



# It looks like this complementizer used to be an adjective

Mathilde Pinson

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## Introduction

- 1 When adjectives grammaticalize into other parts of speech, they tend to develop either adverbial or prepositional functions. Adjectives which become adverbs typically encode degree, like *very* (from the French adjective *vrai*), *pretty*, *bloody*, *real*, *pure* or *dead*. Adjectives which behave more or less like prepositions include *worth*, *like*, *due (to)*, *near*, *next (to)* and *opposite*.
- 2 Conversely, the direct shift from an adjective to a complementizer is very rare from a typological perspective and is unique in the history of English. Adjectives are not mentioned as typical sources of complementizers in Heine & Kuteva [2007], who cite the noun channel, the verb channel (e.g. *say* in some English-derived creoles), the demonstrative channel (e.g. *that*) and the interrogative channel (e.g. French *que*).
- 3 The emergence of the conjunction *like* meaning *as if* is usually attributed to a host-class expansion of the preposition *like* [López-Couso & Méndez-Naya 2012b]. However, an alternative hypothesis can relate *like* to the obsolete epistemic adjective *like* meaning 'likely'. Although the mutation from adjective to complementizer is not well attested cross-linguistically, it becomes understandable when one considers the full construction involving the adjective. This is why the constructionalization approach devised by Traugott & Trousdale [2013] is used in this study, together with a more traditional grammaticalization framework.
- 4 After preliminary remarks on the various uses of *like* and the previous studies that have addressed *like*<sub>AS IF</sub>, I will endeavour to establish its geographical origin and its approximate date of birth. Then the adjectival hypothesis will be presented in detail and will be substantiated by a quantitative study based on the Corpus of Historical American English [1810-2009, Davies 2010-] which documents the semantic and syntactic expansion of *like*<sub>AS IF</sub>.

# 1. Preliminary remarks

## 1.1. The various uses of *like*

- 5 *Like* is undoubtedly one of the most polyfunctional morphemes in the English language. As is well-known, it can be a noun (e.g. *You shouldn't mess with the likes of him*), a verb (e.g. *I don't like chocolate*), an adjective (e.g. *She replied in like manner*), a preposition (e.g. *She's not like me*), a discourse marker (e.g. *He's like very nice*), a suffix (e.g. *He's very childlike*), a component in the quotative expression *be like* (e.g. *She was like: 'I don't know'*) and a conjunction. In fact, there are two different types of conjunctive *like*: *like<sub>AS</sub>* and *like<sub>AS IF</sub>*.

(1) *Like<sub>AS</sub>*: He sings just like his father did.

(2) *Like<sub>AS IF</sub>*: He looks like he's getting better.

- 6 Both of the above conjunctions, which are said to stem from an erroneous use of the preposition, have been overtly stigmatized in style books for decades, as shown by Meyers [1995] and D'Arcy [2007, 2017]. Other examples of proscription against their use include Webster [1790], Raub [1897], Fowler [1908] and Curme [1931] for *like<sub>AS</sub>*, and Wood [1962] and Follett [1966] for *like<sub>AS IF</sub>*. Now, however, these two conjunctions are more or less tacitly accepted within the norms of English, as suggested by Huddleston and Pullum [2002: 1158] or Murray and Simon [2004: 243]. Yet, they remain understudied.

## 1.2. Previous studies

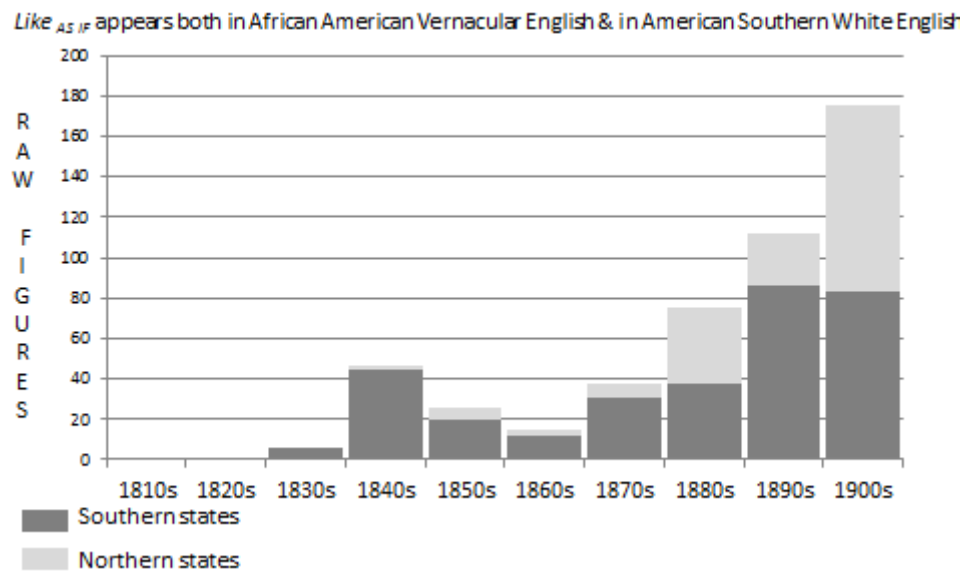
- 7 The semantic notions encoded by *like<sub>AS</sub>* and *like<sub>AS IF</sub>* are usually called Similarity and Comparison, respectively [cf. Quirk *et al.* 1985: 1110-1111]. These two notions are often considered minor types of semantic relations, as suggested by their noticeable absence from some general works on clause-linking [Givón 2001; Cristofaro 2003]. This can be explained by the fact that Similarity and Comparison lie outside the domain of 'core' adverbial relations [Aikhenvald 2009: 381]. Passing reference is made to *like<sub>AS</sub>* and *like<sub>AS IF</sub>* in several grammars of English, such as Biber *et al.* [1999: 844], Leech & Svartvik [2002: 400], Huddleston & Pullum [2002: 1151-1154]. Especially interesting is Kortmann [1997], whose typology of adverbial subordinators in European languages contains a chapter on the evolution of adverbial subordinators in English [1997: 291ff.]. Other notable exceptions include Bryant [1962], who addresses the social distribution of *like*, and Bolinger [1986], who focuses mainly on the hypercorrective use of *as (if)*. In addition, there are also numerous theoretical studies dealing with one type of structure in which *like<sub>AS IF</sub>* can appear, namely copy-raising [e.g. Rogers 1971, 1973; Postal 1974; Horn 1981; Potsdam and Runner 2001; Landau 2009; Asudeh 2012; Asudeh and Toivonen 2012]. This subtype of structure involving *like<sub>AS IF</sub>* includes a raising verb followed by a finite clause whose subject is usually coreferential with that of the main clause, as illustrated in the following example:

(3) He seems like/as if/as though he wants to leave.

- 8 None of the works mentioned above addresses *like*<sub>AS IF</sub> from a diachronic perspective. Other researchers, like Bender & Flickinger [1999] and López-Couso & Méndez-Naya [2012a; 2012b], study the various types of constructions in which *like*, *as if* and *as though* can be used and focus on their use as complementizers. Indeed, after appearance verbs and object-oriented perception verbs, *like*<sub>AS IF</sub> can be considered a complementizer [cf. also Rooryck 2000; Matushansky 2002; Brook 2014], as shown by several syntactic tests [López-Couso & Méndez-Naya 2012a: 174-176]. These types of clauses are obligatory in clause structure; they convey the argument of a semantic predicate; they can be replaced by unambiguous complement clauses; they may appear in coordination with prototypical complements; they cannot be moved to an unambiguously adverbial position and they pronominalize in the same way as complements do.<sup>1</sup>
- 9 Additionally, Bender & Flickinger [1999: 11] and López-Couso & Méndez Naya [2012a: 177; 2015] demonstrate that the complementizers *as if* and *as though* originally derived from adverbial subordinators and these researchers extend this conclusion to *like*<sub>AS IF</sub>. However, they do not actually study the emergence and evolution of *like*<sub>AS IF</sub> *per se*, notably because “*like* is both harder to search for and more recent” [Bender & Flickinger 1999: fn. 5].

## 2. Date of birth and geographical origin of *like*<sub>AS IF</sub>

- 10 Although the *Oxford English Dictionary* (henceforth OED) mentions a few examples of *like*<sub>AS IF</sub> dating back to Early Modern English (s.v. *like* def. 6e), it seems that *like*<sub>AS IF</sub> was seldom used before the nineteenth century. It then started to be used extensively, particularly in the South of the United States, as Simpson [1952] observes:
- [T]he conjunctive *like* is more widely prevalent in America outside New England. Though Wentworth, in his *American Dialect Dictionary*, cites general usage from 1820, most of his citations are drawn from the South and West, and he specifically notes that the construction is ‘almost universal in Texas.’ Moreover, C. Alphonso Smith, southern scholar and historian, [...] has supplied seven rules for writing the southern dialect, of which the first is: ‘*Like* does duty for *as if* in such a sentence as, *He looks like he was sick*’ Indeed, *look like* and *feel like* plus a clause are used so frequently in the South that they are considered southern idioms. [Simpson 1952: 463-464].
- 11 Indeed, many of the early works included in COHA that contain instances of *like*<sub>AS IF</sub> stem from the South of the USA (e.g. Kentucky, Virginia, Alabama, Tennessee, Louisiana and in particular Georgia),<sup>2</sup> as shown in the following graph. It is only subsequently that the use of *like*<sub>AS IF</sub> became generalized across the USA.

Figure 1: Geographical extension of *like*<sub>AS IF</sub> [COHA]

- 12 The Early Modern English examples cited in the OED may not be related to the instances of *like*<sub>AS IF</sub> that we observe today. The Early Modern period corresponds to an era of great linguistic innovation [Kortmann 1997: 302]. It is the period with the largest inventory of subordinators [Kortmann 1997: 294] but 70% of those introduced during that period were rarely used or turned out to be short-lived (compared with 20% of those created during the Middle English period) [Kortmann 1997: 301]. The Early Modern examples mentioned in the OED can therefore be considered instances of a kind of experimental use of the conjunction, which did not catch on in the language used in Britain at the time.
- 13 There are many other cases of extension of prepositions into conjunctions which did not survive, such as:
- (4a) **From** she was twelve yeer of age, she of hir love graunt him made.  
[*Romaunt Rose*, 1366, OED]
- (4b) To remaine [...] **during** a necessary conveniency might also be had for the repairing of her own ship. [*Cloria and Narcissus*, 1653, OED]
- 14 Moreover, the use of *like*<sub>AS IF</sub> in Early Modern English was so rare that no instances can be found in the Helsinki Corpus (1150-1710) [Gisborne & Holmes 2007]. Gisborne and Holmes even go so far as to say that “*like* introducing a clause did not occur in English till after [their] period (1150-1710)” [2007: 20], which strengthens the idea that the early examples from the OED are of a purely experimental kind.<sup>3</sup>
- 15 This evidence tends to show that the Early Modern examples mentioned in the OED do not reflect a fully-fledged use of the conjunction. This conjunction did not catch on in British English and the use that can be observed today comes from the South of the United States. Since this usage undoubtedly originated in speech, there was inevitably a time lapse before it was first recorded in writing. One may therefore speculate that it emerged sometime during the eighteenth century, and started to be used in writing during the early nineteenth century. In COHA it first appeared in non-standard

fictitious Southern dialogues, often associated with African American Vernacular speakers.

### 3. The adjectival hypothesis

- 16 The two following sentences contain strikingly similar clauses:

(5a) Their father said something, too, and it sounded **like** he was angry. [*Help wanted: stories*, Gary Soto, 2005, COHA]

(5b) [It is **like** she was angry when she heard that thou wert fond of a poor Indian woman of Darien. [*The Damsel of Darien*, vol. 2, William Gilmore Simms, 1839, COHA]

- 17 Yet, this parallel is only superficial. Sentence (5a), which dates from 2005, includes an instance of *like*<sub>AS IF</sub> while the use of *like* in sentence (5b) is of a different type, even though this is not apparent at first sight. It becomes clearer, however, if the sentence is given in full:

(5b') If she loves my lord, it is **like** she was angry when she heard that thou wert fond of a poor Indian woman of Darien. [*The Damsel of Darien*, vol. 2, William Gilmore Simms, 1839, COHA]

- 18 The replacement of *like* by *as if* becomes ungrammatical here, although it is possible in (5a) and in the truncated version (5b) mentioned above:

(5b'') \*If she loves my lord, it is **as if** she was angry when she heard that thou wert fond of a poor Indian woman of Darien.

- 19 In this sentence, as the initial *if*-clause indicates, *like* is not a complementizer but an adjective meaning 'likely' (from now on *like*<sub>ADJ</sub>). Indeed, the *if*-clause expresses a hypothesis which is followed by a potential consequence. What is at play here is a deduction based on logic; the speaker evaluates the probability of a state of affair, based on a hypothetical premise. The use of *like*<sub>AS IF</sub> in sentence (5a), by contrast, encodes an inference based on perception, here an auditory one.

- 20 Interestingly, in the truncated version (5b), the status and meaning of *like* is impossible to ascertain and only the context can help to identify the correct meaning of *like*. This is also the case in another example, from the *Compleat Dictionary of English and Dutch* by William Sewel, published in 1766:

(6) It is **like** he did not see it.

- 21 This sentence is ambiguous between an adjective and a complementizer interpretation, and it is only because it belongs to a set of unambiguously adjectival examples that we can identify its correct status and meaning.<sup>4</sup> These examples include:

(7) He is not **like** to live long.

(8) It is not **like** that he should say so.

- 22 In examples (5b') and (6), the co-text helps to identify the precise value of *like*, but in many instances, such as (9), even the co-text is insufficient to enable the reader/listener to distinguish between the adjective and the complementizer:

(9) [T]hey all knew that long before the waters could be lowered so that any attempt to save them could be made, the foul air of that small chamber would have done its fatal work. [...]. Even as they tried to talk, poor Boodle, saying that he was sleepy, lay down on the bare rock floor, where he was almost instantly fast asleep and breathing heavily. “‘T is **like** he’ll never wake again,” said one of the miners, gloomily. “Let him sleep, then; ‘t is the easiest way out of it,” responded a comrade. [*Derrick Sterling: A Story of the Mines*, Kirk Monroe, 1888, COHA]

- 23 In this sentence, there is no objective element that can rule out either interpretation with certainty. In such a case, the difference in meaning between the two interpretations of *like* has very little communicative relevance. Is the miner saying that Boodle will probably never wake up (*like*<sub>ADJ</sub>) or is he implying that Boodle has the appearance of someone who will never wake up (*like*<sub>AS IF</sub>)? These two readings, that of likely imminent death and that of an appearance of imminent death, are identical from a pragmatic perspective. The only nuance that separates them is that the use of *like*<sub>ADJ</sub> emphasizes the deduction based on logic, while in the case of *like*<sub>AS IF</sub> the logical deduction is backgrounded in favour of a notion of inference based on perception. Yet, these two types of reasoning are inseparable: in order to be able to make a logical deduction based on what one knows about the danger of toxic gases, one has to use the sensory evidence at hand: sight (i.e. the miner has fallen asleep), sound (i.e. he is breathing heavily), smell (i.e. the air is ‘foul’), etc. In short, both are evidential, as they express “the perceptual and/or epistemological basis for making a speech act”, which is Cornillie [2009]’s definition of evidentiality. In addition, both interpretations express an epistemic modality; in each case, the speaker does not fully endorse the proposition ‘he will never wake up’ but presents it as a probable event. The semantic proximity between the two versions suggests how the mutation from an epistemic adjective to an evidential complementizer was possible.

## 4. The constructionalization of *like*

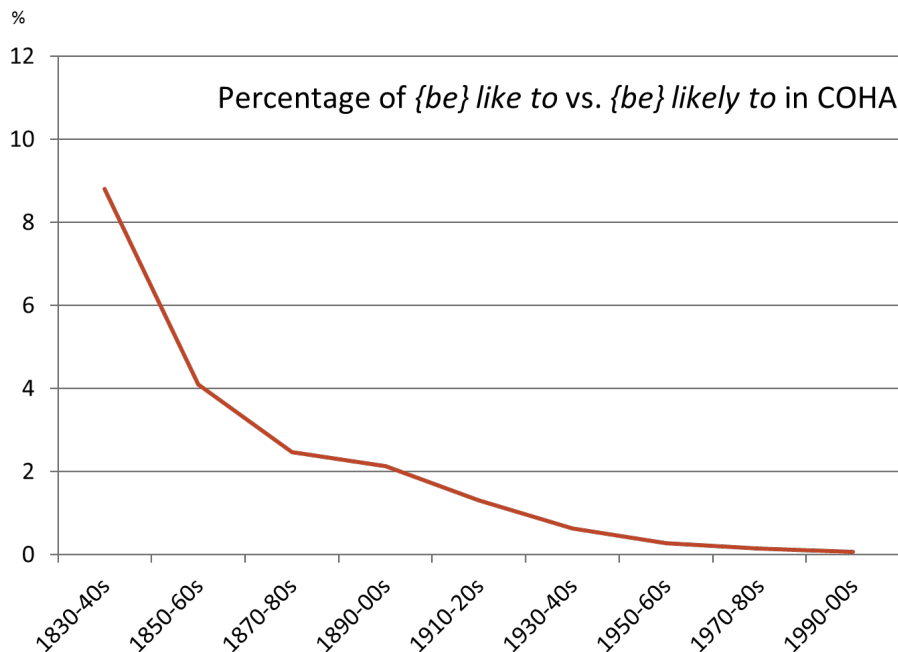
### 4.1. The obsolescence of *like*<sub>ADJ</sub>

- 24 In the OED [s.v. *like* def. 8 and 9.a.], the use of the adjective *like* meaning ‘likely’ is illustrated by examples dating from 1380 to 1896. The adjective appeared in three micro-constructions:
- (a) The attributive construction: *Cloudy, a like change of weather* [1757]
  - (b) The predicative raised construction: *He was like to fail*
  - (c) The predicative extraposed construction: *It is like (that) he will fail.*
- 25 The attributive micro-construction died out earlier than the other two, undoubtedly because *like* could easily be confused with the other meaning of the adjective, namely ‘similar’. For instance, the phrase “a like fate” could both mean “a likely fate” and “a similar fate”. In the attributive construction *like* was therefore replaced by the monosemous adjective *likely* for reasons of isomorphism, i.e. the tendency towards biunique mapping between form and meaning. No instances of the attributive micro-construction can be found in COHA, which suggests that it had already disappeared (at least in American English) by the end of the eighteenth century.



- 26 The raised construction survived longer but had steadily lost ground by the nineteenth century. Its demise is illustrated in the following graph, which represents the proportion of the forms {*be like to*; *am like to*; *is like to*; *are like to*} as opposed to {*be likely to*; *am likely to*; *is likely to*; *are likely to*} in COHA.

Figure 2: Proportion of *be like to* as opposed to *be likely to* in COHA



- 27 During the nineteenth century, speakers were still sporadically confronted with the raised micro-construction, but had no longer access to the attributive micro-construction, which had already died out. As they could no longer associate the raised construction with the corresponding adjective, many speakers became unable to analyze this construction appropriately. Their hesitation was doubtless also increased by the great polyfunctionality of the word *like*. Consequently, some speakers reanalyzed it as a verb, as in the following example:

(10) Jest then some bilin hot steam come up into my throte that **liked** to blow'd my nose rite out by the roots. [*Major Jones's Sketches of Travel*, William Tappan Thompson, 1848, COHA]

- 28 Others started to treat *like to* as a kind of adverb, *liketa*, replaceable by *almost*:

(11) And it **liketa** scared him to death! [Feagin 1979]

- 29 These two uses are avertive and mean 'be about to do', 'almost do' (cf. the French modal *faillir*) [Romaine & Kytö 2005]. The semantic connection with the epistemic adjective is quite clear here, as the expression is used for an event that was highly probable but did not actually happen. This (ad)verb still occurs sporadically in some non-standard varieties spoken in the South of the United States and the Appalachians.

## 4.2. Severance of link and reanalysis

- 30 As the attributive construction of *like*<sub>ADJ</sub> had disappeared, speakers/hearers found the two micro-constructions left (the raised and the extraposed constructions) opaque, because they were unable to relate them with the corresponding adjective. The severance of the link between the adjective and the extraposed micro-construction led to a different kind of reanalysis of *like*<sub>ADJ</sub>. The following sentence, with an adjective followed by an extraposed nominal *that*-clause with a covert complementizer:

(12a) It's *like*<sub>ADJ</sub> [ $\emptyset$  he'll never wake again].

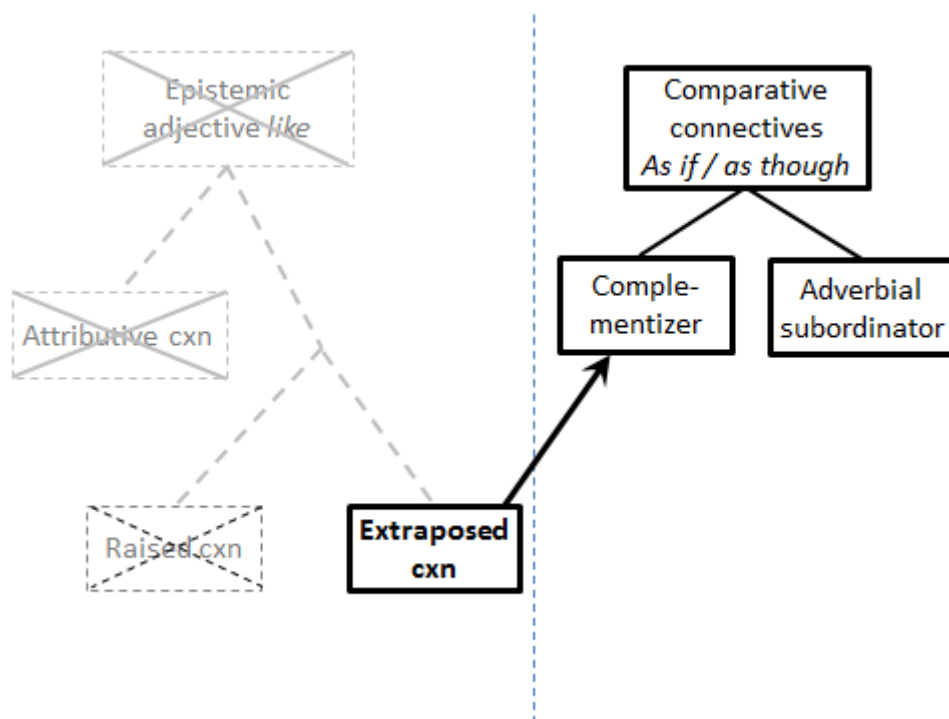
was rebracketed as follows:

(12b) It's [*like*<sub>COMP</sub> he'll never wake again].

with *like* turning into an overt complementizer.

- 31 The constructionalization, which can be formalized as [it copula Adj [ $\emptyset$  Clause]]  $\leftrightarrow$  [probability] > [it copula [Comp Clause]]  $\leftrightarrow$  [comparison], is summarized in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Change in inheritance



- 32 The constructionalization led to a change in inheritance of *like*. It completely ceased to be treated as an adjective and acquired conjunctive properties. By analogy with *as if* and *as though* it subsequently also became an adverbial subordinator, introducing adjuncts.

## 4.3. A case of primary grammaticalization

- 33 The emergence of *like*<sub>AS IF</sub> and that of *like*<sub>AS</sub> therefore illustrate two different types of grammaticalization. The appearance of *like*<sub>AS</sub> constitutes a case of secondary

grammaticalization, from preposition to conjunction, hence from a grammatical to an even more grammatical item.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, the emergence of *like*<sub>AS IF</sub> results from a case of primary grammaticalization, from an adjective to a complementizer, hence from a lexical to a grammatical item.

- 34 The parameters used to identify cases of grammaticalization are present in the case of *like*<sub>AS IF</sub>.<sup>6</sup> First, the process exhibits decategorialization [Hopper 1991: 22] of *like*<sub>ADJ</sub>. As a conjunction, *like* loses the properties that it displayed as an adjective. It is now incompatible with a raised subject (\**He is like*<sub>AS IF</sub> *to fail*), an adverb of degree (\**It is very like*<sub>AS IF</sub> *he will fail*), a comparative or superlative (\**It is more like*<sub>AS IF</sub> *he will fail*) and the prefix *un-* (\**It is unlike*<sub>AS IF</sub> *he will fail*).
- 35 Second, *like*<sub>AS IF</sub> lost its former paradigmatic variability [Lehmann 1982]. Although *like*<sub>ADJ</sub> can alternate with several other adjectives, such as *likely*, *expected*, *probable*, *possible*, *plausible*, *believable*, *conceivable*, etc., *like*<sub>AS IF</sub> can only be replaced with a closed list of items, namely *as if*, *as though* and sometimes *that* or *zero*.
- 36 Third, the rebracketing had an impact on the placement of a prepositional phrase encoding the experiencer. Compare for instance the two following sentences, where *like* is used in comparable contexts, after the copula verbs *look* and *appear*:

- (13a) Looks **like** [to me] they need it mighty bad. [*Judith of the Cumberlands*, Alice McGowan, 1908, COHA]  
 (13b) “‘Pears [to me] **like** you’re mighty slow,” she said, complainingly. [*Campfire Girl’s First Council Fire*, Jane L. Stewart, 1914, COHA]

The placement of the PP after *like* in (13a) seems to orient the interpretation toward an adjectival status, while it is quite improbable to find intervening material between *like*<sub>AS IF</sub> and the subject of the *like*-clause (cf. Pinson [2015]). This tends to suggest that *like* is a complementizer in (13b).<sup>7</sup>

- 37 Also noticeable is an increase in token frequency, all the more so because *like*<sub>ADJ</sub> was a rare adjective. It became much more frequent when it acquired conjunctive properties. Subsequently, we also observe an increase in type frequency, since *like*<sub>AS IF</sub> was later extended to other syntactic contexts (see Section 5.2.). This increase in type frequency goes hand in hand with semantic generalization (or desemanticization). In the case of *like*<sub>AS IF</sub>, we observe a mutation from a content-word, describing the properties of a referent as being ‘within the realm of credibility’, to a non-factual clausal connective.
- 38 Another feature of grammaticalization is erosion, which may (or may not) affect grammaticalized items in the final stages of their development (cf. Heine & Kuteva [2007: 42-43]). As is well-known, adjectives are stressed while monosyllabic conjunctions are not, although diphthongs, such as /aI/ here, usually retain some prominence.<sup>8</sup> A few examples in COHA can potentially be considered a sign that *like* is unstressed, owing to the use of a particular graphic rendering. By removing the final letter in *like*, some authors may have attempted to transcribe its deaccentuation:

- (14) I dun nussed dat man an’ his baby thru’ yaller fever, ‘pears **lik**’ he thinks he neber can do ‘nuff for ole Aunt Savannah [...]. [*Thirty Years of Freedom*, Katherine Davis Chapman Tilman, 1902, COHA]

- 39 Similarly, in the novel *Bad Boy at Home*, the spelling *lik* is sporadically used for the preposition or the conjunction, but never for the verb *like*, as illustrated by the comparison between (15) and (16):

(15) Maria [...] begun a cryin **lik** her hart wuld brak. [*Bad Boy at Home*, Metta Victoria Fuller Victor, 1885, COHA]

(16) I alwus **like** to help my 'mployers outer a tite place. [*Bad Boy at Home*, Metta Victoria Fuller Victor, 1885, COHA]

- 40 One element which seems at first to contradict general findings on grammaticalization is that low frequency items are not good candidates for grammaticalization, and yet the adjective *like* meaning *likely* was quite rare. However, given that *like* is very polyfunctional and very frequent in its other uses, particularly as a preposition, the low frequency of the adjective did not prove to be a hindrance. In other words, it is probably an interplay between the syntax of the adjectival construction and the frequency of the preposition that led to the emergence of a highly productive clausal connector.

## 5. Semantic and syntactic extension

### 5.1. Semantic extension

- 41 The conjunctions *as if*, *as though* and *like* are compatible with two types of meaning: the evidential/epistemic meaning and the *irrealis*/counterfactual meaning (see Pinson [2018] for more detail). The evidential meaning reflects an inference based on sensory stimuli, as in:

(17) He looks **like** he's getting better.

while the *irrealis* meaning corresponds to a comparison between an actual situation and an imaginary one, as in:

(18) The moonlight makes the park hills, lakes, trees, and meadows look **like** they've been dipped deep in blue light and purple shadow [*The Mayor of Central Park*, Avi, 2005, COHA]

- 42 If the adjectival hypothesis is true, it implies that the conjunction originally had an evidential/epistemic meaning and that it is only later that it acquired an *irrealis* meaning. The corpus study shows that indeed the proportion of epistemic readings has decreased over time while *irrealis* cases have increased.<sup>9</sup>

**Table 1: The semantic evolution of *like*<sub>AS IF</sub>**

|                              | Epistemic     | <i>Irrealis</i> <sup>10</sup> | TOTAL |
|------------------------------|---------------|-------------------------------|-------|
| COHA [1820-1879]             | 63.7% [N=79]  | 36.3% [N=45]                  | 124   |
| COHA [1880-1899]             | 55.2% [N=95]  | 44.8% [N=77]                  | 172   |
| Sample from COHA [2000-2010] | 39.1% [N=108] | 60.9% [N=168]                 | 276   |

- 43 As Table 1 shows, the proportion of *irrealis* readings has dramatically increased between the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century and the difference is statistically significant ( $\chi^2$  test:  $p < 0.0001$ ).

## 5.2. Syntactic extension

- 44 The conjunction *like*<sub>AS IF</sub> has also extended its range of syntactic uses over time. A syntactic comparison between the nineteenth-century part of COHA and a sample of occurrences from the 2000s in COHA suggests two stages, which can also help to sustain the adjectival hypothesis.

### 5.2.1. Anteriority of structures with impersonal subjects

- 45 The adjectival hypothesis proposed here postulates that *like*<sub>AS IF</sub>'s first context of appearance involves an impersonal subject:

(19) It + be/seem/appear/look... + like-clause

because the adjective from which it derives cannot be used with a referential subject together with a finite clause:

(20) \*He looks like(ly) he will be sick.

- 46 If the adjectival hypothesis is true, it implies that copy-raising structures, which involve a referential subject and a finite clause, appeared only subsequently.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the proportion of impersonal subjects was probably higher in older texts than it is now. To test this hypothesis, I have compared the percentage of impersonal subjects relative to the number of post-copular uses of *like*<sub>AS IF</sub> in two different periods of COHA.

Table 2: The syntactic evolution of *like*<sub>AS IF</sub> [1]

|                                | Impersonal subjects | TOTAL | Percentage of impersonal subjects relative to the number of post-copular uses of <i>like</i> <sub>AS IF</sub> <sup>12</sup> |
|--------------------------------|---------------------|-------|---|
| 19 <sup>th</sup> century       | 30.22% [N=81]       | 268   | 46.28% [81/175]   |
| Early 21 <sup>st</sup> century | 18.1% [N=49]        | 276   | 33.33% [49/147]   |

- 47 The decrease in the proportion of uses with an impersonal subject can be interpreted as a sign that this construction predates copy-raising.

### 5.2.2. Anteriority of the complementizer over the adverbial subordinator

- 48 Today, *like*<sub>AS IF</sub> can be used both as a complementizer, after a copula verb, as in:

(20) It looks like he will be sick.

or

(21) He looks like he will be sick.

but it can also be used as an adverbial subordinator, as in example (15), repeated here as (22):

(22) Maria [...] begun a cryin lik her hart wuld brak. [*Bad Boy at Home*, Metta Victoria Fuller Victor, 1885, COHA]

- 49 The adjectival hypothesis implies that the complementizer predates the adverbial subordinator, since it involves that *like*<sub>AS IF</sub>'s context of emergence is in post-copular position.

Table 3: The syntactic evolution of *like*<sub>AS IF</sub> [2]

## Statistical evidence for the adjectival hypothesis

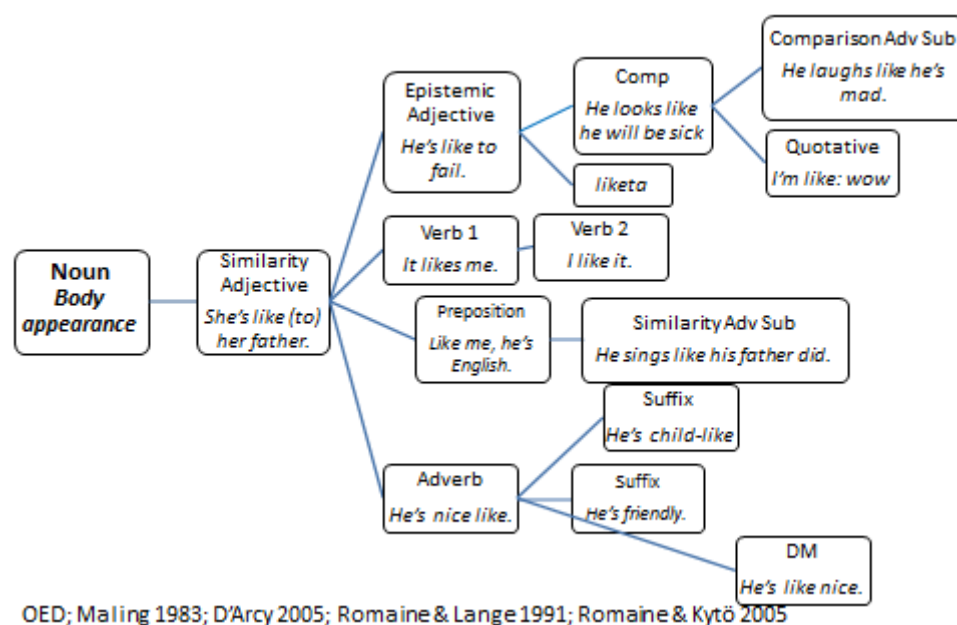
|                                 | EPISTEMIC      | IRREALIS       | TOT           |
|---------------------------------|----------------|----------------|---------------|
| COHA<br>(1820-1899)             | 61.8%<br>(167) | 38.2%<br>(103) | 100%<br>(270) |
| Sample from COHA<br>(2000-2010) | 39.1%<br>(108) | 60.9%<br>(168) | 100%<br>(276) |

|                                 | COMP           | ADV SUB        | TOT           |
|---------------------------------|----------------|----------------|---------------|
| COHA<br>(1820-1899)             | 65.3%<br>(175) | 34.7%<br>(93)  | 100%<br>(268) |
| Sample from COHA<br>(2000-2010) | 50.5%<br>(147) | 49.5%<br>(144) | 100%<br>(291) |

- 50 As can be seen in Table 3, the proportion of use of *like* as a complementizer has diminished over time,<sup>13</sup> while that of *like* as an adverbial subordinator has increased. This result can be interpreted as evidence that the use of *like*<sub>AS IF</sub> started in a post-copular position, before being extended to more peripheral functions. This suggests that, contrary to what is postulated in Bender & Flickinger [1999] and López-Couso & Méndez Naya [2012a], *like*<sub>AS IF</sub> has followed the opposite path from that of *as if* and *as though*. While *as if* and *as though* were primarily adverbial subordinators and later became complementizers, *like*<sub>AS IF</sub> seems to have evolved from a complementizer to an adverbial subordinator.<sup>14</sup> This is not surprising, given the polyfunctionality and polysemy of *like*, which make it unlikely to have appeared directly in a peripheral position. Indeed, *like* is very hard to process unless there are clear cues as to its grammatical status (cf. Pinson [2015]). That is why its proximity to a copular verb is a much needed favouring context.

## Conclusion

- 51 The adjective *like* meaning ‘likely’ was originally used in three micro-constructions: the attributive construction, the raised construction and the extraposed construction. As shown by its absence from COHA, the attributive construction disappeared before the other two, undoubtedly for reasons of isomorphism. The disappearance of the attributive use has triggered the constructionalization of the two remaining uses of the adjective. In other words, the decreasing exposure to the attributive use led to a lack of entrenchment; speakers-hearers then became unable to draw the link between epistemic adjectives and the two micro-constructions that remained. It was particularly difficult for speakers-hearers to relate the two micro-constructions to the adjective given the wide array of functions of the word *like*.
- 52 In raised constructions, *like* gave rise to a non-standard avertive marker diversely treated as a verb or as the adverb *liketa*. By contrast, the extraposed construction provided the bridging context allowing for the grammaticalization of *like* into a complementizer. The impersonal construction was rebracketed from ‘It’s like<sub>ADJ</sub> [ø<sub>COMP</sub> he’ll never wake again]’ into ‘It’s [like<sub>COMP</sub> he’ll never wake again]’. This paper substantiates this hypothesis by documenting the semantic expansion of *like*<sub>AS IF</sub> (from epistemic to *irrealis*), as well as its syntactic expansion (from impersonal to copy-raising and then adverbial constructions). This suggests that it is indeed the impersonal epistemic use which predates the other ones, pointing to an adjectival origin of *like*<sub>AS IF</sub>. The constructionalization can be formalized as follows: [it copula Adj [ø + Clause]] ↔ [probability] > [it copula [Comp + Clause]] ↔ [comparison].
- 53 This paper thus reassesses the role of the adjective channel for the grammaticalization of complementizers, giving centre stage to a long-gone marginal adjective which turns out to have somehow survived through the use of its very popular conjunctive offspring. This study also adds to the general picture of the polygrammaticalization of the word *like*, which can be summarized as follows:

Figure 4: Summary of the polygrammaticalization of *like*

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## NOTES

1. Others treat *like*-complements as PPs [e.g. Potsdam & Runner 2001; Huddleston & Pullum 2002; Asudeh 2012; Asudeh & Toivonen 2012]. According to these researchers, *like/as though/as if*-complements are headed by prepositions with clausal complements. For instance, Asudeh [2012] supports the prepositional status of these connectors by evidence related to modification: these three connectors can be modified by the same type of constituents as prepositions (e.g. *He appears just/almost as though he has been swimming*), while these adverbs cannot modify complementizers. This argument is convincing but assumes that prepositions can have clausal complements. If one does not accept this premise, then the argument is not valid. Indeed, it is considered here that prepositions can only govern NPs including gerund clauses, not finite clauses.
2. The geographical provenance of each instance of *like* was determined by reading it in its wider context, thanks to the Gutenberg Project. In each case, the location where the story takes place is clearly mentioned.
3. Similarly, an extensive database such as *the Old Bailey Proceedings* (1674-1913) suggests that the use of *like*<sub>AS IF</sub> was virtually absent from British English during the Late Modern period, even from rather informal types of discourse. While *like*<sub>AS</sub> appears numerous times in *the Old Bailey*, I only found three occurrences of *like*<sub>AS IF</sub> in two different passages from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The word appears in italics, which suggests that it was considered a mistake by the clerks of the court. *Like*<sub>AS</sub>, conversely, never appears in italics in *the Old Bailey*. In addition, it has been shown that the use of *like*<sub>AS IF</sub> is more frequent in American than in British Present-day English [Quirk *et al.* 1985: 1110; López-Couso and Méndez-Naya 2012a: 177] and Brook [2014]'s corpus study suggests that *like*<sub>AS IF</sub> has been attested in Canadian English from the 1890s onward. The fact that it had been widely used in the United States by 1820 but only reached Canadian English later also suggests that the use started in the US, not in the UK.
4. The translations into Dutch given in the dictionary may also be useful: *vermoedelijk* / *waarschijnlijk* mean 'probably'.
5. The idea that conjunctions are more grammatical than prepositions is somewhat debatable, notably because prepositions can vary greatly in this respect (e.g. *notwithstanding* is less grammatical than *of*). However, the notion that the shift from preposition to conjunction constitutes a case of grammaticalization is mentioned for instance in Heine and Kuteva [2007: 324].
6. On the various parameters of grammaticalization, see for instance Lehmann [1982]; Heine, Claudi & Hünnemeyer [1991]; Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca [1994]; Hopper & Traugott [2003]; Heine & Kuteva [2007].
7. One cannot totally rule out the adjectival interpretation in (13b), since it is not incorrect to say *It appears [to me] **likely** you're mighty slow*. However, a rapid search on COCA, iWeb and the NOW corpus shows that the string "likely to me" is much more frequent than "to me likely" (the respective ratios are: 15:3 in COCA; 228:25 in the NOW corpus and 895:54 in iWeb).
8. Note, however, that the diphthong /aɪ/ is typically realized as a monophthong in Southern American English, which may facilitate the deaccentuation of the word *like*.

9. The periods compared vary greatly in length, but this is due to the dramatic increase in the use of *like*<sub>AS IF</sub>.

10. There were also a few indeterminate cases, which are not presented here.

11. Asudeh & Toivonen [2012]'s study on copy-raising with verbs of appearance shows that there exist four different groups of speakers: i) those who only accept expletive subjects in such structures (e.g. *It seems like Alfred hurt Thora.*), ii) those who accept copy-raising only when the subject of the sentence is co-referential with the subject of the *like*-clause (e.g. *Alfred seems like he hurt Thora.*), iii) those who accept copy-raising regardless of the function of the resumptive pronoun, and iv) those who accept everything, even when there is no copy pronoun at all (e.g. *Alfred seems like Thora hurt Jane.*). Although Asudeh & Toivonen [2012] do not provide an apparent-time analysis and do not mention the age of their informants, such groupings could potentially reflect a diachronic pattern. This would suggest that the structure involving an expletive subject is the oldest one and that the other structures only appeared subsequently.

12. The distinction between the two percentages is statistically significant, as shown by a  $\chi^2$  test ( $p = 0.018$ ).

13. The decrease in post-copular uses is statistically significant ( $\chi^2$ :  $p = 0.0004$ ).

14. This development runs counter to the unidirectionality of grammaticalization, as complementizers are more grammatical than adverbial subordinators, since they belong to a much more restricted paradigm and are on the whole more semantically bleached. Compare for instance the meaning of *if* as an adverbial subordinator (*I'll go if it doesn't rain*) and as a complementizer (*I don't know if it will rain*). However, the shift from complementisers to adverbial subordinators is well attested cross-linguistically, as indicated by Heine & Kuteva [2007: 254].

## ABSTRACTS

The conjunction *like* meaning 'as if' is usually considered to derive from the preposition. There exists, however, a striking parallel between the impersonal post-copula use of the conjunction (e.g. *It's like<sub>AS IF</sub> he didn't see it*) and the extraposed construction of the now extinct adjective *like* meaning 'likely' with a covert complementizer (e.g. *It's like<sub>ADJ</sub>  $\emptyset$  he didn't see it*). This paper therefore aims at sustaining the hypothesis of the adjectival origin of *like*<sub>AS IF</sub> with the help of the Corpus of Historical American English. By documenting the geographic, semantic and syntactic expansion of *like*<sub>AS IF</sub>, this study suggests that the disappearance of the attributive use of the adjective for reasons of isomorphism triggered the constructionalization of the two remaining adjectival constructions. The constructionalization of *like*<sub>AS IF</sub> can be formalized as follows: [it copula Adj [ $\emptyset$  + Clause]]  $\leftrightarrow$  [probability] > [it copula [Comp + Clause]]  $\leftrightarrow$  [comparison].

La conjonction *like* signifiant « as if » est censée provenir de la préposition. Cependant, on note un parallèle frappant entre l'emploi post-copule de *like* avec un sujet impersonnel (ex. : *It's like<sub>AS IF</sub> he didn't see it*) et la construction extraposée de l'ancien adjectif *like* signifiant « likely » avec un complémentateur implicite (ex. : *It's like<sub>ADJ</sub>  $\emptyset$  he didn't see it*). Cet article tente de défendre l'hypothèse de l'origine adjectivale de *like*<sub>AS IF</sub> à l'aide du corpus COHA. En retraçant l'expansion géographique, sémantique et syntaxique de *like*<sub>AS IF</sub>, cette étude suggère que la disparition de l'emploi épithétique de l'adjectif *like* pour des raisons d'isomorphisme a déclenché la constructionnalisation des deux constructions adjectivales restantes. La constructionnalisation

de *like*<sub>AS IF</sub> peut être schématisée ainsi : [it copule Adj [ø + P]] ↔ [probabilité] > [it copule [Comp + P]] ↔ [comparaison].

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** adjectif, constructionnalisation, complémentateur like, épistémique, grammaticalisation, construction impersonnelle

**Keywords:** adjective, constructionalization, complementizer like, epistemic, grammaticalization, impersonal construction

## AUTHOR

**MATHILDE PINSON**

Sorbonne Nouvelle University

mathilde.pinson@sorbonne-nouvelle.fr