

But like, you know, how did it take over the language?

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If you used the word 'like' in conversation or communication before about the year 1990 you would have been talking about similarity or affinity: 'Maggie plays like an angel', or 'I like ice cream'. Straightforward stuff, an uncomplicated transfer of thoughts between people.

But such sublime simplicity could not long survive a full-frontal assault, and that assault came when teenagers of about that period discovered that the word was about the coolest thing on the planet, a word you could send out to do almost anything you wanted. Today it must rank as the most used four-letter element of speech in the English language, even maybe in the history of the language, like.

Take this gem for a start. It comes from a recent newspaper report of a school stabbing incident, something, like, rather ordinary these days.

Mark starts coming but someone tries to push him back, he's like, 'No, no don't....' Alex pulls out his switch-blade and he was like, 'Pull up, run up, run up.' Right?

It looked like Alex was just punching him in the stomach, but he was like stabbing. So when he got off of him, all you saw was, like, blood. And Matthew looked down to hold it, kind of. He didn't look down. He just went to hold it.

Alex was like, 'Bro, you needed to stop,' but you kept coming.

That was when he face-planted onto the floor, like.

Officially (which in this case means what philologists have decided by consensus), like has joined the ranks of what are known as 'discourse markers' – words such as um, actually, so yeah, (and many others) that are inserted at whim into conversation to control or manage the flow. We all use them, especially um, even though we are not specifically aware of doing so. But none has become as dominant as like.

The very notion of discourse markers, by the way, is quite novel, not much older in fact than the changing use of 'like'. They have always been there though, just travelling incognito. And people use them for some quite personal reasons.

There was once a prominent businessman and part-time politician in South Africa who developed his own way of dealing with a pernicious stammer. He would insert the word 'now' whenever he felt the first flutter of a speech anxiety coming on. For him, 'now' became a critical discourse marker, it not only allowed him some control of flow, it really made any coherent speech possible.

Appropriately perhaps, his initials were MM.

"Mister now Chairman," MM would say.

"Mister Now Chairman, I take the floor to set the now record straight...." and so on. Only the most hard-hearted and thick-skinned of his opponents could find anything to laugh at or jeer. And in a sense, it was only a step away from Mister like Chairman.

There are enough other oddities in the opening quote to affirm that our language is a living creature. 'Face planting' alone is worthy of notice. Yet there is no doubt that 'like' dominates. But where did it come from?

Some may claim a different origin, but it is difficult see past the magical hand of American songwriter Frank Zappa in this little treasure hunt. In 1982, he released a song called 'Valley Girl', which he had just recorded with his daughter, Moon. In it

he captured the language of the spoiled little girls of the affluent San Fernando valley (of whom his child was one), and thus was undoubtedly at least partly to blame for the way the word 'like' then spread around the globe in fine new clothes. It took some years, but eventually it made it to every corner where English is spoken.

"Like, oh my god Valley girl, like totally Valley girl
There's, like, the Galleria Valley Girl, and like
All these, like, really great shoe stores

This kind of patter, first known as 'valley speak', was the signature of an army of bubbly San Fernando bimbos with rich fathers and far too much money to worry about anything but how to spend it.

Zappa died of prostate cancer in 1993, and that song was his only one to reach a Top 40 listing. He wasn't all that excited by its success; in fact, he protested that he hated the bimbo aspects that gave it birth.

A lesser aspect of 'valley speak' which may now also be gaining traction is the high-rising terminal way of talking called 'up-speak'. In up-speak, simple statements have a rising intonation, causing declarative language to appear to be interrogative to listeners unfamiliar with it.

You could say it is a speech habit that seems to make a question out of anything. It is curious, charming, and highly infectious, but as with the things that are happening to the word like, it only serves to underline that our language is indeed a living thing.

Purists will resist change, modernists will embrace it.

Apart from all academic or legal questions arising from changes to meaning and the manners of speaking, the cumulative effect is generally to make language more varied and colourful – surely adding to the pleasure and joy we get out of conversation and reading.

There is one more thing to be said about the secret life of words. Like the rings of a tree, the changing bits and pieces of our oral and written communication provide a useful dating arrangement.

Years from now, people will be watching old videos and maybe listening to ancient records, and all the while academic commentators will be saying 'see here, that's when people first began to make use of the many wonderful facets of the word 'like', so it must have been about the final decade of the 20th century!'