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SECTION: NEWS; Pg. 11A**LENGTH:** 524 words**HEADLINE:** **Linguist lashes back:** It's, like, no big deal**BYLINE:** Deborah **Tannen****BODY:**

Being an academic who writes for the popular audience is like having two sets of friends who hate each other. You hear hurtful misconceptions about each group from members of the other. From non-academics, I hear a lot of academy-bashing, especially aimed at scholars who write in academese. Another popular target is teen-agers speaking what a colleague calls "like English." Both attacks are founded on misconceptions.

I know the "like" attack well.

On talk shows, I often get calls from parents bemoaning their children's like-filled speech. A prominent newspaper columnist, frustrated by my refusal to condemn his son, insisted, "It isn't like a tree. It is a tree."

USA TODAY's Joe Urschel recently jumped on that bandwagon. And with one foot there, he planted his other foot on the other bandwagon: After ridiculing teen-age girls' conversation, he quoted from an article in a scholarly journal about the process of linguistic change by which "like" came to introduce dialogue (as in "And I'm like 'Who, me?' "). He concluded, "The guardians of our language are, like, almost as incomprehensible as our kids."

Never mind that linguists aren't the guardians of our language but experts who analyze how language works and develops. When the linguists wrote their article, they weren't writing for Joe Urschel, or USA TODAY readers, or college students. They were writing for other linguists, who have no more trouble understanding their technical language than a teen-ager has understanding her friends.

That's the point about language. Groups of people develop distinctive ways of talking or writing to

communicate meanings particular to their group, and to create a group identity.

A teen-ager who sounded like her parents when talking to her friends would lose all her friends. Throwing in "like" at the right time makes her sound right to other teen-agers.

It's no more illogical than adults throwing "if you will," "in fact," or "the fact of the matter is" into sentences that make perfect sense without those phrases.

You don't talk the same way in different settings any more than you go to work dressed for a picnic. Likewise for writing. You don't write a love letter that sounds like a business letter if you want to keep your love.

If most readers of *You Just Don't Understand* read my scholarly books and articles, they would find them incomprehensible. But without the many articles and books I've written and read in academese, I wouldn't have been able to write the book that so many people have found fun and helpful to read.

Joe Urschel thinks parents are wasting "fat tuition" because college professors write scholarly articles in language he can't understand. Is he wasting his money paying doctors because he finds articles in medical journals incomprehensible?

Parents should lay off their teen-age kids about "like." Most will miraculously stop sounding like teen-agers when they stop being teen-agers. And it's time to stop taking cheap shots at academics for using specialized technical language like any other professionals. As a teen-ager might say, gimme a break!

GRAPHIC: PHOTO; b/w, Jerry Bauer

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