

“All us girls were like euuh!”: Conversational work of *be like* in New Zealand adolescent talk

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Abstract

The prolific use of vernacular *like* in the speech of teenagers in New Zealand (and abroad) has stimulated some debate concerning the efficacy and desirability of its various forms. Sociolinguists have traced the origin and development of one form (i.e. *be like* as a quotative marker), convincingly demonstrating that it is put to systematic use by speakers. The contribution of the present study is to examine the deployment of quotative *be like* as a meaningful resource during talk in interaction. The data have been taken from recordings of classroom sexuality-education activities in a Year 12 (age 16) Health programme in New Zealand. Participants deploy *be like* as a resource for the management of conversation, using it to frame their contributions as versions of opinions which are up for analysis. *Be like* stimulates collaboration and/or evaluation from the other participants, and after debate the original version can be modified or retracted without fear of censure. Concurrently *be like* enables rapport management, allowing for face work and the fulfilling of role-based responsibilities while speakers pursue the transactional goals of a sexuality-focused lesson. It is not clear, from these data, whether these are the primary interactional functions of *be like* or merely two functions amongst many. However, these findings demonstrate that *be like* is a means to social and communicative ends for these adolescent speakers of English, adding to a factual knowledge base about vernacular *like* which can critically inform value judgments about its desirability.

1. Introduction

Most of us are familiar with an oft-misquoted aphorism born of a statement made by George Santayana: ‘Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it’. This nugget seems less clichéd if one considers the conviction amongst a cohort of people from each generation that their progeny are to be the downfall of all that is great and good. This is particularly true in relation to adolescent language use. The perennial theme that young people are ruining the English language is a burden that successive generations have shouldered and then dutifully passed on to their children (see Milroy 1998). D’Arcy (2007: 386) has traced this phenomenon to “...the overarching and timeless gestalt that the language is degenerating.” Like all good myths, it has resilience (see Aitchison 1981).

It would likely be difficult to accurately locate the roots of this ideology, but as D'Arcy (2007: 387) points out, there are some traceable threads. For instance, the fact that the rate of language change tends to peak in cohorts of speakers between ages 13 and 17 (Labov 2001; Tagliamonte and D'Arcy 2009) might contribute to the perception that new forms of language use are degenerative. The applied logic seems to be that if young people are using language differently from their parents, it must be a result of poor teaching standards. However, D'Arcy reveals that the issue is not one of lagging ability; the rules of grammar are acquired before children start school (Milroy 1998). Rather, what is being observed is *social variation* in the application of those rules, and this is a more elusive issue than supposed gaps in the linguistic knowledge base of young people.

Along such lines, the prolific use of the word *like* in discourse can generate consternation in New Zealand and other English-speaking countries, with the folk consensus being that it is a 'meaningless interjection' (see D'Arcy 2007). However closer analysis has proved that vernacular *like* (i.e. usage of *like* which is informal and non-traditional) is diverse in linguistic function as well as systematic in its application (see Barbieri 2009; Buchstaller and D'Arcy 2009; D'Arcy 2007; Jones and Schieffelin 2007; Tagliamonte and D'Arcy 2004). Some might argue that this merely means that we should be more alarmed than ever because a 'bad habit' is clearly becoming widespread and entrenched. Being grounded in belief and emotion, this is a debate that is unlikely to reach a conclusion soon.

Rather than engaging further in a debate of linguistic values, the aim of this article is to "[have] regard to the facts" (Cameron 1995: 227) in the hope that such value-driven debates can be informed by an awareness of factual information about vernacular *like*. Towards such ends, the focus will be on the examination of some conversational data gathered in a New Zealand secondary school classroom in order to investigate the types of conversational effects which are achieved by a specific (and well-documented) usage of the word *like*. This usage has been referred to as 'quotative *be like*,' and is perhaps best described with some examples. The examples in 1 (quoted from the Canterbury Corpus by D'Arcy 2010: 65-68) provide a few standard ways in which *be like* is commonly deployed in New Zealand (indeed throughout the anglosphere):

1 They thought it was an odd cell phone number but I *was like* 'Oh well it's a Kiwi number.' And he *was like* "Oh well that would explain that.'

The bus driver goes 'Hey hey hey.' And he's *like* 'Oh oh oh.'

They're just *like* '[sound effect].' They just kind of scream at you.

These examples should appear familiar to most New Zealand readers of this article. Indeed many will have used quotative *be like* in their own speech at least from time to time, for although it has been verified that its usage in New Zealand back in 1996 was primarily a habit of those under thirty (Buchstaller and D'Arcy 2009: 304-05), this cohort from the Canterbury Corpus have aged somewhat since then. Therefore it can be surmised that people presently under the age of forty-five in New Zealand are likely to have used the form at some point in their lives. As stated above, the quotative version is one specific form of vernacular *like*. Other forms can be seen in 2, with categories and examples taken from D'Arcy (2007: 392).

2 *approximative adverb*

It could have taken you all day to go *like* thirty miles.

discourse marker

Nobody said a word. *Like* my first experience with death was this Italian family.

discourse particle

And they had *like* scraped her.

Although these other forms do appear in the data analysed for this study, they are not the focus here and will not receive any more attention. Suffice it to say that there is also further work to be done investigating the conversational work that these forms are doing in the talk of New Zealanders.

2. Language Focus

2.1 *Be like* comes to Aotearoa/New Zealand

As a linguistic form, quotative *be like* has clear origins in the United States, and it has spread outwards into the English speaking world while being adapted to local systems such as New Zealand Englishes (Buchstaller and D'Arcy 2009). For example, recent research has robustly demonstrated that quotative *be like* is favoured in Pākehā English yet disfavoured in Māori English. This is not to say that it is not used by speakers of Māori English; rather it is used by them much less frequently. The difference in frequency is so significant in fact, that it can be used as a tool for distinguishing between the two varieties (D'Arcy 2010: 69). When it comes to grammatical usage; *be like* appears in the same grammatical structures in both varieties (D'Arcy 2010: 70).

When its usage is compared between the USA and New Zealand, differences in the grammatical environments of *be like* do appear. In both countries, *be like* tends

to be used most often with the ‘historical present’ (i.e. present tense used to refer to past events). An example of historical present can be seen in 3:

- 3 She got me home and it’s **like** ‘So, what’d you think?’ It’s **like** ‘Oh yeah.’
(quoted from the Canterbury Corpus by D’Arcy 2010: 68)

Whereas in the USA *be like* also sometimes appears with the ‘simple present,’ this is far less frequently the case in New Zealand (Buchstaller and D’Arcy 2009). An example of its use with simple present can be seen in 4:

- 4 When he’s there I’m **like** ‘Uh oh that’s cool.’
(quoted from the Canterbury Corpus by D’Arcy 2010: 67)

One of the characteristics that seems to have been imported successfully from the USA is a preference for the use of *be like* with mimetic effects, and this is the case for both Māori and Pākehā Englishes (D’Arcy 2010). In other words, quotations made using *be like* most often involve gestural content and voicing effects which attribute certain attitudes or characteristics to the quoted party (see Buchstaller and D’Arcy 2009: 297). Examples of this phenomenon are frequent in this study, and will become clear in due course.

Another aspect of *be like* is its history of being associated with the quotation of thought as opposed to reported speech. This is a long-standing American pattern which is weakening there, yet dominant nonetheless, and this tendency for *be like* to favour the quotation of thought also persists in New Zealand (Buchstaller and D’Arcy 2009: 306). There are numerous examples in the present study of *be like* being used for the quotation of thought.¹

In summary, from the point of view of grammatical and content-related environments in which *be like* is found, this imported form has been adapted to New Zealand Englishes while retaining some of its original American patterns, and its frequency of use in New Zealand has been more or less linked to ethnicity. Knowing how frequently it is used and the grammatical restrictions placed on it are both valuable sources of insight. However, a question remains: Why might an individual speaker opt to use *be like* during talk when other linguistic resources (e.g. ‘I said/thought...’) are available for the same ends? It seems that its *frequent* use might signal that a speaker is using Pākehā English not Māori English, but the degree to which the deployment of a variety provides clues to a speaker’s ethnic identity will vary widely depending on that speaker’s reasons for deploying these varieties as well as how that choice fits with the rest of a person’s ‘ethnolinguistic repertoire’ (a term from Benor 2010, also cited in D’Arcy 2010). There must be numerous other reasons why one might (or might *not*) select *be like* from one’s linguistic toolbox regardless of the frequency (or infrequency) of selection. What remains unexplored

in the New Zealand context is the ways in which *be like* is deployed as a resource during talk in interaction.

2.2 *Be like* as a resource for conversation and rapport management

The data analysed here have been taken from the collected audio recordings of a study which focuses on the use of language during sexuality education in a Year 12 Health classroom in New Zealand. In these recordings, participants make frequent use of vernacular forms of *like* while discussing gender and sexuality in classroom activities. Rejecting any notion that *be like* is deployed as a meaningless interjection, questions remain as to 1) why speakers opt to use it and consequently 2) what meaning(s) it has in those instances. The answer to these questions were to be found in the ongoing maintenance of social relationships in this learning community. The discussion of sexuality by a group of adolescents and their teacher in a classroom setting calls for a great deal of rapport management. *Be like* proves to be an important tool in this process.

Rapport management, which Spencer-Oatey (2008: 13) loosely defines as “the management of harmony-disharmony among people,” forms a useful concept for this article because in its framework she has included three types of relational work. These are the management of ‘face’, the management of perceived rights and obligations in a given social situation, and the management of the ‘goals’ of a given interaction. Built into rapport management’s theoretical framework is the idea that speakers who are interacting can be doing all of these things at the same time, and so their linguistic (and other behavioural) choices might be attending to more than one aspect at the same time. To clarify, it is perhaps useful to outline how rapport management might hypothetically unfold in a classroom-based discussion of sexuality.

Inherent in most classroom discussions is a transactional goal which drives the topic. Hypothetically, the participants could be asked to read a narrative in which a fictional character is placed in the position of needing to make a sexual decision. The participants then must conduct a group discussion, weighing up the character’s options and recommending a course of action. There is a specific interactional goal here that has been imposed upon them by the task. While managing their work towards that common goal, the students (and teacher) will also need to manage the self they present to the group (which is where the notion of ‘face’ is useful) and the rights and obligations inherent in various roles, such as class members, best friends, teacher, or cousins. With sexuality as a classroom topic, it is probably obvious that the management of all of these things at once could quickly become a fraught exercise.

So what type of work does *be like* do at the conversational, turn-by-turn level in order to facilitate conversation and rapport management? Insight can be gleaned from a Dutch study (Lamerichs and Te Molder 2009), in which researchers investigated the use of the Dutch term *van* as a conversational resource. They indicate that *van* has commonly been translated as quotative *be like* in English, so although comparison of the two forms clearly must be undertaken with a level of caution, the analysis of Lamerichs & Te Molder is instructive for the present analysis. Employing analytical tools of conversation analysis, they demonstrate that *van* is used by speakers to make an assessment of someone in a gossip setting, but this assessment is made ‘available for testing’ by the other participants in the conversation. In other words, the use of *van* to introduce a quotation signals to the listeners that the speaker might not be directly quoting anyone; rather the words which follow represent a tentative opinion of the quoted party’s personality or attitude. The example in 5 is from Lamerichs and Te Molder (2009: 407):

5 *en DAN heb ik zo iets van FLIKker toch op↑ man↑*
 and THEN I’m a bit like (.) GET lost↑ man↑

The statement in 5 follows a stretch of talk in which the speaker expresses frustration at the return of a professor whose frequent absences have been disruptive. The authors’ analysis demonstrates that it is unlikely that the speaker told the professor to ‘get lost’ and indeed the listener fails to orient to “get lost man” as a proper quotation. Rather, this self-quotation is a version of how the speaker felt at the time, or perhaps her thoughts, and in this case it prompts the listener to respond supportively about the unacceptability of the circumstances.

The tentativeness of these accounts is achieved by framing the assessment as an invitation for collaboration using *be like*; it is an account or version which might be expanded or retracted after some debate. Significantly, the speaker is not held accountable for that preliminary opinion because it is merely a *version* of an opinion, and it provides an opportunity for further evaluative talk.

In the sexuality education setting, I suggest that these characteristics of quotative *be like* make it a useful linguistic strategy for placing some distance between the self and any ventured opinions. Analysis will reveal that in fact *be like* allows for the pursuit of task-based sexuality education goals, and thus the satisfaction of the rights and obligations inherent in student/teacher roles. It also provides a face-saving ‘escape route’ for the speaker, thus also satisfying the obligation to provide one another with some personal distance from opinions about sexuality.

3. Data and Participants

3.1 Who are the participants?

As stated in section 2.2 above, the participants are all from a Year 12 Health class in New Zealand. This means that they are all either fifteen or sixteen years of age. In 6 below, the participants are listed under pseudonyms, with their gender and ethnic background indicated. All the participants were either born in New Zealand or immigrated as infants. In cases where students have more than one ethnicity in their family heritage, the school database lists them as Ethnicity 1, 2, and so on. The students and their parents are asked to provide this ranking, but it may or may not reflect how the students see themselves. As stated in section 3.1 above, it is difficult to generalise in any way about the gendered or ethnic patterns of *be like* in these data. I provide this information mainly as contextual information for the conversational data:

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	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Ethnicity 1</i>	<i>Ethnicity 2</i>
Olivia	F	Pākehā	n/a
Aroha	F	Māori	Pākehā
Caleb	M	Māori	Pākehā
Jay	M	Cook Island	n/a
Amber	F	Māori	Pākehā
Kate	F	Pākehā	Māori
Hannah	F	Pākehā	n/a
Codey	M	Samoaan	n/a
Luana	F	Fijian	Cook Island
Josh	M	Cook Island	n/a

The other important participant in these conversations is the teacher, Mr. Johnson. He is originally from Australia and has been teaching Health/sexuality education in New Zealand for about six years.

3.2 Selection of data

The sections of dialogue selected for analysis in this paper were chosen by lining up the electronic transcripts of the conversations, and searching for the word *like*. Stretches of dialogue in which 'like' appeared with noticeable density were more closely scrutinised, and it became obvious that there was a very loose but intriguing

connection between a direct focus on sex as a topic for discussion, and the reliance on *be like* as a linguistic strategy. This hunch cannot be backed up with statistical analysis; thus by mentioning it I make no claims about the robustness of this connection. I merely aim to explain how a ‘flag’ was raised next to *be like* by the analyst; a flag that has led to some useful insights into how this term is used in this particular New Zealand setting, and insight into the relational practice of sexuality education classrooms.

Another point worth addressing here is the fact that one participant, Olivia, is at the centre of all of the data samples chosen for analysis. From one point of view, this makes sense because Olivia is a Pākehā girl. As outlined in section 2.1 above, it does tend to be speakers of Pākehā English who use *be like* much more frequently. Although no significant correlation has been found in relation to the sex of those who use *be like* in New Zealand (Buchstaller and D'Arcy 2009: 310-311), ethnographic fieldnotes indicate that in this particular community of practice, Pākehā girls stand out as frequent users of this form. There are numerous examples in the data set of other participants using quotative *be like* in the way we see it being used by Olivia. The other users include Pākehā boys, Māori and Pasifika students of both sexes, and even adults. However, I have decided to analyse three sections of data which all relate to the same classroom exercise because this approach allows the data sections to cohere together into a more readable sequence of events. As it happened, Olivia (often a leader in the class) enthusiastically engaged with this particular exercise and spoke frequently. In the next section, analysis will show how in this classroom, collaboration, evaluation and rapport are performed at least partly via the deployment of *be like* in conversation.

4. Findings

4.1 Extracts One and Two

In terms of context, the conversation from which extracts one and two have been taken was recorded in 2009, as part of an activity in which the students examined advertisements from mainstream magazines and discussed them in groups. The activity asked them to think about how gender and sexuality are represented in the media. Next they shared their ideas with the whole class in a teacher-led discussion.

Discussion in extract one centres on an advertisement for Gwen Stefani perfume, in which the singer can be seen popping out of a perfume bottle as men flock around her. She is wearing a dress, but it is wet (presumably with perfume) and her posture is decidedly sexually provocative. The caption reads, “I want you all over me.” Mr. Johnson asks Olivia to relate to the whole class her group’s ideas

about the ‘message’ of the advertisement. She holds it up for all to view and says that the message to girls is that if you wear this perfume you will have guys ‘all over you’ and you will be physically attractive. She then begins to emphasise Gwen Stefani’s face and posture in the picture, using *be like* to ‘quote’ Stefani’s facial expression. Please refer to Appendix for transcription notation.²

Extract 1 – *She’s like Ah Ah AHHHH*

- 1 Olivia yeah her face was like
- 2 Aroha like all
- 3 Olivia all sexually like (tips head back, eyes half closed, mouth open a bit)
- 4 Caleb aww come GET me
- 5 Jay like ah (.) ah (.) //AHHHH//↻
- 6 Aroha //like// the sound effect
 (1) like
 like ((breathy)) OOO (laughter)
 like how her her her eyes are shut and her mouth is (.)
- 7 Olivia open
 and how she’s (.) her clothes are all wet and see through and
- 8 Aroha yeah her clothes are SEE through
- 9 Olivia revealing

In turns one and three, Olivia uses *be like* to suggest that Gwen Stefani looks sexually provocative in the advertisement. This is a good example of *be like* being used to ‘quote’ gestural content; that is, to re-enact facial expressions and other body language (see section 2.1). There are other linguistic resources Olivia could draw upon (such as “Her face looks like this...”) but instead she uses *be like*, thus framing her contribution as a version of an opinion; one which might require some collaboration from her fellow group members (i.e. Aroha, Caleb and Jay) and evaluation by the rest of the class and the teacher. As it happened, collaboration and evaluation were offered, leading to group rapport.

Caleb obliges and chimes in at turn four, providing an example of *be like* as a tool for quoting thought (“aww come GET me”) and signalling his support for Olivia’s interpretation. Jay then builds on Olivia and Caleb’s sexual interpretation in turn five and says “like ah (.) ah (.) //AAHHHH//↻” imitating sexual vocalisations, a move which supports Olivia’s account. It also demonstrates the use of *be like* with mimetic effects. Aroha collaborates in turn six, saying “Like OOO” in a breathy voice, and there is much laughter from the class. This collaborative characterisation of the woman’s posture and facial expression meets with no resistance from the other participants, and this silence serves as an evaluation. This version of an opinion has been tested and has met with tacit approval.

In terms of rapport, no further face management is necessary in this case. This is because *be like* allows Olivia and her group members to insert distance between their 'selves' and the opinions being offered. Caleb, Jay and Aroha all comply with their obligation (as fellow group members) to collaborate with Olivia, and no one is censured by their classmates for voicing sexually risqué interpretations. This reticence hints at reasons for deploying *be like*, but remains speculative except in contrast with extract two. In extract two, the version offered for testing meets some resistance, resulting in a different scenario.

Leading up to extract two, discussion has turned to a Dolce & Gabbana advertisement in which a woman is lying prone on the ground with a man on one knee beside her, leaning down towards her face. Other men can be seen nearby watching with some enthusiasm, and so the scene is suggestive of sexual violence but not incontrovertibly so. All figures in the picture are fully clothed except for the kneeling man, who is not wearing a shirt. Amber's group is asked to share their ideas.

Extract 2 - *She's like PIN me DOWN and DO me*

- 1 Mr. J what's it LOOK like he's doing
- 2 Amber it looks like he's holding her down∪
and then she's like (.) trying to (.) get up∪
but
- 3 Kate no::: ((mid-pitch and monotone))
- 4 Amber cause he also looks real seedy as well∪
- 5 Olivia it looks like she's enjoying it
- 6 Hannah yeah cause her face∪ like
- 7 Olivia she's like OH yeah∩ ((creaky voice))
- 8 Codey she looks real HORny eh∩
she DOES∩ LOOK at her
- 9 Olivia she's like PIN me DOWN and DO me yeah
- 10 Luana she doesn't look aWAY so you think she looks HORny∪
what's WRONG with you
- 11 Codey look at her FACE ∩
- 12 Luana look at your OWN face
- 13 Mr. J okay (.) good ∪
six or seven people got to have their say just then∪
um (.) what did YOU think when you first saw it Josh∪
- 14 Josh (5) it's
- 15 Codey aBUsive
- 16 Jay hard OUT∩
- 17 Olivia it kinda looks like (.) a SEXual relation where he's kind of in conTROL
and he's sort of like DOing //things to her// sort of like↑
- 18 Codey //yeah∩//

- 19 Olivia but she doesn't look like she's (.) NOT enjoying it↑
20 Kate I THINK she looks like she's gonna make him WORK for it
21 Olivia yeah

In the preface to Olivia's use of *be like* in turn seven, Amber puts forward a description of the scene which leans towards an interpretation of sexual violence. The scooped rising tone that she uses at the end of clauses creates the sense that this is a tentative interpretation, and Kate and Olivia take this as an opening to counter with their own version. Kate, who normally plays the peacekeeper, quite flatly contradicts Amber's account with "no," but her monotone, lingering vowel conveys some reluctance, suggesting perhaps that she is aware of the ambiguity in the picture. Amber offers a further qualification, saying that the man looks "seedy" but Olivia then shifts the focus to the woman's face. In an even tone and medium volume, she points out that the woman on the ground appears to be enjoying it, and this assertion does not necessarily contradict Amber's account. Rather it suggests that whether or not she is being held down, and regardless of how 'seedy' the man might look, the woman appears to like the situation. Olivia then uses *be like* to put forward a version of an opinion, opening up the floor for debate about what the woman's face might be communicating. The other participants orient to the signal, and in spite of their negative evaluation of this version, rapport is maintained.

In turn seven, Olivia quotes the woman's body language, saying "She's like OH yeah↯" and deploying a creaky voice, a mimetic effect which attributes sexual readiness to the woman.³ Others begin to collaborate. In turn eight, Codey suggests that she looks 'horny'; encouraged by this, Olivia then elaborates her first statement by using *be like* once more, saying "She's like PIN me DOWN and DO me" but this time she does not deploy mimetic effects.

Subsequently in turn ten Luana takes issue with this account, pointing out that just because the woman is returning the man's gaze does not mean that the woman is 'horny'. The tone that she takes with Codey in turns ten and twelve is rather aggressive and scolding, saying "What's WRONG with you?" and "look at your OWN face." Ethnographic fieldnotes indicate that such an assertive approach to disagreement is not out of the ordinary for Luana, and her harsh evaluation of the first account stimulates further evaluation, with Mr. Johnson in turn thirteen prompting Josh for his point of view. Josh's turn is interrupted by Codey and Jay in turns fourteen to sixteen, and they support Amber's original characterisation of the scene as sexually violent by describing it as "abusive" and "hard out".

What is highly relevant here is that finally, in turns seventeen to twenty, Olivia and Kate work together to recast the original version of their opinion, merging the two accounts in the wake of these various evaluations. Olivia concedes that it looks like the man is "in control" and "doing things to her" but then she offers

a revised version of the opinion expressed in turn seven. Olivia says “She doesn’t look like she’s NOT enjoying it↑” and the use of a double negative and a rising tone at the end of her turn softens the original (contentious) notion that she looks ‘horny’. Kate takes this rising tone as a cue for collaboration and finishes the transition by shifting sexual agency to the woman, suggesting that she is “gonna make him work for it.” This is a far cry from the original version of their opinion in which the woman was characterised as ready to be ‘pinned down’ and ‘done’; rather she is now characterised as in control. The other participants fail to take issue with this turnaround, and this is particularly significant when one considers Luana’s tendency to disagree forthrightly with others. Her reticence (and indeed that of all participants) tacitly lends support to the notion that versions of opinions offered up using *be like* are invitations for collaboration rather than assertions of truth. Thus the original version can be expanded or revised without censure.

As before, Olivia and Kate are assisted in the management of rapport by the distance that *be like* places between a speaker and a ventured opinion. As stated above, they are able to recast their original assertions without loss of face. This sits in contrast to Codey’s statement in turn eight, in which he goes bald on record about his opinion instead of offering a version of it, stating “She looks real HORny, eh.” He is collaborating with Olivia’s interpretation, but he fails to deploy *be like*, thus placing no distance between self and opinion. Luana’s resultant scolding of him in turn ten stands out as marked in this conversation, and we see that rapport management has not been equally successful for him. In fact, Luana quite directly associates Codey’s self with his opinion, asking “What’s wrong with *you*?” (my emphasis) and thus threatening Codey’s face. These rapport management elements of the deployment of *be like* are further highlighted in extracts 3A and 3B, where the version of an opinion offered for testing meets little explicit resistance, but considerable strain is placed on group rapport nonetheless.

4.2 Extract Three

Extract three contains a report to a third party on a subsequent section of the same classroom discussion. In extract three Olivia reports to a guest facilitator (eight days later) about what was said in reference to some other advertisements. The guest facilitator is Mani Bruce Mitchell, a Wellington-based intersex awareness advocate who had led the students through a discussion that focussed on sexuality from the point of view of someone who was born with a body that sits somewhere on a continuum between male and female (i.e. intersex). The students had spent some time listening to Mani’s own story before breaking into groups to respond to scenarios in which intersex individuals were placed in sexual subject positions. In the particular case below, a mixed-gender group (Caleb, Josh, Kate, and Olivia) had been asked to respond to a scenario in which a person whom they find attractive reveals that they have an unconventional body, with genitalia that challenge the

male/female binary model. In Mani's absence their conversation had turned to perceptions of attractiveness, and how these are often based on perceptions of femininity or masculinity rather than on perceptions of sexual identity. Asked to sum up upon Mani's return, Olivia reports this discussion to Mani. No collaboration is offered by her group, forcing Olivia to engage in face work in order to save face and salvage rapport.

In the preface to Olivia's initial use of the term *be like* in extract 3A, she frames what's coming as possibly controversial by using the term "sorta thing" (end of turn 2). She repeats this term in turns four and six, maintaining this tentative bearing.

Extract 3A – The guys would be like YEAH::: LESBIA:::N

- 1 **Mani** hehe (.) so w- w- w- so what are the main issues for this person
//for our// learnings
- 2 **Olivia** //oh (.)// oh we were sort of talking about how um (2) it's (.) uh
it's hard for like a- like (1) a female because i found with um:::
just people in general if like a female were (.) say a lesbian
and they were (.) attractive and they looked (.) really feminine sorta
thing
- 3 **Mani** mhm↑
- 4 **Olivia** then guys would **be like**
((pitch down, sotto voce yelling)) YEAH::: y'know LESBIA:::N sorta
thing
whereas if they were more MASCuline
- 5 **Mani** mhm↑
- 6 **Olivia** they'd **be like**
euh (.) sorta thing↑
- 7 **Mani** INteresting
- 8 **Olivia** even though that (1) they're attracted to women↑ (.)
- 9 **Mani** //right//
- 10 **Olivia** //they// have sorta no chance really↑
it's lik- yeah
- 11 **Mani** (2) so that's socialising the prejudice
the way we put people into boxes
- 12 **Olivia** yeah (.) //appearances//
- 13 **Mani** //do y-// do you guys agree with that↑ or (looks at the guys)
- 14 **Josh** (laughs softly)
- 15 **Caleb** ((quietly)) yeah

After setting up her contribution as possibly controversial, Olivia then says in turn four that in response to feminine-looking lesbians, “guys would be like YEAH:::LESBIA:::N” and she applies mimetic effect to this quotation of male attitudes. She deepens her voice and pretends (softly) to yell, and thus attributes an aggressively sexual attitude to men. As pointed out above, she then mitigates this assertion somewhat by following it up with “sorta thing” (as she also does in turn six) and seems to be inviting some debate on the subject from the boys in the group or perhaps collaboration from them (or Kate). This is a version of an opinion which is being put up for testing. There is no collaboration forthcoming, but Mani evaluates it as an “interesting” attitude in turn seven and suggests an explanation for the phenomenon (i.e. “socialising the prejudice” – turn eleven). Mani then asks the boys point blank in turn thirteen whether they agree. Caleb responds with a non-committal “yeah,” yet fails to elaborate, and Josh chuckles quietly, suggesting that these two might have ambivalent feelings about this assessment.

These conversation management effects cannot easily be separated from rapport management. I would like to argue that Olivia, by using *be like* to frame her rather critical account of the boys’ attitude as just a version of what happened, is doing more than merely seeking collaboration and evaluation. She is also managing her relationship with Caleb and Josh, who, as young men, are implicated in this assessment. By offering it as an assessment that is up for testing, she attempts to mitigate the threat to their face and keep some distance between herself and this possibly controversial version of an opinion (thus doing some face management of her own). By subsequently not collaborating with her account then, Olivia’s group members place her in a face-threatening position; one which is compounded by the presence of guest facilitator Mani. These rapport management issues provide yet more incentive for what follows in extract 3B (a direct continuation of 3A). Olivia needs to provide evidence in order to salvage rapport, and she does so in the next section, quoting attitudes from the ‘gender in the media’ activity from the week before.

Extract 3B – The girls w’ like euuh! But the guys w’like YEAH!

16 Olivia like what we had um
 one of our health lessons we had (.) pictures↑
 and there was these two girls that were like (.) sort of like (.) UP on
 each other

17 Mani yup

18 Olivia and all us girls were like ((expressively)) euuh↻
 but the guys w’ like ((pitch down, sotto voce yelling)) YEAH
 cause they were in like bra and undies and things
 and there was this other picture
 where it was like (.) five guys all in their underwear sorta like really
 close touching each other and all of us girls went (.) euh

- and it just shows the difference↑ like
- 19 Mani mhm↑
- 20 Olivia guys w' like ((pitch down)) SWEET A::::S with girls all up each other girls w' like (2) //i don't find that attractive//
- 21 Caleb //interesting how// it's (.) yeah
- 22 Mani okay (.) so it's interesting how //yeah//
- 23 Olivia //yeah//
- 24 Kate yeah

The first advertisement that Olivia refers to in turn sixteen is a Remy Martin advertisement in which two women are draped on each other with a chain around them. At the time, the class agreed that the picture was suggestive of “girl on girl action.” Olivia then goes on in turn eighteen to refer to an advertisement from Versace which showed five male models standing in a row, wearing nothing but briefs, and they were pressed up against one another in ways that could be taken as sexually suggestive, but could also be seen as fairly innocent. As Olivia suggests in turn eighteen, when the pictures were held up for viewing in the classroom, it had created quite a stir.

In turn eighteen, Olivia says “All us girls w'like euuh, but the guys w'like YEAH” using mimetic effects to further embellish the attitudes that participants supposedly displayed when the Remy Martin ‘girl-on-girl’ ad was shown. A quick scan of the transcript of the actual conversation is enough to verify that these single ‘words’ (euuh and yeah) are just characterisations because although there were many outbursts and statements, no one actually vocalised those two utterances. She remains reticent about how the boys reacted to the Versace ad, but points out that the girls “went euh” in response to the male-on-male image. She reiterates in turn twenty, using *be like* this time to capture the girls’ attitude in the phrase “I don’t find that attractive”. Again, no collaboration is forthcoming, but Caleb finally offers his agreement by saying it’s “interesting”, and this is backed up by Mani, Kate, and Olivia. Thus Caleb finally endorses Olivia’s version by explicitly evaluating it as interesting, and implicitly evaluating it as accurate to some extent. He also finally aligns to Olivia’s attempts to salvage rapport.

5. Discussion

During the preceding analysis, the separation of aspects of talk into conversational management and rapport management has been a useful heuristic process, allowing for a bifocal switching of the analytic lens. However it has probably been evident that it is a rather strained separation. The two elements cannot be collapsed into one another, yet in this case at least, they frequently

coincide and intersect. *Be like* does conversational/rapport work that is useful to the participants in these discussions of sexuality

The framing of opinions as versions for testing does indeed stimulate collaboration and evaluation, but there are rapport management incentives for doing so. By using *be like* during discussions of sexuality the participants are able to place some distance between self and opinions about sexuality, thus permitting them to save face and attend to the face needs of others. At the same time they are able to get on with the transactional goals of the classroom activity and with fulfilling their rights and obligations as class members and peers. The freedom that *be like* provides for the later modification or retraction of versions of opinion provides similar affordances. This freedom serves conversational needs by signaling to the participants the tentative nature of opinions being expressed so that they can orient to these signals accordingly, permitting changes of tack or turnarounds. It serves rapport management needs via the same orientations, permitting speakers to forge ahead without fear of threats to face. In the end the transactional goals of the classroom are well served by all of these elements.

6. Conclusion

One day later in the year, while responding to a question from Mr. Johnson, Hannah seemed to take a long time to articulate her thoughts. When another student reacted to her uncharacteristic hesitancy, her explanation was, "I'm trying not to say *like*." As a normally prolific user of the word, in making this pronouncement Hannah also made a palpable statement. She acknowledged that she is aware of *like's* disputed status and has to some extent bought into the arguments against its prolific use. Juxtaposed with the participants' meaningful usage of *like*, this questioning of its value emphasises an important point. Language has aesthetic qualities as well as utilitarian properties, and so well-informed debates of linguistic aesthetics can certainly be productive.

Early in this article, I suggested that I hoped to avoid getting involved in values-driven debates about the desirability of vernacular *like* in speech. The intention was not to imply that value judgments about language should not be made. As Cameron (1995) has compellingly argued, such value judgments can be persuasive when based on well-defined and logical criteria. What the analysis in this article has hopefully achieved is to add to the growing body of knowledge which demonstrates that use of *be like* is a means to particular social and communicative ends for these young people. Value judgments concerning whether other means could better serve those ends can, therefore, be informed by the facts and analyses presented here in order to steer away from credulity and head towards critical engagement.

Notes

1 Jones and Schieffelin (2007) have documented the crossing of quotative *be like* into interactional instant messaging in the United States context. Participants in the current study took part in an interactional instant messaging discussion of love and desire, chatting for one hundred minutes. However, the transcript contains no examples of vernacular *like*. This is a marked absence when compared with its resplendent use in this community during face-to-face discussions of sexuality. This localised situation hints that one difference with vernacular *like* in New Zealand is that it remains a largely spoken resource at this time.

2 In the following extracts, turns are rendered as one intonation unit per line. Intonation has been marked with arrows at the end of intonation units, but only when it deviates from a standard falling tone. *Be like* has been placed in bold and underlined for ease of location, but these particular markings bear no relation to how the words were spoken. Please refer to Appendix for all other transcription conventions used.

3 In an influential study, speech perception tests were conducted using English test subjects. One of their significant findings was that creaky voice is associated with a relaxed state and a 'high level of intimacy' (Gobl and Chasaide 2000: 182).

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Appendix

Transcription Conventions Used

// Slashes indicate overlapping speech.

word- A hyphen indicates abruptly cut-off speech.

(1) Numbers in parentheses indicate elapsed time of silence in seconds.

(.) A dot in parentheses indicates a tiny gap, less than 1 sec.

:: Colons indicate prolongation of the immediately prior sound. The length of the row of colons indicates the length of the prolongation.

WORD Capitals indicate especially emphasized sounds compared to surrounding talk (including "I").

() Single parentheses contain prosodic contributions - e.g. (laughter).

(()) Double parentheses contain author's descriptions rather than transcriptions.

↑ Indicates rising intonation in the preceding syllable.

∩ Indicates falling and then rising intonation in the preceding syllable.

∪ Indicates rising and then falling intonation in the preceding syllable.