Like, Whatever: The Syntactic Evolution of a Morpheme

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for Dr. Heather Bliss's LING 282W course, *Writing for Linguistics*. The assignment asked students to expand, elaborate, or adapt one of their earlier Linguistics writing exercises or assignments into a short experimental or argument paper. This required that students identify a research question for which a methodology could be designed and implemented to elicit results that confirm (or disconfirm) a hypothesis. The paper uses APA citation style.

This paper seeks to illuminate the syntactic contribution of the morpheme, *like*. Although *like* has been validated as constituents of several syntactic categories, such as verb, noun, adverb, and preposition (Montell, 2019; McWhorter, 2016), it has been defined as a meaningless filler word when it appears as casual interjections in speech. In this study, we posit that *like* is not a meaningless filler word, but a flexible constituent that can move within and across phrases. We analyze *like* through the lens of the pop culture canon, drawing examples from modern English (American, British, Irish) and extracting six sound bites from movies, television, and music from the past twenty years to represent current patterns of speech from speakers of all ages and genders. Using various syntactic constituency tests, including movement and omission, we uncover the syntactic contribution of *like,* revealing that while it is omnipresent in speech, *like* performs a very important communicative function: as an emphatic discourse marker at the beginning, middle or end of a syntactic phrase. By parsing *like* and identifying its purpose in dialogue and the ways in which it is very much hedged by syntax, we can deduce its universality in speech across languages and discover how these similarities can influence and shape cultural identity and cross-linguistic landscapes.

1. Introduction

"I went to give a talk at my old school and the girls were all doing their 'likes' and 'innits?' which drives me insane. I told them, 'Just don't do it. Because it makes you sound stupid.'"

Emma Thompson, 2010

While languages change over time, these shifts are seldom arbitrary. According to Kilgarriff (2005), language is essentially non-random and language users never choose words randomly. If this is true, then the common assumption that *like* is an unconsciously used, meaningless filler word (Weissman, 2021) bears more scrutiny.

Linguistic trends are driven by the younger generation and one of the more common criticisms to arise out of the English language in the past 40 years is the use of *like* in everyday speech, which rose to the forefront during the Valley Speak uprising of the 1980s, thanks to the popularity of the Valley Girl trope in mainstream media (Wolfson, 2022). As a result, women have long been blamed for the degeneration of the English language, as they are perceived to be the primary (over)users of this word (Montell, 2019). As we are consistently bombarded by pop culture, it would be prudent to analyze the use of *like* in this context, as representations of current speech patterns. While another casual form of *like* exists, *be+like*[1], which appears prior to a quotation or paraphrase as an informal substitution for the verb *'to say'* (quotative *be+like*), our analysis focuses on the intermittent interjections of *like* in dialogue, henceforth referred to as non-quotative *like*. Here, we seek to illuminate the following two questions:

- What is the meaning of *like*?
- If *like* has a purpose, what is its syntactic contribution in speech?

According to D'Arcy (2005), non-quotative *like* serves as a discourse marker linking sequences of dialogue, appearing clause-initially before entering the syntactic structure. Using various syntactic constituency tests, including movement and omission, we propose that non-quotative *like* is not a random filler word. Rather, it can move easily into various positions within and across syntactic phrases (beginning, middle, or end) and it is consciously used by speakers to add nuance, as an emphatic storytelling gesture. While *like* can be omitted, its deletion changes the overall sentiment of a sentence. As a result, *like*'s existence in

[1] A perfect example is a song lyric from Taylor Swift's *We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together* (2012): Ugh, so he calls me up and **he's like**, 'I still love you'.

everyday speech has a communicative utility, and this is significant across languages and among various demographics and social groups, signifying connection, bonding, and acceptance (Moreno, 2020).

2. Method

2.1 Material

For testing, material was drawn from the entertainment corpora, specifically six sentences from movies, television, and music from the 2000's to present day to represent modern speech patterns. These titles were specifically selected due to their overwhelming popularity in the years they were released. Our analysis utilized American, British, and Irish English sentences spoken by people of various ages and genders to encompass a wide demographic. The sentences were extracted from scenes from movies and television shows and from song lyrics off the artists' albums and were transcribed by hand by a second-year Linguistics student (See Table 1).

Table 1. Word material

Title	**Medium**	**English**	**Gender/Age**	**Line**
Bend It Like Beckham	Movie	British	F, teens	I mean, as a job, like. (Chadha, 2002)
Mean Girls	Movie	American	F, teens	You're like, really pretty. (Waters, 2004)
We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together (Taylor Swift)	Song	American	F, 20's	Like, we are never getting back together, like, ever. (Swift, 2012)
Succession	TV	American	M, 40's	I have like five people Gregging for me. (Armstrong et al, 2019)

Curb Your Enthusiasm	TV	American	M, 70's	I'm like, exploring the situation. (David et al, 2021)
The Banshees of Inisherin	Movie	Irish	M, 50's	That's great, like! (McDonagh, 2022)

2.2 Procedure

Word material from Table 1 was tested and analyzed by a second-year Linguistics student and verified by a fellow peer.

2.2.1 Movement Test

To determine the syntactic constituency of non-quotative *like*, we subjected the word to a series of movement tests. According to Gluckman (2020), any rearrangement of a sentence, while keeping its meaning, is considered a constituency test.

First, we moved the string, *like*, from its original position to another position within the sentence to provide evidence that the string is a constituent (Santorini et al, 2007). Secondly, once the string was identified as a constituent, we analyzed its original phrasal position and compared it to its new placement (See Figures 1-6). We then determined the grammaticality of this new placement, the changes that this movement produced, and what these changes represent (See Table 2).

2.2.2 Omission

To validate *like*'s communicative function, we subjected *like* to an omission test (See Example 1).

First, *like* was elided and the sentence was assessed to confirm that its overall meaning was still intact, despite *like*'s deletion. Secondly, the original sentence was compared to the *like*-deleted sentence to determine if the presence or absence of *like* made any semantic difference in the dialogue.

3. Results

3.1 Movement Test

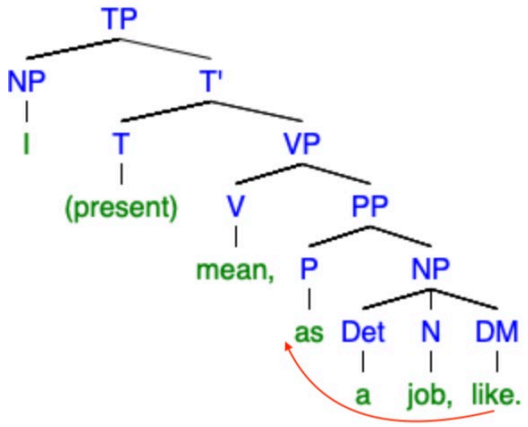

Figure 1. I mean, as a job, **like**. (Chadha, 2002)
I mean, **like**, as a job ____.

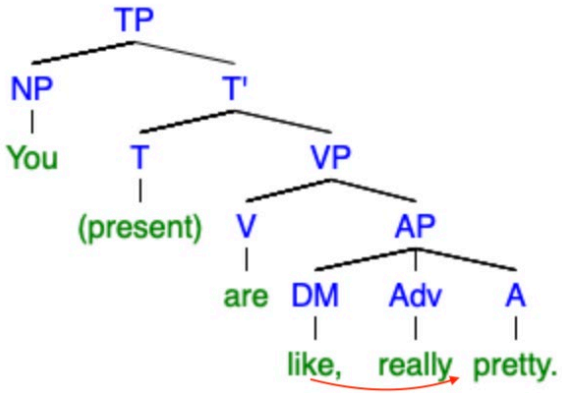

Figure 2. You're **like**, really pretty. (Waters, 2004)
You're ___ really **like**, pretty.

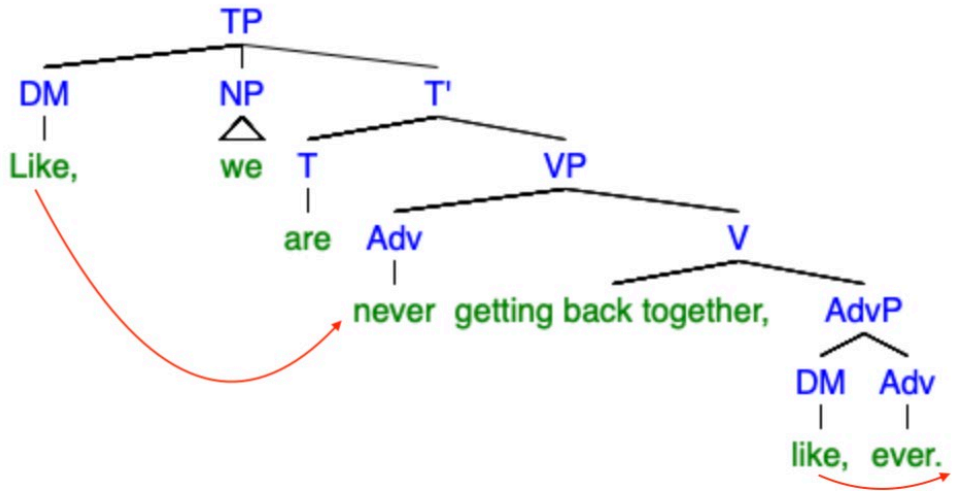

Figure 3. **Like**, we are never getting back together, **like**, ever. (Swift, 2012)
____ We are, **like**, never getting back together, ___, ever, **like.**

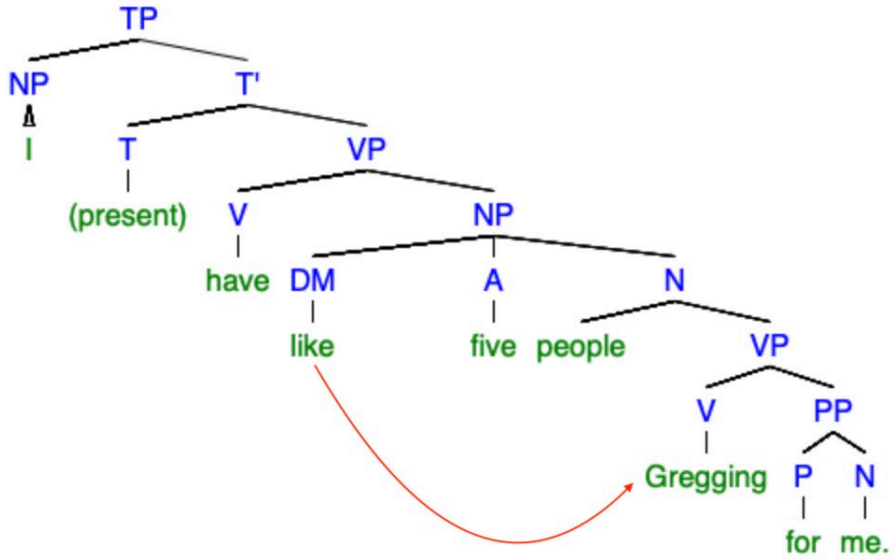

Figure 4. I have **like** five people Gregging for me. (Armstrong et al, 2019)
I have ____ five people **like**, Gregging for me.

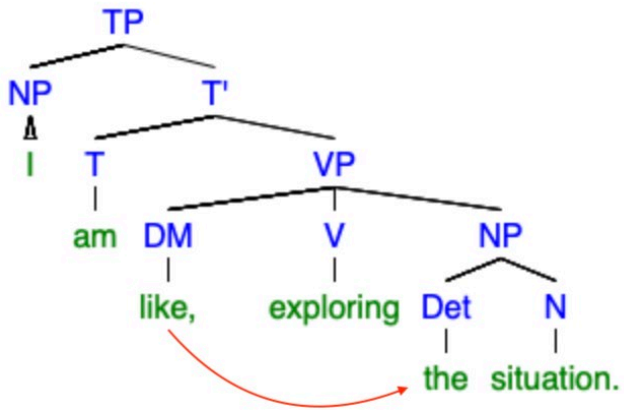

Figure 5. I'm **like**, exploring the situation. (David et al, 2021)
I'm ___ exploring **like**, the situation.

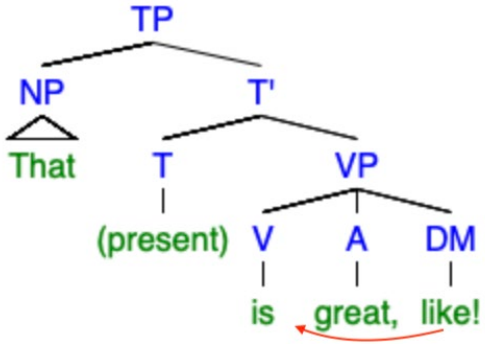

Figure 6. That's great, **like**! (McDonagh, 2022)
That's **like**, great ____!

As observed in Figures 1-6, the movement of *like* from its original position to a different position within or across a phrase (beginning, middle, end) showed that it could easily move within these parameters and remain grammatical. Although *like* at the end of a sentence is not as common in American English, it is a typical occurrence in British[2] and Irish English (Devitt, 2019).

[2] Anecdotal evidence, as per my British friends.

We deduced that *like* could move within and across prepositional phrases (PP); verb phrases (VP); adjective phrases (AP); adverb phrases (AdvP); and noun phrases (NP).

Table 2. Emphasis of *like*

Sentence	**Emphasis**
I mean, as a job, **like**. (Chadha, 2002)	The entire phrase preceding *like*.
I mean, **like**, *as a job*.	What I mean.
You're **like**, *really pretty*. (Waters, 2004)	The degree/scale of prettiness.
You're really **like**, *pretty*.	What you really are.
Like, *we are never getting back together, like, ever*. (Swift, 2012)	The entire phrase following the initial *like*.
Like, we are never getting back together, **like**, *ever*. (Swift, 2012)	The likelihood of us never getting back together.
We are never, **like**, *getting back together, ever, like*.	What we are never doing.
We are never, like, getting back together, ever, **like**.	The entire phrase preceding the final *like*.
I have **like** *five people Gregging for me*. (Armstrong et al, 2019).	What I have.
I have five people **like**, *Gregging for me*.	What the five people are doing.
I'm **like**, *exploring the situation*. (David et al, 2021)	What I'm doing.
I'm exploring **like**, *the situation*.	What I'm exploring.
That's great, **like**! (McDonagh, 2022)	The entire phrase preceding *like*.
That's **like**, great!	What that is.

In addition, the movement of *like* into various phrasal positions demonstrated that it functions as an emphatic morpheme in reference to the

phrase that follows it (See Table 2). The only instances when *like* appeared to refer to the entire sentence was when it was in word-initial or word-final position. Thus, depending on its placement, *like* served as a spotlight to shift focus onto different parts of a sentence.

3.2 Omission Test

Example 1.

a. I mean, as a job, **like**. (Chadha, 2002)
b. I mean, as a job.

c. You're **like,** really pretty. (Waters, 2004)
d. You're really pretty.

e. **Like**, we are never getting back together, **like**, ever. (Swift, 2012)
f. We are never getting back together, ever.

g. I have **like** five people Gregging for me. (Armstrong et al, 2019)
h. I have five people Gregging for me.

i. I'm **like**, exploring the situation. (David et al, 2021)
j. I'm exploring the situation.

k. That's great, **like**! (McDonagh, 2022)
l. That's great!

The deletion of *like* from the sentences in Example 1 suggested that its omission did not change the general meaning of the sentence. While the overall idea of the sentence remained the same, *like*'s absence removes the focus from phrases in the dialogue deemed significant by the speaker. The underscoring that *like* brought to its target phrases was lost, signifying a change in semantics and therefore, *like*'s syntactic contribution.

3.3 Summary

From this testing, our predictions are borne out:

- *Like* is a constituent.

- *Like* can be moved to multiple positions within and across prepositional, verb, adjective, adverb, or noun phrases (beginning, middle, end), and therefore, observes a syntactic pattern.
- *Like* is not a random, meaningless filler word; in our data, it functions as a discourse marker for emphasis and is used by speakers to direct attention to important phrases. Its omission changes the overall sentiment of a sentence, indicating that *like* fulfills a communicative function.

4. Discussion

The conversation regarding *like* and its usage is controversial because it is a word that is very much embedded into our everyday lives. *Like* is a shapeshifter bound by specific patterns, a true workhorse morpheme of the English language. It fulfills the purpose of a dialogue underline, similar to physical gestures in conversation, such as hand motions, pointing, or even facial expressions. It is an added layer of nuance and can be inserted almost anywhere in a given sentence, altering how people interpret dialogue according to the slight differences prompted by its placement. According to Montell (2019), this non-quotative *like* is often used as connection, organization, or expression of attitude in dialogue. *Like* signals to the listener the significant parts of speech, functioning as a check in to acknowledge focus (Wolfson, 2022). While *like* as a discourse marker has been dissected down to its many different purposes — hesitation, approximation, counterexpectation, reinforcement (McWhorter, 2016) — we can agree that it is this flexibility that makes it unlike any other word in the English language.

The omnipresence of *like* in English is not unique. In fact, other languages exhibit their own equivalents: French's *genre*, Quebecois French's *comme* (a literal translation of English's *like*), Swedish's *liksom*, Miami Spanish's *pero like*, and even American Sign Language[3]. This signifies that languages other than English also have similar nuance morphemes akin to *like* that are employed to add layers of meaning to speech. If *like* was meaningless, it would not have equivalents cross-linguistically. Not only this, the examples above, specifically *comme* and *liksom*, indicate that they may morphologically derive from *like* itself. In the Netherlands, a team of linguists has investigated the concept of a universal word (in their case,

[3] Anecdotal equivalents, as reported by my friends.

Huh?), the reasons why it is common across languages, and how it is constrained in a conversational environment (Dingemanse et al, 2013). With further investigation, *like* may very well behave in similar ways.

Socially, we are influenced by what we deem to be cool; language is no different. According to Moreno (2019), "collective identity…represents an evolutionary shift in belonging; an establishment of cultural identity; or act as an agent of cohesion, recognition, belonging and inclusion among various social groups" (p.10). As human beings, we want to be included, rather than excluded, and language provides an entryway into acceptance. Consequently, young women are slowly being credited, rather than criticized, for the use of *like* and recent data indicates that *like* transcends age and gender boundaries (Quenqua, 2012). Not surprisingly, the need to belong does not stop at the end of adolescence, although the usage of *like* evolves and differs according to specific age groups (D'Arcy, 2005).

Regarding experimental rigour, this study could benefit from real world dialogue testing with consultants of all ages and genders living in different areas of the world to strengthen confidence in the conclusions drawn from these results, which was based primarily on pre-written entertainment material. The incorporation of the analysis of quotative *be+like* would also shed light on syntactic contributions and patterning. Additionally, tracking the usage of *like* in everyday speech against our increased exposure to pop culture corpora (the main arbiters of coolness) would provide additional evidence of whether the amount of our media consumption is directly correlated to *like*'s steady rise in colloquial speech. As our use of media shows no signs of stopping, any subsequent analysis of *like* can only contribute to further explorations and discoveries within the linguistics paradigm.

In the meantime, what we have confirmed with certainty is that there is more to *like* than meets the eye. It would be remiss for speakers to attempt to eliminate *like* in everyday speech, dismissing it as a throwaway filler word, and not truly examine its unique behaviour within the English language.

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