree, 2006: 723). Dailey-O’Cain’s study (2000) also showed that many people have negative opinions about like. The most common reason mentioned for disliking it is “the notion that it makes people sound uneducated or lazy” (Dailey-O’Cain, 2000: 70).

Most of the pragmatic markers are multifunctional. They can serve different pragmatic functions in different contexts, but they can also have several pragmatic features at the same time. Underhill (1988: 234) suggests that like functions as a marker of new information and focus as in But then the first day of our skiing, you know we’re gettin all excited to go skiing the first day it’s like snowing ... blizzard snowing. Andersen (2001) looks at it as a signal to the hearer that there is a non-identical resemblance relation between a linguistically encoded concept and the concept in the speaker’s thought and instructs the hearer to opt for a less-than-liter al interpretation of the utterance. The taxonomies of most studies include approximation, exemplification, and quotative like. Andersen (2001) and Müller (2005) also include the function of like as a hesitational/ linking device while Müller (2005) and Beeching (2016) include the function of like to mark lexical focus. In addition, Andersen includes the function of metalinguistic focus, Müller includes the function of introducing an explanation and Beeching includes the function of hedging.

The function of the quotative like has also received significant attention (Andersen, 2001; Blyth et al., 1990; Beeching, 2016; Buchstaller and D’Arcy, 2009; Meehan, 1991; Tagliamonte and Hudson, 1999). Be like operates as a fixed unit which may be close in meaning to verbs of saying/thinking (Andersen, 2001). It cannot be omitted in this position and it is essential for the syntactic well-formedness of the utterance. Its function is to point to a thought produced by the speaker or someone else, and which may or may not have been verbally realised in an utterance: … and then, and then Kevin came up to me and said erm [...] if you if you go and see Mark this afternoon erm he would like to speak to you, I was like, ‘He should come and speak to me’ (Andersen, 2001: 250). Although the quotative like may appear both in present and in past tense, it is more likely to convey the effects of historical present, such as adding vivacity and immediacy, demarcating authority, or structuring the discourse (Buchstaller and D’Arcy, 2009).

2. DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

Like as a pragmatic marker is not taught in EFL classes but its frequency in learner conversation is surprising. We pose two research questions here: 1. What functions do MLE of English associate with like? 2. How do they view speakers who use it? The participants of this study were 40 students of English enrolled at the Department of English language and literature at Goce Delcev University, Stip, Republic of North Macedonia. Their age ranged from 19 to 25. All participants learned English for at least five years in primary school and four years at high school, which means they had English as a subject up to their graduation from high school. Very few of the students had been to an English speaking country and had had a chance to learn English in an informal environment. Most of the participants were B2, C1 or C2 level. For the purpose of this part of the study attitudinal data were collected from the participants about their perception of like with respect to the age and gender of the speakers, formality of the situation, grammaticality, acceptability, distractiveness, and politeness of the utterances. They also rated users for fluency and their level of English. The participants were also asked to explain if they use like in a similar way and for what purposes as well as how they learned it. The attitudinal survey was adapted from Dailey-O’Cain (2000). The examples, however, were from my data.

3. FUNCTIONS OF LIKE IN ENGLISH

The functions of like can be classified in three groups: 1. as verb, noun, adjective, preposition, conjunction, and in fixed expressions; 2. as a pragmatic marker; and 3. as a quotative be like. The examples of like as a verb or a preposition are most common in the first group. As a verb, it is mostly used to talk about likes (which I, I like very much, very much) and dislikes (I don’t like possessive people). The preposition like is used for comparison. In these structures it is often used with be like, look like, or feel like. Quite common are also the expressions with like that (something like that/this; stuff like that/this). Like as a conjunction is generally considered informal (Müller, 2005, p. 206). It appears with the meaning of as (Like he said, they should be put in shelter) and as if (Well, I kind of feel like I need space and time when I am not with her). Sometimes like is also used as a noun (I won’t get enough likes).

In this paper, however, we are not interested in these meanings of like. We are here interested in the usage of like as a pragmatic marker. The functions of the pragmatic marker like are very different from those given above. Those given below are based on Andersen (2001), Müller (2005) and Beeching (2016).
I. Like and interpretive resemblance

Andersen (2001, p. 230) argues that “Like is a marker whose main contribution to utterance meaning is as a signal that the relation between an utterance and its underlying thought is not a one-to-one relation, but a relation of non-identical resemblance”. This meaning includes the following functions: 1. Approximation of a measurable unit; 2. Loose use of lexical expression; 3. Exemplification; and 4. Introducing an explanation. They can be paraphrased as approximately, roughly, similar to, for example, virtually, as it were, so to speak, or so called. The examples below illustrate the connection between the pragmatic marker like and loose use of language in the English interlanguage of Macedonian learners of English:

(1) It’s like five hundred euros I believe.
(2) I haven’t seen him, like, maybe, half a year.
(3) They... were like speaking English I’m... I really... I was confused. That was the English department, but they didn’t speak good English.
(4) … we waste a lot of time on our… our applications like Facebook or social media Instagram for instance but (mm-hmm)
(5) That did not discouraged me to not go anywhere like I’ll... I’ll still wanna explore, but I l...
(6) S2: And that’s why they go there hmm... Creating possibilities for themselves and so many of them just go with a plan to stay there.
   S1: Yes.
   S2: Yes, they...
   S1: Yes, like the United States.
(7) Oh that’s my dream like I would like to go to the United States.
(8) No, I... I’m not judgmental about that, like it’s your own body, you do
(9) like, what would be left here?
(10) And like, do you think that the problem is me, that I don’t wanna spend that much time with them?

Approximation of a measurable unit refers to numeral phrases and other measurable units which represent rough representation of the quantity contained in the phrase. This category includes cases in which like precedes expressions of quantity, time period, or frequency. It’s easier to process five hundred euros (1) than let’s say 534 euros and it’s more convenient to say half a year (2) than to go into precisely defining the number of months and days that she hasn’t seen him. Example (3) is also a case of rough approximation but the material that is introduced is ‘conceptually loose’. By saying that they were ‘like speaking English’, she makes it explicit that the language they spoke was similar to English but she would not quite identify it as such. Examples (4) and (5) illustrate like as a pragmatic marker whose function is to suggest that the following noun phrases are to be understood as exemplifications of wider categories and the noun phrases that are preceded by like pick out one of a larger set of alternatives.

Like can also mark units that need to undergo the enrichment process, i.e. extension of the given information to make it more understandable. The speaker in (7) makes her dream more specific by adding I would like to go to the United States; not judgmental in (8) is made more specific with it’s your own body. We were able to notice that not only did participants used like with explanations of certain expressions, but also with questions asking for explanations, opinions or additional information, as in (9) and (10).

II. Marking lexical focus

Another important function of like is to put the item that it accompanies in focus. Müller (2005, p. 221) notes that the scope of like in this function may be nouns, verbs, adverbs and adjectives. The following examples taken from my data illustrate the functions of like as focuser:

(11) I don’t agree with like poison, but at the end of the day I do agree that …
(12) But, that’s, like, crazy, like, all the time …
(13) I don’t wanna just sit here and, like, stare at you,
(14) I see him like during the week just maybe in a couple of minutes
(15) Yeah, but you were talking and then you were, like, just immediately shut down,
(16) and in Chinese and they don’t have an idea what that means and we find out that means something like really bizarre hhh
(17) ... like, hell ...

The above examples illustrate that several Macedonian learners employed like before an expression which is clearly exaggerated, as in (16) and (17).
III. Like as a hesitational/linking device
Like can occur in connection with planning difficulties and linguistic formulation of utterances. Müller (2005) refers to this function as ‘searching for the appropriate expression’ because it can be used when the speaker is thinking about what to say next. However, for like to be classified as an indicator of search, at least one other hesitational marker had to be present, such as filled and unfilled pauses (Müller, 2005, p. 2008). Andersen (2001) describes four distinct situations in which like can be used as a hesitational/linking device: false starts (18), cut-off utterances (19) and to provide a discourse link between syntactically or thematically distinct units of discourse (20). These functions are illustrated below with examples from our data:
(18) That’s like they... It w... I was hi.. It was hard for me to understand because hmm...
(19) Ye... Yes it was. Like hmm... (end of turn)
(20) I mean not get bored but hmm... I think hmm... Spending too much time like ... That’s when hmm... You start fighting and some things bother you and if you just give some time to... for things to cool out you... you don’t see each other for five, six, seven... A week or hmm... If you just see hmm... If you don’t see each other during the week, when you... you just you’re eager to see him in the weekend and you have the best time ever.
IV. Quotative be like
Quotative be like is used to represent thoughts and feelings. Sometimes, we can see lip movements, so that the person retelling the scene can assume speech, but often the “quotation” represents feelings, reactions, and thoughts.
(21) You know I’m like, ‘First I’ll finish college and settle hmm... Build my own life and then I’ll will talk about everything’
Macedonian learners used it more often with second and third person than with first person, and in both present and past tense:
(22) Because they’re like, ‘I’m gonna be cool; I’m gonna have tattooed something, a word or whatever’
(23) He was like, ‘No, imagine if you’re going for an interview or have some kind of a meeting, conference, whatever and you’re wearing
(24) when they’re all like, ‘you’re un-‘
In the examples below the speakers use like with a different reporting verb/phrase. In the first example the speaker introduces a question by explicitly naming it plus like. In the second one like is preceded by the reporting verb say.
(25) My question to you is like, do you agree that tattoos are unprofessional?
(26) I just say them to their face
4. STUDENT’S PERCEPTION OF LIKE
Students’ perception of like was examined through an attitudinal questionnaire. The questionnaire required learners to express how they view users of like with respect to their gender, age, education, friendliness, politeness and formality. Additionally, they were asked to express their view of non-native speakers who use it with respect to fluency, destructiveness, grammaticality, level of English and politeness. Learners were asked to explain if they use the PM like and how they use it as well as how they learned it.
The results of this investigation show that the pragmatic marker like is salient for MLE. Like as a PM is not taught in EFL classes and it is not illustrated in EFL listening and reading materials. In the attitudinal survey students reported that they had learned it through media exposure especially movies, reality shows, interviews, You Tube videos, etc. No matter whether learners use or don’t use like in their speech, all students who did the survey are aware of it and most of them see it as a mark of informal communication (35). The attitudinal survey of our study showed that while most of the respondents (32) identify the usage of like with younger speakers, they do not clearly identify it with the gender of the speaker: 15 learners identify it with male speakers, 12 with female speakers, and 13 do not identify it with any of the genders. Accordingly there is no clear association with one or the other gender.
It is interesting that most of the learners have negative perception of the usage of like. They see native speakers who use it abundantly as unfriendly (25), not cheerful (24), uninteresting (24), impolite (31). As for education, 12 learners see the speakers using like uneducated while 19 said that they wouldn’t know. They find such conversations distractive (26) and difficult to follow (29). They see it as a marker of disfluency (24) and a low level of proficiency in English (30). Some of the reasons that they quoted for not using it were that they don’t like how it sounds; it shows uncertainty and it sounds impolite; it makes the conversation sound informal and ungrammatical; they try to make sentences clear so that it would be easier for the others to understand what they are saying; it sounds rough and it looks like you don’t have enough vocabulary and you are not fluent in English; using it too much can irritate the listener and make the atmosphere uncomfortable; also it sounds annoying. One of the respondents said that like users sound like gangsters and boast too much. It is interesting that the respondents in Dailey-O’Cain’s (Dailey-O’Cain, 2000) study also indicated an abundance of very strong negative opinions.
Only 6 of the students were really positive about the usage of the PM like in conversation and think that it helps them organize their speech, 19 said that they don’t use it at all and 15 said that they sometimes or rarely use it. Learners find it useful to emphasize strong emotions or make the situation more interesting; to describe something; to formulate utterances when they are not sure what to say or how to express themselves and like gives them time to think; to link sentences; it makes talking easier, for example if you are confused, if you can’t think of something or if you don’t know the exact word or phrase. One of the respondent said that she uses it but not too often; only when she has so much to say she starts using it a lot. Most of the students who use it feel guilty about that and hope that they don’t use it too often.

Previous studies of pragmatic markers showed that students with a higher proficiency in the learned language who are more acculturated to the L2 environment are more likely to use more discourse markers (Hellermann & Vergun, 2007; Polat, 2011). The usage of like in our data supports this finding. The findings from students’ reports in the survey of their view of like suggest that there is a connection between frequency of use of like in learners’ conversations and their attitudes towards this marker. The more positive they are, the more likely it is that they will use it more frequently. In spite of the high level of proficiency in English (C1 or C2), learners who took a very negative attitude of like and reported to find it annoying avoided using it in their conversations. Still, several learners who said that they don’t use like actually used it in their conversations. This seems to be the case with some pragmatic markers even in our native language. They are socially stigmatized. Speakers tend to expose a negative attitude towards a certain marker and claim that they never use it.

5. CONCLUSION

The results of the present study provide new data on the usage of the PM like in the interlanguage of MLE. Our research confirms that the functions that they identify with like are similar to those used by native speakers. This is remarkable when we consider that like is not taught in the classroom. The study also indicates that like is one of those markers that is stigmatized by listeners. In spite of this, it is very frequent in the speech of both native and non-native speakers. Learners indicated several aspects of how it is useful for them, but most of them pointed out that it helps them organize their turn and deal with structural and conceptual uncertainty. This study also sheds light on how foreign language learners use all the resources around them in order to become more fluent and efficient in conversation. The B2+ learners have become autonomous in their learning. They are active observers of how language is used in communication, which helps them improve their communication.

The present study is by no means without its limitations, some of which may be addressed by future research. Further research may investigate whether the use of like is influenced by the proficiency levels of English and whether a longer stay in an English speaking country influences the use of like. It would be also useful to investigate other pragmatic markers and see how they are used in learner English.

REFERENCES


