

Keep your English up to date

Be like

Gavin Dudeney

So I was talking to a friend the other day about this series, and he was like, 'Why are you doing that?', and I was like 'Actually, it's quite fun' and he was like 'No way!' and I was like 'Way!'...

I expect you've got the idea now.

When recounting a story, or an encounter with someone else, it's now quite common to hear the speaker introducing each piece of reported speech with the word 'like'. It's used as a kind of hedge or paraphrase (when we're not really sure of the exact words originally used) and is usually accompanied by some fairly sophisticated paralinguistic features to recreate the original conversation, complete with facial gestures, arm movements, etc.

This use of 'like' came from 'Valspeak' originally, the sociolect common to the San Fernando Valley area of California. Valspeak has been responsible for many additions to our language, including the famous 'duh!' which we also look at in this series. 'Like' has largely replaced other similar devices such as 'go' (so he went 'Where are you off to?' and I went 'Just down to the shop for some milk') and 'be all' (I was all 'Why isn't anyone working?' and Sue was all 'It's lunchtime, John... calm down!').

Today it's not confined to California, or even the USA, but is becoming more common in British English too. Anyway, I'm like so tired after all that writing that I think I'll have to go and have a lie down.



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