

The word 'like' is, like, here to stay

U of A professor still finds relevance in her 13-year-old research on the informal use of the word 'like', illustrating how fluid our language can be

KIRSTEN GORUK
News Staff

13 years after then-University of Michigan graduate student Jennifer Dailey-O'Cain researched the uses of the word "like" in informal speech, it appears as though the term isn't going anywhere.

Now an associate professor in the department of Modern Languages and Cultural Studies at the U of A, Dailey-O'Cain has found that her research hasn't lost relevance. She explained that studies examining the use of "like" are still being conducted, and there are plenty of reasons why.

"It's an interesting, marked, observable, and measurable recent change," explains Dr John Considine, associate professor in English and Film Studies at the U of A. "Linguists are thinking about language variation through time and from one group to another."

Considine adds that although sometimes frowned upon, the use of "like" fulfills specific functions in language—that it isn't being used randomly or incorrectly. As with all grammar, "like" follows certain rules.

After Dailey-O'Cain noticed this trend, she too became interested in the functions of the word and how it's used in speech.

Her research was three-fold in design. She used a quantitative approach to look at the actual usages

of "like," allowing her to compare instances where the term was used and where it could be used. She then studied perceived thoughts about its use in spoken language.

"It wasn't about how it was actually used; it was how people thought it was used, whether people thought women or men used it more, younger or older people, that sort of thing," Dailey-O'Cain explained.

The final study employed the "matched guise" technique: four people's voices were recorded, and then two sets of each recording were made—one with the "likes" digitally removed. The four people were given two guises, and test subjects were told there were eight people.

"Then you really know that what they're reacting to is the 'like' and not some other aspect of the person," she said.

The listeners were asked about the perceived education levels and friendliness of the people on the recordings, and according to Dailey-O'Cain the multiple recordings of the same person made certain that people weren't reacting to other aspects of the recordings.

"The guises were associated with the speakers seeming more attractive, cheerful, friendly, and, believe it or not, successful. [But] they also seemed less educated," she said.

Jessie Loyer, a third-year English student, admits to being guilty of

using "like" around her friends, and says she'll notice when others use it as well.

"If someone in authority, such as a professor, uses 'like' too often, I just doubt their authority and look elsewhere for a professional opinion."

Although Considine hasn't noticed an overly increased use of "like" among his students or colleagues, he understands Loyer's position.

"These new uses of 'like' do annoy some people who value the conservative use of English," he says.

For those who are using "like" in their speech, there's a perfectly good explanation. As Dailey-O'Cain points out, it serves two purposes in our language.

"The first thing it does is it serves as a focuser. It says that the next thing that I say after this 'like' is what I want you to focus your attention on," she explained.

The other is its grammatical function as a quotative: it can be used before quotes, direct or otherwise.

Like it or not, "like" is useful and Dailey-O'Cain is confident that it will continue to adapt and endure the test of time.

"One of the things that make this topic so exciting is that language change usually happens quite slowly—you compare generations. But with 'like,' it's happening really fast; it's changing every three or four years."

Faculty of Arts grads get a new career resource

ALLISON GRAHAM
News Writer

A new career development officer position for the Faculty of Arts is trying to ease the minds of job-hungry students and antsy employers who may have previously subscribed to the myth that an arts degree can't get you a job.

Amber Nicholson, who received her BA and MA degrees from the U of A, is working with employers and Arts students in order to spread the word that an arts degree is as employable as any other.

"My role is to meet with employers to generate and grow career opportunities for Arts students and also to ensure that students are aware of the value and employability of the skills that they're gaining during their liberal arts education," Nicholson said.

The idea of the position, which was mainly a result of student encouragement, was initiated by the Collective Body for Arts Students (CBAS), the Career and Placement Services Office (CAPS), and the Faculty of Arts' Dean's Office. So far, the focus is on informing Arts students about career options through job-oriented programs like career forums, the Arts Career Network Internet newsletter, and the new Rapid Resumé Review service.

"It's a service for students that students requested," Nicholson said, adding that this movement to help students couldn't be happening at a better time, as employers are eager to hire new graduates.

"Employers are actively recruiting right now and are very interested in the skill set that Arts graduates have," she said.

Acting dean of Arts Gurstan Dacks, who took part in the formation of the career development officer position, said he too has been aware of the necessity of educating students and



SAMBROOKS

HERE TO HELP Amber Nicholson is on hand to help Arts students find work.

employers of their options.

"The Arts' Students Association, which was the predecessor to our current CBAS [...], felt that Career Placement Services did a lot of things very, very well, but that arts students didn't adequately appreciate how to translate their experience in arts into job-related language or understanding and, indeed, that employers weren't able to do that either," Dacks explained.

Both Nicholson and Dacks expressed the importance of Arts students taking advantage of their skills, but said that it's equally essential to continually inform employers about what Arts students can offer, even with the growing number of employment options.

"The ideas that the career development officer is going to be disseminating out there hopefully will begin to change the broad culture, which is not necessarily hostile to an arts degree but rather uninformed about it, and so it will assist the arts degree to take its place among degrees that people just intuitively understand lead to jobs,"

Dacks said.

However, if both employers and graduates are becoming ready and willing to encourage an arts degree in the workplace, it's difficult even for faculty members like Nicholson and Dacks to understand why there is still the misconception that arts grads can't find jobs.

"The arts degree does not automatically and transparently attach to a particular occupation the way nursing or education does, so it's superficially logical to imagine that [...] there aren't jobs, and that's because people are thinking in terms of disciplines, not in terms of skills," Dacks added.

It is this way of thinking that the new career development officer is hoping to change, and by creating various programs to show employers and students the employability of an arts degree, Nicholson is positive that her new position has a lot to achieve.

"There's lots of evidence for employability for arts students, [and] I would like to think that this will help get that message out to students," Nicholson said.



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