

The Logic of American Mallspeak

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OUTLINE

- (a) What is mallspeak?
- (b) Why mallspeak?
- (c) Brief history
- (d) Misconceptions
- (e) Literature review: hedge / focus / verb of saying
- (f) New Analysis: approximator / textual cohesion / quotative

(a) WHAT IS "MALLSPEAK"?

Example: Hysterical girl at Columbine High (BBC World Service)

We were just sitting there the library, and then we were LIKE talking, and we didn't know what it was, and then I looked out the window, and there's this guy throwing LIKE a pipe bomb at all the cars, and then he came in the – they LIKE started blowing up and shooting everyone in the cafeteria, and then you could hear 'em laughing and running upstairs, and they were shooting anyone of color, wearing a white hat, or playing a sport, and they didn't care who it was, and it was all LIKE close range. [pause] Oh...

(b) WHY MALLSPEAK?

"Mallspeak" – or "teenbonics" – is a pernicious verbal epidemic that erodes the meaning of our language and reduces the clarity of thought. What began as a teenage phenomenon is slowly filtering into the mainstream, as young people, weaned on "like" and "you know" trade their lunch boxes for briefcases.

The Free Daily Press, Boston University (March 5, 1999)

* Language change {
 sound change
 lexical change
 grammaticalization

(c) BRIEF HISTORY

- (a) 1950s counterculture and bop talk: A generalized modifier used to lend a somewhat tentative and detached tone to the speaker, to give the speaker time to rally words and ideas: *LIKE I was LIKE groovin', LIKE, you know what I mean?* (Chapman, R. 1995. *Dict. of American Slang*: 345)

50s "beat" subculture: *That's LIKE cool, man.*

(Bruce Nevin <bn@bbn.com> / LINGUISTLIST)

- (b) Early 80s: Valleygirls / Valleyspeak
 - San Fernando Valley, CA
 - Stereotype: teenage / rich – shopping-obsessed / stupid / gossipy
- (c) 1980s – 90s: Mallspeak
 - North Carolina (Butters 1982)
 - Ohio (Schourup 1983)
 - New York (Blyth, Recktenwald & Wang 1990)
 - Washington D. C. (Romaine & Lange 1991)
 - Texas (Ferrara & Bell 1995)

- (d) 1990s: overseas (Britain)

My fourteen-year-old daughter (London born and bred) tells me that she often hears things like "He was LIKE let's have a party," and even "They were all LIKE let's have a party". So it's already reached us.

(Dick Hudson, University College London <uclyrh@ucl.ac.uk>/LINGUISTLIST)

(d) MISCONCEPTIONS

- It doesn't mean anything / it is entirely random; ungrammatical
- It is an empty filler word, devoid of meaning, used to give the speaker time to rally words and ideas
- It is a fad; it is slang that will come and go

(e) REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

LIKE [hedge (Underhill 1988, "Like, is, like, focus")
 [focus (Underhill 1988)

BE +LIKE quotative / verb of saying

(Blyth, Recktenwald & Wang, 1990; Romaine & Lange, 1991; Ferrara & Bell, 1995)

(A) Hedge

(B) Focus marker (introducing new / important information [often both – hard to distinguish])

(C) Quotative / verb of saying

(i) Introducing reported speech (direct quotes / constructed dialogue)

(ii) Introducing internal monologue (thoughts that have not been said)

(iii) heightening of drama / revealing internal states

(1) mildly taboo words involving blasphemy and bodily functions

(2) non-word vocalizations (usually without conventional spellings, e.g., *eeuw* (revulsion), *eeek* (threat/startle); *oooo* (audible glee)

(Ferrara & Bell 1995: 282)

(D) Criticisms:

- Hedge /focus functions need to be studied in greater detail (most of the research has been on the quotative function)
- Why these three functions?
- What is the relationship between the three functions?
- How did these three functions come to be? (How do they relate to the more conventional meanings of LIKE)

(f) NEW ANALYSIS

(0) Definition & asymmetry:

semantic: commutative A 邊 B 變 B 邊 A
pragmatic: asymmetrical (B is more familiar than A)

Pragmatic function: (1) provides familiar point of reference (2) tradeoff: accuracy

(1) Approximator (limited function – numbers) / (Underhill 1988: 240)

Modifies: (1) (simple / familiar) number / number range
(2) implies imprecision
Synonyms: approximately; about; around

(2) Approximator (full function) = Hedge

• Grammaticalization: limited function -> full range of functions

Modifies: (1) simple / familiar idea (2) implies imprecision
Synonyms: approximately; about; around

- (a) Epistemic motivation: incomplete knowledge (hesitation)
 - (i) Not sure about the facts (c.f. *what*)
 - (ii) Not sure what the right terminology is
- (b) Linguistic motivation: intentional fuzziness / vagueness
 - (i) Mitigation (LIKE as downtoner)
 - (ii) Tentativeness (politeness / face-saving strategy)
 - Requests
 - Suggestions
 - Potentially offensive questions
 - Conversation openers

(3) Focus (Underhill 1988) / textual conjunction (Romaine & Lange 1991)

Marking topic / stylistic / register shifts (changes in the texture of the language)

- Using vagueness / fuzziness as a bridge two different levels
- Makes small shifts more visible / big shifts less sudden (c.f. traffic cone)

- (a) Topic: Degree of importance / relevance (unimportant -> important)
 - Like saying “Pay attention now, here comes the important part!”
 - Rhetorical highlighter (c.f. underlining text on a computer)
 - Often used to introduce new information
 - Contrast
- (b) Intensifier:
 - (i) strong emotions (enthusiasm; excitement; surprise; anger ...)
 - (ii) extreme situations (often with “totally”)
- (c) Degree of formality (register shift: formal -> informal; informal -> formal)
- (d) Change of semantic field
- (e) Figurative language
- (f) Exaggeration (similar to intensifier: extremes)
- (g) Stock expressions (c.f. (i) approximator / familiarity (ii) attitude)
- (h) Idiosyncratic / imprecise expressions
 - Description + “thing”
 - Description + “man” / “woman” / “guy” / “type”
- (i) Unconventional idea (preparing the listener for the element of surprise)

(4) Quotative (verb of saying): BE + LIKE

- The focus / essence of speech (c.f. focus function): emotions / attitudes
- Direct quotes in journalism:

“vivid and clear”: familiar expressions

“strong feelings or reactions”: emotions / attitudes

(1) strong emotions / attitudes,

(2) stock expression / gesture

(3) very often not clear whether it is speech or thought (but that is not the point)

- Purely a reported speech marker (c.f. “said”)

(6) Overlap of functions

(7) Deciphering Opening example

We were just sitting there the library, and then we were LIKE talking, and we didn't know what it was, and then I looked out the window, and there's this guy throwing LIKE a pipe bomb at all the cars, and then he came in the – they LIKE started blowing up and shooting everyone in the cafeteria, and then you could hear 'em laughing and running upstairs, and they were shooting anyone of color, wearing a white hat, or playing a sport, and they didn't care who it was, and it was all LIKE close range. [pause] Oh...

1st: focus; 2nd: hedge / focus; 3rd: hedge / focus; 4th: intensifier

(8) Grammatical note:

LIKE always or nearly always introduces a (syntactic) constituent. (Underhill 1988: 242)

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