

Like, That, and Whatever: Consciousness, Child Development, and the Misuse of Words

By John Wulsin

If children grow up with the habit of seeing and describing clearly in speech the true connections between things, then they will be able to think more clearly in high school and to act more consciously in adult life.

Parents and teachers, we need to prepare our children and students to navigate through the everchanging, turbulent waters of the present and future. One of the best tools we can give our children to meet and thrive amidst unforeseen changes is a proper use of language. Speech is an expression of consciousness. It is also a shaper of consciousness. Teachers at every level—nursery, kindergarten, lower school, and high school—and parents need to work together in forming the way our children speak.

My concern arises not out of a belief in an absolute right or wrong in the use of language. I am not a grammarian speaking out against anti-grammarians. This is not the last-ditch cry of a defender of a grammatical Alamo, holding out against the changing language of the masses. Language always changes. Our language changed more in the Elizabethan period than in almost any other time. Poets need to be changing, revitalizing language. There has often been a healthy interchange between the language of the streets (and fields) and the language of the groves of academe, and interchange between the established language patterns of the past and the percolating slang of the present. Such tension is necessary for the language to stay alive. Today, the uniformity of our pervasive mass media is a major new force deadening that vital interchange.

As Waldorf parents and teachers, we need to choose what is timeless and essential in our language. We need not take a stand on one side or the other of the perennial polarities of traditional and progressive, classical and romantic, lawful and free, established and pioneer, past and future. We are concerned primarily with the healthy development of the child into his or her individuality, and into a healthy relationship

with the world and with other human beings. Thus we in Waldorf Education work both traditionally and progressively, classically and romantically, lawfully and artfully. We must draw on the past to prepare to meet the future.

At various points during the last thirty years, six major changes in usage began to creep into American English. Now firmly established in day-to-day speech, particularly

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among the young, each of these usages involves a dangerous confusion. Together they are, I think, signs and creators of a degenerating consciousness, rather than of a new, vital, and healthy consciousness. They concern the following words: 1) *like* 2) *who/that* 3) *whatever* 4) *good/well* 5) *each one/their* 6) *me/I*. If we teachers and parents understand the nature of these dangerous confusions, we can work together to help develop our children's emerging and enduring consciousness in a healthy way. I will address in this article the first three of these new language habits.

Like

A recent discussion among the faculty members at the Green Meadow Waldorf School revealed that their most urgent concern about the speech of the children is the pervasive abuse of the word *like*. *Like* is a fine word. It is usually a preposition, with a noun or pronoun as its object: like a rock, like a bird, like her.

The advertising firm for Winston-Salem cigarettes in the 1950s is probably responsible for jarring *like* loose from its clear role as a preposition and establishing it as a conjunction, followed by a clause containing a noun and a verb. "Winston tastes good *like* a cigarette should." That role of conjunction, for a clause, had been performed, ever since Homer, primarily by *like's* good cousin, *as*. In fact, one could say that Homer gave the clearest and finest mission to the word *like* and its companion *as*—or, to be exact, to the words in classical Greek that correspond to our English *like* and *as*.

A simile gives expression to an important capacity of Western mind, one that was emerging in ancient Greece. This is the ability to recognize and to state that two normally dissimilar objects are in fact similar. A is like B. This woman is like a tree. "Thetis . . . rising like a dawn mist from the sea into a cloud . . . , soared aloft in heaven to high Olympus" (Homer's *Iliad*, Book One, 11.496-99). The relationship is not one of mathematical equality, that is, $A=B$, but rather one of comparison. One exercises the imagination, rationally. The fact of the similarity is stated explicitly, through language. The possible similarities usually remain implicit, active in the imagination of the reader.

When the similarity is recognized, not simply between two objects but between two activities or clauses, then the word *as* is used. Homer's extended similes can become quite developed, taking on a life of their own. For example:

*From the camp
The troops were turning out now,
thick as bees
That issue from some crevice in a
rock face,
Endlessly, pouring forth, to make
a cluster
And swarm on blooms of summer
here and there,
Glinting and droning, busy in
bright air.
Like bees innumerable from ships
and huts.
Down the deep foreshore streamed
those regiments
Toward the assembly ground—
and Rumor blazed
Among them like a crier sent
from Zeus.*

(Homer's *Iliad*, Book Two, 11. 81-90,
tr. Fitzgerald)

In either case, the normal simile with *like*, or the extended simile with *as*, it is absolutely crucial that both the speaker/writer and the listener/reader are clear which image is the actual subject (called by literary scholars the "tenor") and which image is the "vehicle" that helps us better understand the original, actual subject. In the extended simile the actual subject is almost always a particular activity in a particular place, while the "vehicle" is almost always an activity which can take place almost anywhere, at any time, even forever. There will always be, we hope, bees swarming on blooms of summer. The Homeric extended simile points to an eternal dimension within the life and activities of mortals on earth. One might even say that the Greeks, being guided in life on earth by these great stories, were, through similes, not only shown the connections between things on earth but were also reminded of the timeless realm from which they themselves had come.

Now that we have a historic-linguistic context for the role of *like* in our language and literature, we can turn our attention to the role of *like* in the life of the developing child. In Waldorf Education our concern for the child is that he or she incarnate as healthily as possible into life. We nourish the young child artfully through imagination, always trying to guide him or her into the reality of the world in which we live, and also into the reality of the world which he or she will help create.

The child, especially in fifth and sixth grades, develops thinking capacities that made their appearance first in ancient

Greece and Rome. These have to do with a healthy and balanced relationship to the reality of the world. One cannot become so lost in the swarming bees that one forgets that actually the soldiers are running to the ships. The simile is meant to bring us further inside the original image, not to take us away from it. In literary language the "vehicle" is meant to illuminate the "tenor," not to eclipse it. We could also say, as parents and educators, that the simile should help us more fully "incarnate," that it should bring our spirit and soul in harmony with our physical body and the real world, rather than create a dissonance.

Now, what happened with *like* about thirty years ago? Here is one amateur linguist's version of the recent career of *like*. In the late 1960s American society became polarized. The hardening asphalt of the cool fifties was rent asunder by mere flowers—the "flower children" of the dawning new "Age of Aquarius." In the opposition between repressed, oppressive establishment and uninhibited, liberated hippies, young people sought to expand their consciousness, up and away from the bedrock of day-to-day reality. Drugs gave the illusion of further expanding consciousness, to the extent that, for some, the connection to actual, quotidian reality evaporated.

In literary terms, the conscious connection between the actual image and the figurative image, between the tenor and the vehicle, between the actuality and the illuminating perspective, was lost. In terms of "A is like B," B lost A.

"Like, I went to the like store, and, you know, like I met

like Freddie." The speaker of this sentence is living completely in the world of the illuminating perspective. Yet there is no contrasting reality to illuminate. There is no darkness to shed light on. The light has no bearing; the light is lost. But there is no good without evil. As William Blake said, "Without Contraries, there is no Progression."

The arbitrary proliferation of *like*, like a virus or cancer, robs the speaker and the listener of the vitality of the dynamic of clear polarity. The virus of misused *like* gives the speaker the illusion of living completely in the "illuminating perspectives," yet the irony is that in fact it is only a weakened shadow of day-to-day reality. It is not at all that larger timeless dimension of the vehicle in Homer's extended similes.

Young children don't need explanations; they just need to hear the correct usage after they have used the incorrect one, and then they need to imitate it.

Unfortunately, the drug culture of the sixties spawned a senseless proliferation of *like*, so that today it permeates the verbal atmosphere in which the children grow up. The insidious danger is that, like chemical, atmospheric pollution, the misuse of *like* will seriously interfere with the healthy incarnation of the child. The growing child needs to find a vital, conscious, and true connection

to the earth. This misuse of *like* incarnates rather than incarnates the growing child, pulls him or her away from living actuality.

I can well imagine that at a future stage of development, we will no longer need the word *like* to help us perceive and experience the connections and similarities between things. We will be able to experience the thing in itself and will not need to have something else illuminate it for us. But at this time *like* does help illuminate our world for us and for our children. If children grow up with the habit of seeing and describing clearly in speech the true connections between things, then they will be able to think more clearly in high school and to act more consciously in adult life. They will be able to make connections consciously and thus allow the eternal to permeate the particulars of their lives. In this, the correct use of the splendid word *like* can make a crucial difference.

Who/That, Which

"Any person that speaks this way to another is highly inconsiderate."

"Any girl that stays quiet in class because of fear is being unfair to herself."

To put it simply, a person is a *who*. A place, thing, or idea is a *that* or a *which*. Yet the tendency to dehumanize is powerful and pervasive—in media advertising, in the computer world, in business, the armed forces, in prisons, in public school, and even—through careless use of language—in our own Waldorf schools.

The problem is not with *that* or *which* as adjectives. There is nothing wrong with

"Which boy finished his work?" or "I see that child in the green shirt." But there is something wrong with "the boy that finished his work." It refers to a human being as a thing. The proper use of the relative pronoun is the simplest way to differentiate clearly between what is human and what is not human: the person *who* or *whom* . . . , the thing *that* or *which* Each time a child hears himself or herself referred to as *who*, the child subconsciously experiences a confirmation of his or her humanity. Every individual lives with the question "Who am I?" At the least, the corollary answer should be "I am who."

Whatever

This third grammatical confusion is the most recent, the simplest, and perhaps the most insidious. Where has it come from, this trail word, this tail word of the 1990s? I wonder.

Whatever has perfectly respectable uses, as a pronoun and as an adjective. In "Do whatever you think is best," or "Whatever happens, keep the faith," it is an exemplary pronoun. In "Whatever merits the work has . . ." or "Whatever the reason, she refuses to go," it functions nicely as an adjective.

As a pronoun, *whatever* is either the subject or the object of a verb, a dynamic part of a thought. As an adjective, *whatever* clearly qualifies or modifies a particular noun.

"She can come if she likes. Whatever." "I think that's bad, whatever." "I might do it—whatever." How is this word working in the sentences? It does not seem to be working as any recognizable part of speech.

Maybe it comes closest to an exclamation like "hooray" or "uh-oh." How is it affecting or reflecting the rest of the sentence? It does not affirm or reinforce. It does not ask for elaboration. It does not negate, does not take a stance in opposition. This word, used in a manner that is almost alien to the functions of the eight parts of speech, seems to undo, to diffuse, to virtually invalidate whatever the previous thought has been!

What is the appropriate punctuation to follow this floating *whatever*? It is not a period

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that ends a statement. It is not a question mark that expresses the need for open exploration or consideration. It is not an exclamation point of either excitement or command. The punctuation mark for the tailing *whatever* would have to be something like a squiggle, perhaps a drooping squiggle.

Essentially, *whatever*, used this way, is a cop-out word. *Whatever* articulates the epitome of moral relativism, of indifference, of impotence. *Whatever* is the attitude of the twenty bystanders who see and hear a woman being murdered, without either coming forward to stop it or even lifting a finger to call the police. *Whatever* is the attitude that words do not have meaning, and hence, it implies that what one just said doesn't matter. If what one does or says has no

meaning or importance, what one feels or thinks also has no meaning or importance. And if that's the case, why live?

This use of *whatever* as a negating trailer is insidious. Whereas the misuse of *like* is like a virus causing our thinking to disintegrate, this misuse of *whatever* is like a virus alienating us from our own attitudes, thoughts, and actions.

The word *whatever* always has to be followed by something. And whatever this something is, it matters. The point is to name it and to find one's relationship to it. Then every thought, every word, every feeling, every action matters. Then we, and the world we inhabit, become fully alive. Children need to learn to use *whatever* as a valid pronoun or adjective and not as a cop-out word. This will help them develop clarity of thinking, the will to complete a thought, as well as a consciousness in the soul that is profoundly different from the attitude that "anything goes."

These then are three major and insidious misuses of language that permeate speech today. What can we, as parents and teachers, do to protect our children from them and from their effects? First, we need to be sure that we ourselves are not guilty of these misusages. Second, we should gently correct our children whenever we hear them misuse words such as *like*, *that*, and *whatever*. Children learn to speak from us. Imitating their elders, they form their habits early. We need to help those habits become clear, strong, true habits that support the process of healthy incarnation. Young children don't need explanations; they just need to

hear the correct usage after they have used the incorrect one, and then they need to imitate it.

We probably will have to point out time and again that *like* is a word that needs something in front of it and something after it; that *who*, not *that*, is to be used when referring to a human being; and that *whatever* needs to be followed by a noun or clause, so that a complete thought is formed. But it is very important that we have the will and the patience to do so.

Among themselves our young people will continue to speak their own peer lingo, which often includes "likety-like" speech and the devaluing use of *whatever*. We cannot, of course, affect that. They will enjoy their slang jargon. That's fine. Some of it is new and vital language. But, if we are clear in our own speaking at home and at school, and correct them gently when necessary, they will greatly benefit.

Let us remember that we want our children to be able to play in the language, to play with the language, to make up new language, to learn the laws of the language, to work as freely and flexibly as possible within those laws, to love the art of language, to go beyond the laws when artistically appropriate, to use the language so that it helps all of us to think clearly, to feel fully, to act truly. Yet, we want to recognize when certain developments pose real dangers. When we do recognize such dangers, how we speak—and how we encourage the children to speak—can make a crucial difference. *