

I'M LOVING IT

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I'm Loving It: Expressing Favorable Opinions in English

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Introduction

Expressing opinions, particularly favorable opinions, in English are all routine for the native speaker. How native speakers form compliments and favorable opinions can be intricate and strange to the non-native speaker. In order to examine how native and high-proficiency speakers of English talk about their personal likes, an observation project was implemented. Findings from this project produced possible patterns that speakers use when expressing favorable circumstances or feelings. The information gathered can also serve as a vital evaluation tool of current ESL textbooks regarding this language feature as well as provide more information to teachers regarding this issue. The observations, analysis, review of texts, and pedagogical implications can be a starting point to improve language instruction to ESL learners.

Comment [s1]: found?

Data Collection

For approximately one month, data was collected regarding how people expressed a favorable opinion. Forty-two tokens were collected over this time frame for analysis. Utterances were recorded as they were overheard in spontaneous conversation. A total of 33 opinions were gathered from females and 9 from males. While a total of 42 tokens expressing likes were observed, some speakers contributed more than one token.

Conversations occurred in a variety of settings including school, work, retail, and private settings. Twelve tokens were collected from conversation held in a public setting, 19 from a private setting, and 12 from a school or workplace setting. Data was collected from random, adult speakers. Adults in their twenties up until their fifties were included in this observation project. Speakers were either native English speakers or high proficiency English speakers who are able to function at the graduate level.

Variants

In collecting the tokens, the variants were grouped into four general categories based on linguistic choices. Two categories were of equal prominence in the findings while two were less frequent. Of the forty two tokens collected, fourteen include the word “like,” fourteen use an adjective to describe the thing being approved of, ten include “love” and then four speakers use an idiomatic expression to express their favorable opinion.

Table one:

Variant categories and distribution

Category	“Like”	“Love”	Adjective	Idiom
number	14	10	14	4
example	“I like your jacket”	“I love it”	“that's awesome”	“I'm into it”

“Ooh I like these”

The first category of variants (n=14) found are tokens that include the word like. In this category, the most common variant is the plain “I like (object)” statement, where the object is the thing liked, such as “your jacket” or “just about anything.” Also in this category are statements that employ a slightly more complex structure, most often modifying with the word “really.” For example, one speaker said “ I really like coconut.” There is one instance in the data of a speaker who uses like in the progressive form, stating: “I'm liking it.”

“This one's delightful”

The other equally prevalent category of variants (n=14) are tokens that describe the object

being approved of with an adjective in either a single word utterance, such as “nice” or, interestingly, a structure of demonstrative pronoun + copular verb (to be) + adjective, such as “that’s awesome” or “this is really good.” In other words, there are no tokens in this category that include a subject noun.

“I (expletive) love pasta”

With slightly fewer occurrences, (n=10) we find tokens where speakers use the stronger “love” instead of “like.” The findings in this category mirror the “like” category with similar occurrences of modification and again, one instance of progressive “loving.” Other tokens include “I love sweet potatoes” and “I love that movie.”

Comment [s2]: ☺

“Ain’t nothin’ wrong with that”

The final, smallest category of variants (n=4) were those where the speaker used an idiomatic expression to describe their opinion. These included such tokens as stating that the object liked is “rocking (the speaker’s) world.” These tokens are a minor part of the data, but never-the-less interesting in their **obscurity**.

Comment [s3]: mmmm, sweet potatoes... (sorry)

Comment [s4]: they are interesting, but I wouldn’t call them obscure. If you collected them at all within the relatively short timeframe and small scope of this project...

Data Analysis

Variants by context of speaker

The first area of interest to the researchers was the social context in which the token occurred. The tokens were observed in three settings: private, public and professional. Those that were classified as private speech tokens were said in settings where the speakers were with friends, their significant other, or roommate and where it was unlikely for them to be overheard by anyone else either at home, on the phone or in a car. Public tokens took place in locations where the conversation could have been easily overheard by people other than the interlocutors,

these tokens still include opinions being given to friends or significant others but also include approval of acquaintances and in one case, in a store, a sales clerk to a customer exchange is recorded. Professional setting tokens were observed in classes or in the department where both researchers work. The interlocutors in these cases see each other as colleagues or classmates, although they may also consider each other friends as well. Table 2 shows the dispersion of these tokens across settings.

Table 2:

Distribution of variants by setting observed

Variant	Private		Public		Professional	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
“like”	n=4	22%	n=4	33%	n=6	50%
“love”	n=6	33.5%	n=1	8%	n=3	25%
Adjective	n=6	33.5%	n=5	42%	n=3	25%
Idiom	n=2	11%	n=2	17%	n=0	0%
Total	n=18	100%	n=12	100%	n=12	100%

It is in the private interactions that the most balance is seen, with none of the four variant categories exhibiting a true dominance. Similarly, in the public setting, where the statement of like or favorable opinion was likely to be overheard, there is some shared dominance between “like” statements (n=4) and adjectives (n=5), together, those account for 75% of the tokens. These are both in contrast to what was observed in professional settings, where 50% (n=6) of the tokens observed were “like” statements, and where no idiomatic expressions were used. It is evident even from these limited findings, that the formality or comfort level of the setting does

Comment [s5]: I really like your definitions of each of these contexts, really clear.

Comment [s6]: huh. weird formatting. At least I could fix this one so I could read it more easily.

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have an impact on the way that people express likes and opinions.

Comment [s7]: very cool. Though I'd hedge this statement a bit more as you really don't have enough data to make this strong of a statement

Next, the data was analyzed in terms of the geographical background of the speaker, as seen in table 3.

Table 3:

Distribution of variants by region of origin of speaker

Variant	International		North		South		Midwest	
“like”	n=5	(35.7%)	n=0	(0%)	n=6	(31.6%)	n=2	(33.3%)
“love”	n=5	(35.7%)	n=2	(66.7%)	n=3	(15.8%)	n=1	(16.7%)
Adjective	n=4	(28.6%)	n=1	(33.3%)	n=7	(36.8%)	n=2	(33.3%)
Idiom	n=0	(0%)	n=0	(0%)	n=3	(15.8%)	n=1	(16.7%)
Total	n=14	(100%)	n=3	(100%)	n=19	(100%)	n=6	(100%)

Comment [s8]: I probably would have combined North and Midwest. But since you are focusing on South vs. International, that's okay. You could have even just done US vs. international.

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As might have been predicted, as the researchers both live and work in Atlanta with international colleagues, the two largest populations observed were southern and international speakers. As these are similar in number of tokens observed, the following will try to exhibit how these two populations usage of positive opinion statements may be compared.

The first observed difference between the two groups is that the non-native speakers were not observed using any idiomatic expressions to talk about likes, but that among the other three categories, their use was quite balanced, with a difference of only one token splitting adjective usage from “like” and “love.” Southern speakers were observed to prefer statements using adjectives, which they used 36.8% of the time and “like” (31.6%) with the other third of the tokens observed split between “love” statements (15.8%) and idiomatic expressions (15.8%.)

As mentioned above, the greater data set showed that use of variant was observed to depend at least somewhat on the setting where the token was observed. Thus, with the two previous observations in mind, the data was examined more closely, combining the aspects of setting and comparing how international speakers compare with their southern counterparts in choice related to setting (see table 4.)

Table 4:
comparison of international and southern speakers use of variants by context

Variant	International			Southern		
	Private	Public	Professional	Private	Public	Professional
“like”	1	1	4	3	3	-
“love”	4	-	-	2	-	1
Adjective	1	2	1	3	2	2
Total	6	3	5	9*	7*	3

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**total includes idioms.*

From this data, limited as it is, we note two specific things. The first is that although international speaker informants were observed a similar number of times to give favorable opinions in private and professional situations, there is no such balance in the southern speakers repertoire, where it is evident that speaking of likes and favorable opinions appears to be more frequent in private settings. The other noteworthy observation is to mention that there is a clear preference in the international speakers to use “like” in professional settings, while in private settings to use “love.”

ESL Textbooks and Likes

As it can be seen from the observations, there are many ways to express a like or favorable opinion. Whether it is to compliment someone, voice a personal opinion, or express feeling, expressing what someone likes is commonplace for native and high proficiency speakers. Those learning English need to be exposed to such devices. Many English as a Second Language (ESL) textbooks address the linguistic need to express favorable opinions. Five ESL textbooks targeting various teaching contexts were examined to see how materials presented the target language. While many commercial textbooks do address how to discuss likes, word choice and scenarios are often limited.

The first textbook examined was *Longman ESL Literacy* published by Pearson-Longman (2006). This textbook is intended for low-literacy learners who are only beginning to read and write in English. As expected, the material presented is basic and little variation is given. Learners are only given the language to say and write, "I like" (p. 133). This is presented in a unit about food and drink so all of the context surrounds those topics. Students are also shown how to express likes in first and third person. While it is a simple representation of this language feature, it is beneficial that students are exposed to this early on in their language learning so they can later expand on this feature of language.

Foundations published by Pearson-Longman (2007), geared to beginner students who need general or vocational English, again focused on the basic, yet level appropriate, usages of like. Students are taught how to say they like a particular activity using *like* + infinitive such as, "I like to play soccer" or "I like to go to the park" (p. 209). *Side by Side Plus Book 2* published by Pearson Longman (2008) which also target a more communicative, yet high-beginner

audience, discusses how to express that someone likes to do a particular activity. While *Foundations* only gives a few generic sentences for students to use as examples, *Side by side Plus* gives a variety of stories that use the target language *like to*. It uses simple phrases such as “Robert likes to cook” but also raises awareness of degrees of like using phrases such as “Jonathan really likes to write” (p. 3). Example question forms for the target language were also provided.

One of the most comprehensive ESL texts that was perused was *New Person to Person* published by Oxford University Press (1995). This book focuses on developing communicative skills in beginning students. In the unit entitled, “How do you like the city?” students are given sample dialogues in which likes and dislikes were expressed. Phrases such as “I love it,” “I really like,” and “This one looks great” are given for students to use (p. 33, 36). Students are also provided with a list of topics to discuss and state their opinions.

The last textbook that was explored was *Interactions 2* published by McGraw-Hill (2007). This text targets English for Academic Purposes community. In *Interactions* a section was included to give students an idea of how to express their likes and dislikes. It explains that there are varying degrees of like which include “like very much,” “like a little,” and “neutral.” The text suggests that students use phrases such as “It's fantastic,” “I love it,” and “I'm crazy about it” to convey a strong, favorable opinion. For a little less extreme expression, learners are given “I like it” and “It's nice.” Later, learners are exposed to how to formulate an appropriate question when asking about what someone likes- (p. 178). Overall, this seems as though it would be helpful to students. It is clear and provides a better range of language options for expressing a favorable opinion about a variety of topics. Animals, flowers, places to eat, singers, and music

are all shown as acceptable topics about which to express an opinion, which is different than what the other texts typically use as objects which are liked. Matching activities are also given as practice for students. Students could match a sentence that expresses an opinion with the correct definition. For example, "I'm crazy about it!" would be matched with "I love it" (p. 175). Overall, *Interactions* gives the most comprehensive and balanced lesson for teaching students how to express their like of something.

Pedagogical Implications

From observations to the study of ESL textbooks, many pedagogical implications can be made regarding the expression of favorable opinions. It can be seen that native and high-proficiency speakers use a variety of language to express their likes. Classroom teachers need to be aware of how speakers express these concepts so they can best equip students. In order to be both better speakers and listeners, ESL learners need to be exposed to how speakers express themselves in authentic situations. The data collected showed that no non-native speaker used idiomatic phrases to express that they liked or enjoyed something. However, this is a commonly used feature for learners to at least have awareness of. While it might not be worthwhile for students to learn, "Cornbread, ain't nothing wrong with that," frequently used idiomatic phrases such as, "It's rockin' my world," and "I'm into it" would be beneficial for students. ESL textbooks could also update their lessons to incorporate the many variations that were observed.

Students should also be made aware that while native speakers express favorable opinions about activities and personal interests, they often use it to make compliments to others. Giving compliments should be carefully approached as there are many pragmatic considerations; however, students need to understand when they are being complimented and how to give a

Comment [s9]: 😊

sincere and appropriate compliment to those around them. Data from the observations showed that most tokens were taken from a compliment context which alludes to the importance of complimenting in American culture.

Finally, teachers need to be careful to explain that the favorable opinions are expressed differently in different contexts. Classmates discussing clothing would discuss similar topics with faculty members or employers very differently. Students who know this and gain practice interacting within different contexts and registers can potentially be more successful and avoid embarrassing social faux pas. ESL teachers should ensure that students are least exposed to these areas so they can be well-rounded, competent users of the language.

Great! I assume you didn't mention gender, ethnicity, etc., because you had too little variation in the sample? Anyway, I found this really clear and well-analyzed. It rocked my world. :-) Grade:

A

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