

cool featured on early-1960s TV show *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis*, was known to pepper his lazy lines with “like.” Whether beatniks actually said “like” or whether it was introduced into mainstream pop culture to exaggerate or mock the differences between beat speech and “normal” speech is unclear. Regardless, the word continued to be associated with youth—and, more specifically, with the fringe elements of youth culture—throughout the ‘60s and ‘70s. The 1986 BBC documentary series *The Story of English* linked the origins of “like” to the surf culture that emerged on the Southern California coast in the late 1950s. From there, the documentary hypothesizes, it headed inland to suburban malls, where it eventually fell into the vocabulary of the Valley Girl, that brainless, shopping-obsessed bimbo archetype native to California’s San Fernando Valley.

Musician Frank Zappa and his fourteen-year-old daughter, Moon Unit, breathed life into the caricature with 1982’s “Valley Girl,” wherein Moon Unit parodied her motormouthed peers from Encino in a song that introduced the rest of the world to Val slang like “gag me with a spoon” and “grody.” The teenexploitation classic *Valley Girl*, which lovingly lampooned its namesake, followed in 1983.

More than a decade later, another teen movie—the *Emma* update *Clueless*, with its Val-speaking, white (or at least whitewashed) Beverly Hills teen socialites—presumed that the Valley dialect’s cultural associations had shifted from brainless consumerism to a classier brainless affluence. This is probably why, when I asked a twelve-year-old student of mine in the South Bronx what it means to speak professionally—as opposed to, in her words, “talking ghetto”—she responded, “It means, like, you have to, like, talk like this.”

Was she channeling the class implications of “like,” or its race implications? It’s hard to separate the two. Perhaps she got an earful of Hilary, the spoiled older sister in the African-American family on the early-1990s sitcom *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. Hilary’s accent was pure Val, and it certainly signaled upper-class status. Her speech patterns, along with those of her lawyer dad, preppy brother, and snooty butler, provided linguistic contrast to Will Smith’s ghetto authenticity.

I grew up near the Valley itself, so “like” has subtly different class implications for me. My prep-school friends and I might well have agreed to meet at, like, the Wet Seal in the Galleria, like, this weekend. But we ig-

## The, Like, Downfall of the English Language

### A Fluffy Word with a Hefty Problem

Gus Andrews / SUMMER 2003

IN A SEPTEMBER 2002 ARTICLE TITLED “COSMO’S CRASH Course in Office Talk,” *Cosmopolitan* helpfully guided its readers’ anxiety to a part of life they might not yet have agonized about: their speech. “If you’re like many young women,” the article confided, “you undermine your professional profile by littering your speech with words such as ‘um,’ ‘like,’ and ‘you know.’”

The article’s author trotted out a series of career consultants to reinforce this idea. “Not only does using such words as ‘like’ and ‘you know’ make you seem unpolished and inexperienced,” explained Kristen M. Gustafson, author of the book *Graduate! Everything You Need to Succeed After College*, who’s quoted in the piece, “but it makes people disregard your ideas because you sound as if you don’t have confidence in what you are saying.”

Slang-bashing is nothing new. Along with rap, heavy metal, television watching, gum chewing, teen sex, and other faves, juvenile speech patterns are periodically written up as a sign of the decline of Western civilization. “Like,” in particular, comes in for heavy abuse, thanks in part to the expression’s longevity. While slang descriptors such as “groovy,” “fresh,” and “radical” were quick to fade into peculiar-sounding obsolescence, “like” has retained its currency in youth culture for over forty years.

The beatniks were the first group to be tarred with the “like” brush in the popular imagination. Maynard G. Krebs, the misappropriation of beat

nored our own "bad" grammar when conjuring up the stupidest character we could imagine, an airhead whose rapid-fire speech was peppered with "like," "totally bitchin'," and "ohmigawd!". Put bluntly, Valspeak was white trash. We were supposed to abandon mall crawling for more sophisticated pursuits as we got older, and we were supposed to grow out of "like," too. Our parents looked out for our class standing. I got my first drubbing for using the word at age thirteen: A friend and I were in the car, talking excitedly and with abandon, when I realized that my stepmother and father were giggling in the front seat. Eventually, my stepmother turned around to face us and said, "Forty-three."

"Forty-three what?" I asked.

"You've said 'like' forty-three times in the last five minutes." She snickered. Despite its rich history and subtle sociopolitical meanings, "like" is still just bad English to most adults, an error to be corrected. To linguists, fortunately, the phenomenon is worthy of more thought. In February 2002, the serendipitously named Muffy E. A. Siegel published a paper on "like" in the *Journal of Semantics*. Linguists are generally concerned with describing how words are used rather than with chastising the user, so the article is an assessment of the rules by which the word is deployed, with comments on where "like" challenges established linguistic theories.

Siegel hypothesizes that the use of "like" indicates that the speaker isn't committing to the accuracy of what she or he is saying. This can work in a number of ways. For example, in the phrase "Like, a giant moose knocked our tent over," "like" could be taken to modify the whole phrase, in which case the speaker is giving one example of many things that went wrong on a camping trip. It could be modifying "moose," signaling that the speaker is employing hyperbole (it could have been a small deer that knocked the tent over). Or, more simply, it could mean the speaker wasn't clear on exactly what kind of animal had knocked down the tent. (Granted, this is not a new concept. Even my father, who laughed along with my stepmother's "like" tally, will defend his phrasing "like, five cars at the show" to mean "about" or "approximately.")

Siegel does not address the use of the word "like" in the phrase "was like," where it replaces "said." (For example: "I was like, 'That dog has got to go,' and she was like, 'What? He's such a sweet dog,' and I was like, 'He's peed on the carpet four times this morning.'") But her theory works by ex-

ension: "Was like" is a good way for a speaker to indicate that the dialogue she is re-creating should not be taken as the exact words spoken by the participants. This extension also makes a place in English for the phrase "And she's all . . ."

Siegel's understanding of "like" as a modifier places the word among "maybe," "possibly," "you know," and similar phrases known as hedges. So it's not surprising that "like" is associated more with women than with men. Since the 1970s, sociolinguists have noted that women often use hedges to soften the impact of their statements. What would-be grammar police (like the *Cosmopolitan* article's author) don't acknowledge is that hedges say less about an individual woman's lack of confidence than they do about society's expectation that women not be assertive.

Either way, it seems to be a good idea to help young women root "like" out of their speech entirely. But Siegel also offers a more positive perspective on the use of the word. Studying twenty-three tape-recorded interviews of high-school honors students—both boys and girls—from suburban Philadelphia, Siegel found that spontaneity of speech, not insecurity, was most strongly correlated with a flurry of "likes."

While she found that girls did use "like" much more often than boys, she also discovered that speakers of either gender said it less often when they had more time to plan what they were saying. The speaker's comfort level and the informality of the setting also seemed to increase the use of "like." "Happily," Siegel concludes, "if girls use 'like' more than boys, it may indicate as much a gift for intimacy and spontaneity as insecurity."

Alas, fewer young women probably read the *Journal of Semantics* than *Cosmo*, so the results of this survey are unlikely to do much to break the vicious cycle that plagues "like" users: You don't feel confident in what you're saying, so you use "like"; your parents pick on you for saying "like," so you feel less confident in what you're saying; you say "like" more, they pick on you again, and on it goes.

The thrust of popular language use will never sway the gatekeepers of the English language. While "like" and other nonstandard usages spread to their very living rooms, they still cling to the shibboleth that bad English displays the speaker's stupidity. Meanwhile, my twelve-year-old student determines the meaning of "like" from *Clueless*'s Cher and Dionne. What happens when she meets my stepmother, or the *Cosmo* article's author? Will

she try to speak Val in an attempt to raise her class standing? How many potential employers will dismiss her as incompetent, either for her adopted Valspeak or for her native South Bronxese?

You can't maintain linguistic purity by sheer force of will, or even through English classes. People don't have to be taught language to learn it. Babies are naturally wired to learn language by example, whether via parents or TV. By now, kids who've never heard of a Valley Girl are surely learning to say "like" from their parents. They may be admonished by those same parents not to use the word; they may learn to code-switch, turning off their use of the word in formal situations—but it's not likely that they'll give it up. Despite attempts to stigmatize it, "like" will live on.

What can *Cosmo's* job consultants do about it, aside from undermining more women's confidence? According to Siegel, they'll have to deal with it. "The language mavens always say, 'Oh, they're wrecking the language.'" she told *The Philadelphia Inquirer* in 2002. "And it's always girls and working people [who are blamed for it]. But languages change because they need to change. There are so many more girls and working people than there are language mavens."

## Teen Mean Fighting Machine

Why Does the Media Love Mean Girls?

Gabrielle Moss / WINTER 2005

LIKE ALMOST ALL FIRST DAYS OF HIGH SCHOOL IN CINEMA history, that of Cady Heron, protagonist of *Mean Girls* (2004), goes poorly. A practical, homeschooled teen raised in Africa by zoologist parents, Cady is mystified by the social customs of American high schoolers and confused by teachers who don't trust her; she ends up eating her lunch alone in the girls' bathroom. Cady, who apparently has never had a negative or hostile thought in her life, is quickly accosted by two very different types of mean girls: the sarcastic "art freak" Janis and the bitchy clique the Plastics. Cady is enlisted in a revenge scheme Janis has hatched against head Plastic Regina George, but soon finds herself enjoying the perks of popularity enough to attempt to unseat Regina and become Queen Bee herself.

*Mean Girls* spins a fairly pedestrian yarn about the seduction (and subsequent redemption) of an innocent outsider by the posh lifestyles and flexible morals of the popular kids. But while most teen films are based on a potent mix of recalled adolescent fantasies and repressed memories, *Mean Girls* was based on a bestselling self-help book—Rosalind Wiseman's 2002 book *Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and Other Realities of Adolescence*—that's one of the central texts of a movement that for the past few years has galvanized parents and their daughters against an alleged epidemic of meanness in their midst.

Spearheaded by *Queen Bees*, Rachel Simmons's 2002 book *Odd Girl Out*: