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Gender and Style: The Discourse Particle *like* in the Corpus of Spoken Professional American English

Yoko Iyeiri,¹ Michiko Yaguchi, and Hiroko Okabe

Abstract

The present paper discusses the discourse particle *like*, as in: *right so I'm just like below the allotments just now.*² Apparently, the use of this discourse item is conditioned by stylistic and sociolinguistic factors. We have investigated the Corpus of Spoken Professional American English and found that the discourse particle *like* is attested in the *exploratory* talk³ of the national meetings of mathematics tests and reading tests, both held in the 1990s, to a noticeable extent. By contrast, the *expository* talk of White House press conferences and faculty meetings of the University of North Carolina provides far fewer examples of the discourse particle *like*. As for gender differences, the same item is more frequently employed by male speakers. This result does not necessarily support the generally accepted view, which argues that it is a characteristic feature of young female speech. Finally, we investigated the relationship between the discourse particle *like* and other hedges, and reached the conclusion that the existence of other hedging items does not seem to hinder the occurrence of *like*.

1. Introduction

Fowler's Modern English Usage revised by Burchfield (1998: 458-459) spares two pages for various uses of *like* before it continues to the nominal and verbal uses of *like*. The entry includes: (i) *like* as a conjunction; (ii) *like* as a preposition; (iii) a hated parenthetical use of *like*; and (iv) *like* in idiomatic phrases (e.g. *like anything, like always*). It is the third type, i.e. the "hated" parenthetical use of *like* that the present paper is interested in, although *like* as a conjunction and *like* as a preposition are also considered

in the discussion below. Ultimately, (i)–(iv) all share the core meanings of approximation and illustration, and therefore are classified under the same entry by Burchfield (1998).⁴ (Type (iv), in our view, falls under the classifications of (i) and (ii).) In the present paper, we will use the term “the discourse particle *like*” to refer to the “hated parenthetical use of *like*.”

The discourse particle *like* is often “hated” indeed, although it has a fairly long tradition in the history of the English language as the following illustration cited from Fanny Burney’s *Evelina* (1778) shows:

- (1) Father grew quite uneasy, *like*, for fear of his Lordship’s taking offence.⁵

This is the first citation in *The Oxford English Dictionary* (and also in *Fowler’s Modern English Usage*), which gives the labels of “dialectal and vulgar” to this usage (s.v. *like*). It also states that *like* of this usage is a meaningless interjection and expletive. It is not meaningless, as we discuss later in Section 3,⁶ while it is true that it has no grammatical relation and can be removed without affecting the syntactic structure of the sentence.⁷ Example (2) is cited from the Corpus of Spoken Professional American English (henceforth CSPAE),⁸ whose data we shall analyse in the present paper:

- (2) *Like* take out 2C for strand A and put that in there, but then give the reference back to where ... (CommM797 [Mathematics, 7/1997], male)

As Romaine and Lange (1991: 270) point out, it takes time before new usages are acknowledged in society. In relation to *like*, they first refer to the conjunctive use of *like*, stating: “it is widely in use and has now gained marginal acceptability.”⁹ They then mention the discourse particle *like*, which is our main concern, and say that “[it] has probably been used for over a century, though only now are scholars studying it seriously.”¹⁰ It is indeed attracting scholarly attention nowadays, mostly in the field of sociolinguistics. So far, it seems to be a general assumption that the discourse particle *like* is a linguistic feature of young women. For instance, Siegel (2002: 43) remarks:

United States’ English speakers I have asked and newspaper columnists (Johnson 1998, Lewis and Stanton 1996) certainly seem to believe that *like* use is most prevalent among very young women, and very young women often seem not to be confident about their assertions.

Although she does not support the argument about the lack of confidence of young women in the end, she does agree that the discourse particle *like* is more commonly encountered in female utterances than in male ones.¹¹ The present paper will investigate the CSPAE to see if it is indeed favoured by female speakers.¹² It will also discuss the relationship between the occurrence of the discourse particle *like* and stylistic differences of language, to see if its use is indeed “hated” and “vulgar” as Burchfield (1998: 459) and *The Oxford English Dictionary* (s.v. *like*) suggest.

2. The CSPAE and the CSPAE GENDER

The present analysis is based upon the CSPAE, which contains over two million words recorded in the 1990s in the United States and consists of seventeen files in four different settings: (i) press conferences held at the **White House** and other locations; (ii) **Faculty meetings** of the University of North Carolina; (iii) national meetings on **Mathematics** tests; and (iv) national meetings on **Reading** tests. To conduct research into gender variation, we extracted the utterances by men and by women only and discarded the rest.¹³ We shall call the resultant corpus the CSPAE GENDER. See the table below:

Table 1. Four different settings in the CSPAE GENDER

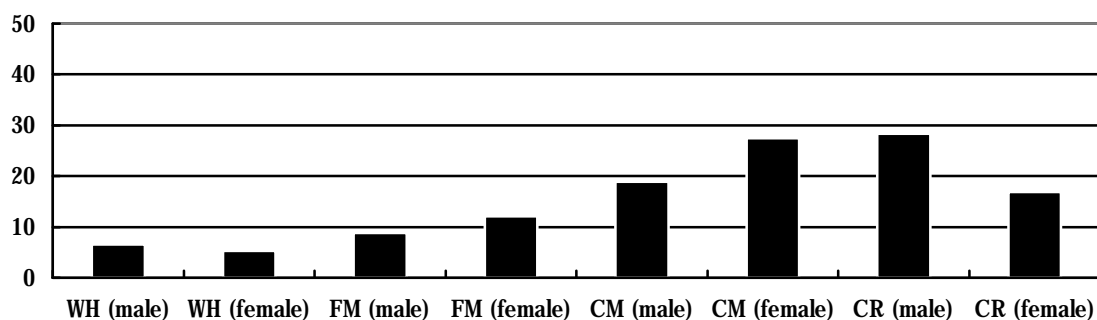
White House		Faculty meetings		Mathematics		Reading	
Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female

The present paper forms a part of our larger project in which we investigate style and gender differences in the CSPAE, and our research so far has revealed a number of interesting findings, some of which are relevant to this study. On the whole, the White House press conferences illustrate the most formal setting of the four, followed by the Faculty meetings, national meetings of Mathematics tests, and national meetings of Reading tests in this order. Iyeiri, *et al.* (2004a) analyse the occurrences of *different from* and *different than*, reaching the conclusion that the stigmatized use of *different than* is the least frequent in the White House files and the most frequent in the Reading files. Within each setting, women are more inclined than men to avoid the use of *different than*. Similarly, Yaguchi, *et al.* (2004) find that the use of *sort of* and *kind of* increases as we move from the White House through Faculty and Mathematics to Reading. Supposing that *sort of* and *kind of* are a typical feature of casual speech, the finding will indicate that the Reading files illustrate the most casual setting of the four. Within each setting, men use these phrases more often than women. Furthermore, Iyeiri,

discourse particle *like* alike. This is why *Fowler's Modern English Usage* treats the preposition *like*, the conjunction *like*, and the discourse particle *like*, under the same entry. In the following case where *like* is a preposition, for example, what the “Superintendent” may be interested in is not exactly what is meant by “that,” but something similar. Thus, the concept of approximation is expressed:

- (4) ... if your Superintendent would be interested in something *like* that.
(CommR6b97 [Reading, 6/1997], female)

In the present section, therefore, we will investigate the overall frequencies of *like* in general, including the preposition *like* (which is the most frequent), the conjunction *like*, and the discourse particle *like*. This is to see the extent to which the concepts of approximation and illustration linked to *like* are involved in the language of different styles contained in the CSPAE GENDER. Otherwise, one cannot see whether the discourse particle *like* is indeed favoured by women (or men) or whether the frequent occurring of the same item simply arises from the abundant use of *like* itself. Figure 2 below shows the frequencies of various uses of *like* (i.e. the preposition *like*, the conjunction *like*, and the discourse particle *like*) per 10,000 words in different files of the CSPAE GENDER:¹⁵



WH: White House; FM: Faculty meetings; CM: Mathematics; CR: Reading

Figure 2. Frequencies of *like* used in various ways (per 10,000 words)

It is apparent from Figure 2 that there is a close relationship between the style of language and the occurrence of *like* in general. The discourse particle *like* is often considered to be a feature of informal speech, which is perhaps true,¹⁶ while the above graph indicates that the overall use of *like* at least (i.e. the preposition *like* and the conjunction *like* as well as the discourse particle *like*) is not restricted in the professional

speech of the CSPAE. Especially, it is more frequent in the *exploratory* talk of the national meetings of Mathematics and Reading, whose language is less formal than that observed in White House press conferences and Faculty meetings.¹⁷

As for gender distinctions, the general tendency is for women to favour the use of *like* more than men, although this does not apply to the Reading files, where *like* is more abundantly used by men than by women. We do not know the reason for the oddity of the female files of the Reading tests. It may simply be accidental or related to other factors (e.g. content matters of the meetings), for which we have insufficient evidence.¹⁸ Apart from this clear exception, women are more inclined to use *like* of various usages in their utterances than men.¹⁹ If the discourse particle *like* is more numerous in female speech as advocated in previous studies, this can be attributed, at least partly, to the general tendency of *like* as described in this section. By contrast, if the discourse particle *like* is less numerous in female speech than in male speech, the result will be noteworthy, in that women are more inclined than men to avoid this particular usage of *like*.

4. The discourse particle *like*

The present section discusses the occurrences of the discourse particle *like* from the perspective of style and gender differences, using the CSPAE GENDER. It occurs at various positions, almost like an adverb. In fact, Biber, *et al.* (1999: 560-563) treat it as a stance adverb. In the following, we have cited two examples from our data, one occurring intrusively and the other at the sentence-initial position:

(5) And then, we asked *like* four and one, four multiple choice, one short constructed response. (CommR6b97 [Reading, 6/1997], male)

(6) *Like*, instead of advanced, basic, proficient, and whatever, it's like meets the standard, meets the standard with excellence, barely meets the standard. (CommM597 [Mathematics, 5/1997], female)

It also occurs sentence-finally, although we could not come across any clear instances of this case.²⁰ As Romaine and Lange (1991: 248) consider, the sentence-final one perhaps indicates that the preceding statement is simply an illustrative example.²¹

All these examples are discussed in the present section, while there are some which we do not deal with. The following are related constructions, but not considered in this section, as we limit “the discourse particle *like*” to cases where *like* is used as an

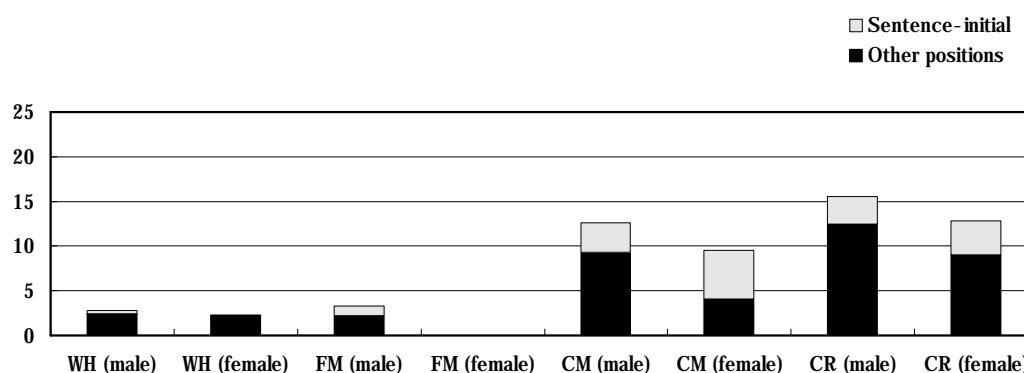
independent particle:

(7) *It's like* I've been at this 28 years. (CommR6b97 [Reading, 6/1997], female)

(8) They look at that. And *they're like*, no, we're not doing this. (CommM8a97 [Mathematics, 8/1997], male)

The similarity between *it's like* as in (7) and the sentence-initial particle *like* has been discussed in literature (e.g. Schourup, 1985: 59-61). It is very much discourse-oriented indeed, but it is outside the purview of our statistics in this section, as it contains a clausal structure.²² Likewise, (8) is outside the scope of our statistics in this section, although this is also interesting from the perspective of discourse. It illustrates what researchers call quotative *like*. *They're like* in this example signifies “they say.”²³

As mentioned in the Introduction, the discourse particle *like* is “hated” according to Burchfield (1998: 459) and considered to be “dialectal and vulgar” according to *The Oxford English Dictionary* (s.v. *like*). However, it is not at all restricted in the professional speakers’ utterances of the CSPAE GENDER, at least as far as the national meetings of Mathematics tests and Reading tests in it are concerned. Figure 3 below displays the proportions of the discourse particle *like* to the entire sample of *like* (i.e. the preposition *like* + the conjunction *like* + the discourse particle *like*):²⁴



WH: White House; FM: Faculty meetings; CM: Mathematics; CR: Reading

Figure 3. Proportions of the discourse particle *like* to the entire sample of *like* (%)

Several things are clear from the above graph. First of all, there is a great divide

This is the case at least as far as the proportions of the discourse particle *like* to the entire sample of *like* are concerned. When we count the frequencies of the discourse particle *like* per 10,000 words, the difference between men and women in the case of Mathematics becomes slightly blurred, which is due to the fact that the overall frequencies of *like* tend to be larger in female files than in male ones. Nevertheless, the general tendency remains. In other words, the feelings of approximation and illustration are often expressed by *like* in female utterances, but not so much in the form of the discourse particle *like* as in male utterances.

One interesting point about the matter of gender differences is that women have a tendency to use sentence-initial *like* more commonly than men. This inclination is particularly striking in the female files of Mathematics, which is in accordance with Iyeiri, *et al.* (2004b), who notice that women in Mathematics files tend to begin their utterances with the conjunctions *and* and *but*, making their utterances continuous to the previous speaker's ones. To be "sentence-initial" in Figure 3 does not always mean "utterance-initial," but this is not irrelevant, since to be "utterance-initial" means to be "sentence-initial" at least. Thus, we can surmise that women's manner of initiating sentences or at least utterances is one of the key points in respect of gender differences in discourse analyses.

5. The use of *like* and other hedges in the CSPAE GENDER

Before completing our discussion of the discourse particle *like*, we would like to investigate its relation to other hedges, since it is reasonable to wonder if their existence can hinder the occurrence of the discourse particle *like*. As far as the data of the CSPAE GENDER are concerned, however, the discourse particle *like* often appears side by side with other hedges or other expressions of approximation. Examples abound:

(9) But it's impressionistic, *sort of like*, what stays with you when you first finish. (CommR6b97 [Reading, 6/1997], male)

(10) Things like, *you know*, there's a central purpose, but then there's *kind of like* author's bias, and there's major ideas, but then there are, *like*, conclusions, connections, explanations. (CommR6b97 [Reading, 6/1997], female)

(11) Historically, in procedure there were questions written in, I call it, pigeon basic, where students actually had to step through *like almost* a program and say what the output was. (CommM8a97 [Mathematics, 8/1997], male)

(12) And I think we should follow the kinds of rules that have been established, *you know, like* for Congress or for other bodies. (CommM697 [Mathematics, 6/1997], male)

These illustrations suggest that there is possibly a positive correlation (rather than a negative one) between the occurrences of the discourse particle *like* and other hedges. Yaguchi, *et al.* (2004: 68-69) provide the frequencies of *sort of* and *kind of* as hedges in the different settings of the CSPAE GENDER. To make a fair comparison between the discourse particle *like* and *sort of / kind of*, we have normalized our data and obtained the frequencies of the relevant items per 100,000 words. The result is graphically presented in Figure 5 below:

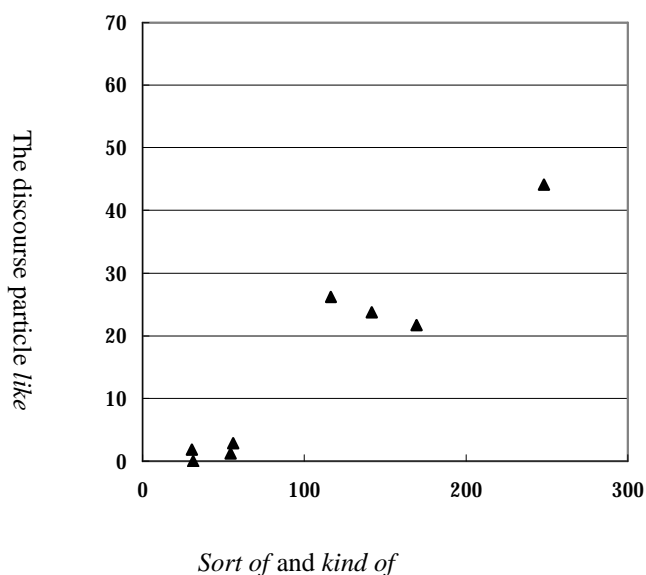


Figure 5. Correlation between the frequencies of *sort of* plus *kind of* and the discourse particle *like* (per 100,000 words)

Clearly, there is a positive correlation: the settings with frequent use of *sort of* or *kind of* tend to display frequent use of the discourse particle *like* as well. The correlation coefficient we have obtained is as large as 0.961. It is a reasonable conjecture, therefore, that the existence of other hedging expressions does not hinder the occurrence of the discourse particle *like*, although the whole issue needs to be furthered with the investigation of other hedges.

6. Conclusion

We have discussed various uses of *like*, paying particular attention to the discourse particle *like*. *Like* in general increases as the style of language becomes less formal. As far as the different settings of the CSPAE GENDER are concerned, *like* is abundantly witnessed in the meetings of Mathematics and Reading tests. It seems to be characteristically used in *exploratory* talk. As for gender differences, *like* in general seems to be more frequently employed by women than men, although an exceptional case is available in our data. To turn to the discourse particle *like*, however, men are more inclined to present examples than women, which is contradictory to the generally accepted view that it is a feature of young women. Female speakers seem to present the discourse particle *like* more frequently at the sentence-initial position than men, but on the whole it is more copiously attested in utterances of male speakers. The discourse particle *like* has been disliked or even “hated” (according to the phrasing by Burchfield, 1998: 459). It is indeed uncommon in well-planned utterances in the files of the White House press conferences and the Faculty meetings, but its use is not at all restricted in the natural and spontaneous discourse as observed in the files of the Mathematics and Reading meetings. Apparently, it is more widely used than generally expected, in academic discourse.

Notes

- 1 Correspondence to: Yoko Iyeiri, Faculty of Letters, Kyoto University, Yoshida-honmachi, Sakyo-ku, Kyoto 606-8501, Japan.
- 2 We have borrowed this example of the discourse particle *like* from Miller and Weinert (1995: 365).
- 3 Holmes (1992: 134-135) makes a distinction between *expository* talk and *exploratory* talk. According to her, the former is the type of talk to convey facts and/or opinions and the latter is the type of talk to explore and develop ideas. As she points out, *expository* talk is often a feature of formal and public talk, whereas the latter is a feature of less formal talk.
- 4 The issue of the meanings of *like* will be mentioned once again in Section 3.
- 5 Throughout the present paper, italics in illustrative examples are ours.
- 6 Siegel (2002: 38) criticizes traditional studies which consider the discourse particle *like* to be meaningless and expletive. She maintains that it conveys “something about the speaker’s relation to what is asserted in the sentence.”
- 7 See also Schourup (1999: 231-232) and Brinton (1996: 267) for the persistence of

grammaticality after the removal of discourse particles.

- 8 The corpus was compiled by Michael Barlow, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill and released by Athelstan in 1998. We have used the 2000 CD-ROM version (© Michael Barlow).
- 9 This comment by Romaine and Lange is interesting when contrasted to Whitman's statement in 1976, fifteen years before the publication of their paper. He says: "In 1946 Robert C. Pooley observed that 'the use of *like* as a conjunction is a usage on the borderline of acceptability in American English'. More than twenty years later, the construction appears to remain on the borderline. Obviously, it has not yet found general acceptance in formal writing" (Whitman, 1976: 157-158). Indeed, it takes time before usages are acknowledged. On the issue of the conjunction *like*, see also Note 17 of the present paper.
- 10 Here, Romaine and Lange use the term "nonquotative *like*" to refer to the discourse particle *like*. This is due to the fact that the principal concern of their paper is the use of quotative *like*, as in: *And I'm like, "Great"* (Romaine and Lange, 1991: 237). They argue that the quotative use of *like* is even more unnoticed than the discourse particle *like* (Romaine and Lange, 1991: 270).
- 11 Most previous studies argue to the same effect, although few of them are accompanied with statistical data. Precht's (2002) unpublished paper, which is mentioned in Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003: 186), is an exception, in that it refers to more abundant use of the discourse particle *like* before numbers (e.g. *They are like ten years old*) in male speech than in female speech.
- 12 It is outside the scope of our research to investigate the relationship between the use of the discourse particle *like* and the age of the speaker. This is simply due to the limitations of the corpus we use.
- 13 Occasionally, labels like "voice" are given to utterances in the corpus, and in such cases it is impossible to find the gender of the speaker. We have, therefore, discarded utterances of this kind.
- 14 At this stage of our research, we are unable wholly to eliminate the possibility that the *expository* vs. *exploratory* contrast is a binary distinction (rather than a gradable one), since there is a fairly clear dividing line between the group of the White House and Faculty and the group of Mathematics and Reading, in terms of their use of conjunctions (cf. Iyeyiri, *et al.*, 2004b).
- 15 The numerical data are given in Appendix 1.
- 16 See, for example, Siegel (2002: 47). The issue will be discussed in detail in the following section.

- 17 The infrequent employment of *like* in the White House files is, to a very small extent, exaggerated in this graph, since the press conferences of the White House have a slightly stronger tendency to use the conjunction *as* instead of *like* (e.g. *as you said* rather than *like you said*) than the other settings. This, however, does not affect the overall tendency displayed in the graph. The conjunction *like* in the sense of “as” is not very frequent in any of the files investigated. On the other hand, the conjunction *like* in the sense of “as if” is very common in *all* of the four settings of the CSPAE. See, for example: *It looks like you're ready to vote* (facMtg95 [Faculty meeting, 1995], male). Apparently, these expressions are more or less established in present-day American English. Here again, difference due to style is so slight as not to affect the entire picture, since they are simply too common in *all* of the files.
- 18 It is beyond the scope of our discussion for the moment, but we would simply like to refer to Poos and Simpson (2002), who analyse the use of *kind of* and *sort of* in the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English. Their research shows that there is a difference of tendency between speakers in the field of science and those in humanities and arts. This may be a hint for our future research.
- 19 It is perhaps unwise to be concerned with the difference between the male and female files of the White House, since the use of *like* is, in any case, too restricted here.
- 20 To enhance the level of accuracy, we have discarded some examples, where the syntactic structure changes in the middle of a sentence: e.g. ... *they look at you like, okay, so who cares?* (CommM697 [Mathematics, 6/1997], female). *Like* in this case is most likely a discourse particle, but we are unable to eliminate the possibility of it being a preposition. If it is a discourse particle, it may be a sentence-final one depending upon the length of the pause between *like* and *okay*. The restarting function of *like* of this kind is an interesting discourse feature, but to analyse the issue, we need the help of phonetic descriptions.
- 21 They say that sentence-final *like* is similar to what Dines (1980) calls terminal tags (e.g. *and stuff like that*, and *and something like that*) in this sense. It is also relevant to mention here that Dines (1980: 18) points out the more frequent occurrence of terminal tags in working-class speech than in middle-class speech. Remember the general “hatred” attached to the discourse particle *like* (see the Introduction above).
- 22 In other words, the removal of *like* alone will affect the syntactic structure of this sentence.
- 23 (8) is the sole example of quotative *like* we have encountered in the CSPAE GENDER. According to previous studies, it is attested mostly among young

speakers. Blyth, Recktenwald, and Wang (1990: 219), for instance, state that it is “often used by younger speakers but never (in our corpus) by speakers older than 38.” See also Note 10 above.

24 See Appendix 2 for the numerical data.

25 Schourup’s (1985: 54) inference also refers to this point.

Appendix 1.

Frequencies of *like* used in various ways (per 10,000 words)

	WH (male)	WH (female)	FM (male)	FM (female)	CM (male)	CM (female)	CR (male)	CR (female)
<i>Like</i>	6.56	5.31	8.79	12.11	18.89	27.49	28.36	16.92

WH: White House; FM: Faculty meetings; CM: Mathematics; CR: Reading

Appendix 2.

Proportions of the discourse particle *like* to the entire sample of *like* (%)

	WH (male)	WH (female)	FM (male)	FM (female)	CM (male)	CM (female)	CR (male)	CR (female)
Sentence-initial	0.35	0	1.10	0	3.27	5.44	3.11	3.75
Other positions	2.44	2.27	2.20	0	9.33	4.08	12.44	9.05
Totals	2.79	2.27	3.30	0	12.60	9.52	15.55	12.80

WH: White House; FM: Faculty meetings; CM: Mathematics; CR: Reading

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