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# Tiger Woods as a linguistic role model?

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An analysis of the spread of the phrase 'I felt like I...'

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IN COMMON with other sportsmen and sportswomen of international renown, the world's top golfer, Tiger Woods, is obliged to make himself available to the media after most of his performances. The comments he makes on such occasions subsequently appear in newspapers and on television channels worldwide, as well as through numerous websites. It is noticeable that in such circumstances he frequently uses what might be called a prefabricated phrase or sentence stem (Willis, 2003: 147) which some might think of as characteristic only of American English, but in fact (as we shall see) appears to be gaining ground among English speakers from other backgrounds too. The phrase is 'I felt like I', and here are some examples:

1. I felt like I hit my irons better today.<sup>1</sup>
2. I felt like I was putting well all day yesterday, but they were all for pars.

Many proficient users of English will probably have the sense that the phrase 'I felt like I' is more typical of American English than, for example, British English, and other linguistic features found in the immediate co-text of the phrase in many of Tiger Woods' press conference

comments may tend to reinforce this impression. For example, Woods often uses adjectives where many speakers (especially perhaps British or British-influenced speakers) would use an adverb. For example:

3. I felt like I hit the ball pretty good today.<sup>2</sup>
4. I felt like I hit the ball pretty good all week.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, Woods occasionally makes use of a present perfect tense form which is characteristic of American English:

5. I felt like today's round could have gotten away a little bit.<sup>4</sup>

Further investigation shows that the use of 'I feel/felt like I' in a post-performance interview extends both to other sports and to sportswomen as well as sportsmen:

6. 'You know, I felt like I was playing great.' (Michelle Wie, American golfer)<sup>5</sup>
7. But I feel like I'm doing better, which is important. (Serena Williams, American tennis player)<sup>6</sup>
8. Overall, I felt like I served pretty well. (Andy Roddick, American tennis player)<sup>7</sup>

Of course, Wie, Williams and Roddick are all from the United States, so we may well



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conclude that ‘I felt like I’ is an American phenomenon. Conversely, we might expect speakers of British English to use ‘as though’ instead of ‘like’, and confirming instances are not hard to find. For example – straying away from sport for a moment – the pseudonymous ‘Rose Perkins’, a British sufferer from myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME) writes in the *Guardian Weekly* newspaper (18 September 2007) that ‘I felt as though I wanted to slip away and never be found.’ We may be inclined to think that this is characteristic of British or British-influenced usage; that British speakers/writers use ‘as though’ when a clause follows (‘as though I wanted to slip away’) and only resort to ‘like’ when a noun phrase follows (‘I didn’t feel like a victim. I just felt like a prat.’<sup>8</sup>). However, in the same paragraph as the above quotation, ‘Rose Perkins’ also writes that ‘I felt like I was being made to feel ill.’ Hence, British English does seem to embrace the Tiger Woods ‘I felt like I’, and indeed examples certainly occur in post-performance interviews given by British sporting stars.

For example, the recently retired tennis player Tim Henman was sometimes seen as the archetypal middle-class Englishman – too ‘soft’ and ‘nice’ to be a success in the cut-throat world of professional tennis. Yet even this supposed epitome of Englishness uses ‘I felt/feel like I’:

9. I’ve always been fairly calm on the court, because that’s how I feel like I’m going to play my best tennis.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, the British golfer Luke Donald often makes use of the phrase in his post-round comments to the media:

10. I felt like I was a little heavy handed with both those shots.
11. I felt like I played okay today.<sup>10</sup>

And the British (Scottish) tennis player Andy Murray also employs it:

12. I made some unforced errors but I learnt that at a Grand Slam I can play against the top players. I felt like I really played well.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, if both American and British sportsmen and sportswomen use the phrase it is perhaps not surprising that those of other nationalities (and sometimes mother tongues) also do so:

12. I really felt like I was putting well and playing quite well. (Bernhard Langer, German golfer)<sup>12</sup>

13. I felt like I couldn’t play in those conditions at all. (Padraig Harrington, Irish golfer)<sup>13</sup>
14. Every time I came to the net, I felt like I was in a good position. (Roger Federer, Swiss tennis player)<sup>14</sup>

We can therefore conclude that in their dealings with the media sporting stars of many linguistic backgrounds use the formulaic expression ‘I feel/felt like I’. Whether the non-Americans are consciously or unconsciously influenced by hearing Tiger Woods use it, is of course uncertain. But given the admiration in which he is held – for example, the British golfer Colin Montgomerie frequently cites Woods as the greatest sportsman in the world – it must be possible that he serves as a linguistic role model to some.

Another important aspect of all this emerges when we look at corpus data. Whereas instances of ‘I feel/felt like I’ outnumber those of ‘I feel/felt as though I’ in the free online version of the British National Corpus, this is not at all the case when we examine instances with the third-person pronouns ‘she’ and ‘he’. This is shown in Tables 1 and 2.

As we can see, ‘I feel/felt like I’ is more common than ‘I feel/felt as though I’ in the data. However, ‘like’ virtually disappears when we examine examples with third-person singular pronouns. Why might this be? And why, additionally, does ‘feel/felt as though’ appear to co-occur more frequently with ‘she’ than with ‘he’?

It is of course impossible to draw firm conclusions and particularly so when the data is drawn from a relatively small corpus. However, it may be that ‘feel/felt like + a clause’ is largely a feature of speech rather than writing. It is noticeable, for instance, that many of the instances in BNC occur within quotation marks. For example:

15. ‘I felt like I was escaping just to get in,’ he reflected.<sup>15</sup>
16. ‘I did, but at the same time I felt like I understood Manson...’<sup>16</sup>

It is perhaps rather unusual to report in speech the feelings of others on their behalf (‘He feels/felt like he...’), although two examples were found in BNC. On the other hand, *writers* do report the feelings of others – perhaps particularly in works of fiction – and in the BNC data they appear almost always to do so using ‘feel/felt as though’ rather than ‘feel/felt like’:

17. She felt as though she was on a high.<sup>17</sup>

**Table 1: Examples with the first-person pronoun**

Item	Total number of instances
I felt like I	20
I feel like I	36
I feel as though I	26
I felt as though I	16

**Table 2: Examples with third-person pronouns**

Item	Total number of instances
He felt (feels) like he	1 (0)
She felt (feels) like she	1 (1)
He felt (feels) as though he	10 (1)
She felt (feels) as though she	31 (0)

18. He felt as though he lived in a purposeless world.<sup>18</sup>

And finally – very tentatively – could it be that writers of fiction (and perhaps particularly of the ‘bodice ripper’ genre, of which there seem to be quite a few examples in this data) tend to elucidate to readers the feelings of female more often than male characters?

19. When he at last looked away from her, she felt as though she had been seared to the soul by the scathing dismissal in his eyes.<sup>19</sup>
20. The grey eyes roamed over her face, and she felt as though she was being devoured by some huge magnetic force.<sup>20</sup>

But now we are rather far from the world of Tiger Woods!

Overall, we may conclude that perhaps ‘I feel/felt like I’ is an example of formulaic language (Weinert, 1995) used by many speakers (rather than writers) of English, and characteristic particularly when reporting on, or generalizing about, past performance or experience. In particular, it is a language ‘chunk’ which seems to occur rather frequently in post-performance media interviews given by sportsmen and sportswomen. Although intuition might suggest that it is largely a feature of American English, it seems that British English speakers and proficient non-native users of the language are quickly acquiring it too. ■

## Notes

**1** Examples 1 and 2 from <http://www.tigerwoods.com>, accessed on 6.8.2007. Example 1 is from The Players Championship, May 2006. Example 2 is from the Wachovia Championship, May 2004.

**2** Source: [http://www.asapsports.com/show\\_interview.php?id=43694](http://www.asapsports.com/show_interview.php?id=43694), accessed on 6.8.2007. This is a comment from the US Open Championship in June 2007.

**3** <http://www.iseekgolf.com/news/6317-tigerwoods-interview-round-four>, accessed on 6.8.2007. US Open, June 2007.

**4** [http://www.asapsports.com/show\\_interview.php?id=43681](http://www.asapsports.com/show_interview.php?id=43681), accessed on 6.8.2007. US Open, June 2007.

**5** <http://www.iseekgolf.com/news/4981-michellewie-interview-us-open-qualifying> accessed on 3.11.2007. US Open qualifying, June 2006.

**6** <http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/tennis/6975084.stm>, accessed on 2.9.2007. US Open Tennis Championship, September 2007.

**7** <http://www.andyrodick.com/1147/interview-with-andy-roddick-june-29th-2005/> accessed on 3.11.2007. Wimbledon Tennis Championships, June 2005.

**8** Vicki Woods, *Daily Telegraph*, 17 November 2007. This quotation is also the article’s headline.

**9** <http://www.timhenman.org/aboutMe/biography.sps?itype=5889&icustompgeid=8513>, accessed on 21.11.2007.

**10** <http://www.google.com.sg/search?hl=en&q=Luke+Donald+I+felt+like+I&btnG=Search&meta>, accessed on 3.9.2007, for both quotations. US Open Championship, June 2005.

**11** <http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/tennis/6288011.stm>, Australian Open, January 2007.

**12** [http://rydercup.sportinglife.com/golf/2006/history/story\\_get.cgi?STORY\\_NAME=golf/06/09/15/GOLF\\_Ryder\\_Cup\\_Langer.html](http://rydercup.sportinglife.com/golf/2006/history/story_get.cgi?STORY_NAME=golf/06/09/15/GOLF_Ryder_Cup_Langer.html), accessed on 21.9.2007.

**13** [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0HFI/is\\_6\\_54/ai\\_103410587/pg\\_3](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0HFI/is_6_54/ai_103410587/pg_3), accessed on 21.9.2007

**14** <http://www.tennis-x.com/story/2007-11-18/h.php>, accessed on 21.9.2007.

**15** BNC reference AJA 230.

**16** BNC reference CHB 1102.

**17** BNC reference H8H 2728.

**18** BNC reference A68 808.

**19** BNC reference HH1 611.

**20** BNC reference H8H 3356.

## References

British National Corpus free online access at <http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/>

Weinert, R. (1995) ‘The role of formulaic language in second language acquisition: a review.’ In *Applied Linguistics*, Vol. 16(2), pp. 180–205.

Willis, D. (2003) *Rules, patterns and words*. Cambridge: University Press.