Discourse marker *like*: A unified account

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Abstract

The English *like* is a case of synchronic polysemy that features adjectival, nominal, preposition, conjunction, and discourse marking uses. The latter constitute a mosaic of sub-functions attracting a variety of interpretations by linguists, including the functions of approximative, non-contrastive focuser, hedge, quotative, and discourse processor. While research tends to accept the quotative function, it is divided on the question of the remaining discourse functions displayed by the marker. The examination of polysemous *like* will begin with its diachronic evolution and its sociolinguistic distribution, then proceed to a discussion of previous approaches to the discourse marker function, then attempt to reconcile these within an extended grammaticalization framework, arguing that the different functions attributed to it are implicatures of the central concept of similarity/comparison, which is residual in its current use in the language.

**Keywords:** grammaticalization, discourse markers

1. Introduction

Modern English *like* displays a variety of functions, including those of noun, adjective, preposition, conjunction, suffix, and discourse marker (DM). The subject of the present paper is the latter, which has attracted a number of interpretations over the last two decades.

The feature apparently emerged as early as in the 1950’s, in counterculture slang, originally used by the Beatniks.¹ Originally stigmatized as vulgar, a featu-

¹ According to James (1983: 202), *like* is a compromiser and as such it displays particularly high frequency of occurrence in what Halliday (cited in James 1983) terms ‘antilanguages’, used by marginal social groups, as a reinforcer of solidarity. Examples are offered in Anthony Burgess’s (1972) novel, *A Clockwork Orange.*
re of Valley Girl talk, in the 1980's it experienced an increase in frequency of occurrence, becoming popular in the speech of teenage and college-age Americans, in New York and California, also attested in other English-speaking countries, in Canada, Scotland, and the UK.

Approaches to the feature have extended beyond the initial attribution to it of a filler function, including the function of approximator, a marker of direct speech, a hedge, a compromiser, a common ground indicator, a loose talk marker, a focuser. What I propose to do in this paper is to attempt a unified approach within the theory of grammaticalization, reconciling existing approaches, treating them as implicatures of a central, prototypical meaning/function.

2. Like: what it is we are studying

Approaches to like in the literature essentially fall into three subtypes: (a) use with numerical expressions indicating approximation, as in example (1) in which like behaves like a preposition:

(1) Phoebe\textsuperscript{3} - Six more months, three meals a day, I'm gonna eat like, you know, millions of cows.

(b) quotative use, introducing direct speech/thought:

(2) Chandler- He's gonna try to undermine me. He will be like 'So where's your boyfriend? What's his name? Chester?'

In this example, occurrence with the future tense makes a case for the fact that it does not introduce actual words spoken, but rather a free version, a potential utterance/thought.

(c) the discourse marker per se, described as a filler, hedge, indicator that the contribution following is not an accurate version of what the speaker had in mind, or, for Schourup (1985), suggesting selectivity on the part of the speaker, in his/her choice of what to say.

(3) Rachel- So what is she, like, a model, an aerobics instructor, what? Ross- Actually she's a paleontology doctoral candidate specializing in the cenozoic era.
Chandler- ok, that's like the easiest era!

\textsuperscript{2} Previous grammaticalization accounts of like are by Romaine and Lange (1991) who adopted Traugott's model (1989), and by Buchstaller (2001) using a radial category framework.

\textsuperscript{3} Examples 1-4 are from the cult American sitcom 'Friends' set in 1990’s New York, tracking the life of 6 friends from their early twenties into their thirties.
or for Miller and Weinert (1995) assigning focus:

(4) Joey- There was this scene in Footloose
Chandler-Flashdance
Joey- Yeah. Where that plumber girl ...
Chandler-She was a welder.
Joey- What were you like IN the movie?

In the sections that follow, the evolution of the lexeme will be examined, followed by an overview of approaches in the literature, to be used as implications of the central, prototypical meaning of similarity, as will be proposed.

3. Origin and evolution

While synchronic discussions of the different functions of *like*, quotative and DM, are frequent in the relevant literature, and sufficient research has been conducted regarding its sociolinguistic distribution, little research has been conducted regarding its diachronic evolution.

References to its history can be found in Romaine and Lange (1991), Jespersen (1946), and etymological dictionaries like the *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* and Ernest Weekly’s (1921) *An Etymological Dictionary of Modern English*. According to the latter, the initial form was adjective *like*, then giving rise to the preposition in the 12th century and the adverbial function in the 13th. Adjective *like* is said to stem from OE *gelíc* meaning ‘like, similar’, related to ProtoGermanic *galíkaz* ‘having the same form’, ‘with a corresponding body’, from *ga- ‘with, together’ and *līkan* source of OE *lic* ‘body’.

The postponed filler function (‘going really fast, like’) is said to have emerged in the late 18th century, while there is also a “presumed emphatic” usage mentioned (‘going, like, really fast’) originating in the 1950’s in counterculture slang and bop talk.

If the connection with OE *lic ‘body*’ is established, then we are dealing with a prototypical grammaticalization case, whereby a full, lexical, word, with referential meaning, enters the grammaticalization process as follows:

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4 Otto Jespersen (1946) proposes the following evolution for the adjectival suffix –*ly*:

OE *lik* “appearance, form, body”
> ME *-lik* (Northern varieties) > weakened form *-ly*
- *-liche* (Southern varieties)

The change is located somewhere between the 13th and 15th centuries and for Jespersen it was due to Scandinavian influence. The suffix co-existed with a parallel suffix –*like* that referred to external appearance rather than inner qualities.
an adjective > suffixes -like (gentlemanlike) and -ly (friendly)
a preposition (13th cent.) > Conjunction (14th cent.) > DM (late 18th)
an adverbial (14th) > suffix -ly (eagerly)

The fact that the adverbial function historically follows the preposition one presents a challenge for the unidirectionality hypothesis, which has led linguists who examined the diachrony of *like* (Buchstaller 2001) to posit multiple grammaticalization chains. The same position is adopted in this paper, as suggested above, and it will be argued that this is indeed a case of grammaticalization, displaying a number of structural and pragmatic features characteristic of the process:

(a) Decategorialization: from a full lexical noun, *lic* or *liche*, meaning ‘body’, function words emerge, adverb, preposition, conjunction, DM, more restricted in the contexts of use.

(b) Generalization of meaning, or rather, loss of full semantic content.

(c) Bonding: the suffixes -ly and -like, cannot occur independently

(d) Increase in pragmatic function. There is a shift from referential to non-referential meanings, as the DM becomes more associated with the speech event, in some sort of meta-referentiality, pointing to the universe of participants’ knowledge.

(e) Subjectification. The DM is gradually associated with speaker attitude, in particular with attitude to discourse flow.

(f) Divergence (Hopper 1991) as *like* exists in a number of forms, i.e. adjective (of like mind), a conjunction/preposition, on the one hand, and the more grammaticalized adverb/adjective-yielding suffix (e.g. Human-LIKE, gentleman-LIKE).

Concerning the emergence of the quotative function, according to Romaine and Lange (1991), it derives from the Middle English tendency to have double complementisers (*lyk as, like as*), such as *while that, which that*, etc., which were simplified later on: Standard English favoured *as*, colloquial English favoured *like*. This usage is mentioned by Olga Fischer, in Blake (1992), where the composite conjunctions of *as* are said to have the meaning of counterfactual comparisons, of the sense of *as if*. A number of examples of *like as if, as like as, like as there was* can be found in 19th century literature.⁵

5) “O father, I’m *like as if* I was stifled,” said Eppie. “I couldn’t ha’ thought as any folks lived i’ this way, so close together. How pretty the Stone-pits ‘ull look when we get back!”

(Eliot, George : Silas Marner (1885) 1861: 170)

⁵ Examples (5-8) were taken from the University of Virginia Electronic Text Center.
(6) The receiver — "(methought a spasm seized him at the name of this official, and he broke off). "But it's all past and done with, anyway; and what I want to get at is the facts about the wreck. I don't seem to understand it; appears to me like as there was something underneath."

(Swift, Jonathan, 1667-1745 : The Wrecker 1898)

4. Sociolinguistic distribution and attitudinal studies

As was mentioned in the introduction, DM like was a marked form in register, frequently attested in colloquial speech and stigmatized as ‘vulgar’. A significant observation in the literature that goes beyond simple value judgements is that of Jespersen (1946), whereby like is frequent in colloquial and vulgar language “to modify the whole of one’s statement, a word or phrase, modestly indicating that one's choice of words was not, perhaps, quite felicitous. It is generally used by inferiors addressing superiors.” In this case, beyond the usual condemnation of the word as vulgar, we find that it has stylistic significance and an implication on the part of the speaker that what follows is less than the exact meaning intended, hence close to the function of a hedge, or to Schourup’s (1985) definition in terms of an “unspecified minor nonequivalence”.

In terms of its current sociolinguistic distribution, it is the quotative marker that has become subject of quantitative study, namely in Romaine and Lange (1991) and Blyth, Recktenwald and Wang (1990). Age-wise, most researchers agree that it is a feature of ‘younger’ talk: the Romaine and Lange research yielded that users of quotative like are typically under 30, while Blyth et al. observed a relative decline in the usage of be like after 25 and a sharp decrease after 38. In terms of gender, research is divided and the actual frequency counts are often contradicted by attitudinal studies, always showing an expectation that the feature characterizes female talk. In particular, in the Romaine and Lange research be like was predominantly female (83%), while in Blyth et al. it was mainly men who used it, as was the case in the Daily -O’Cain experiment (2000), for both focuser and quotative like. Daily -O’Cain also conducted a survey of sociolinguistic attitudes/stereotypes and found that like correlates well with solidarity-oriented traits, such as friendliness, attractiveness, cheerfulness, rather than status-oriented ones, and concluded that it is for this reason that the DM is viewed as more characteristic of female speech.

Closing this brief sociolinguistic profile of like, it is worth mentioning the genre in which the researches were conducted, which, however, has not received sufficient attention as a potential parameter influencing the relevant occurrence
or absence of the feature. It is felt that there may be ground to suppose that it
does affect research findings, given the different results yielded by the Miller
and Weinert (1995) and Siegel’s (2002) research. In particular, the former,
which concluded that like is a focuser, was conducted on map-task dialogues,
while the latter was conducted in informal discussions among high school
friends on the philosophical topic of ‘What is an individual?’ and concluded that
like signals ‘a possible mismatch between words and meaning’. In other words,
introducing the different speech genres as parameters in the research might
suggest that polyfunctionality arises from an interaction of the DM with the
different genres.

5. Approaches in the literature

An overview of the attention like has received in the literature can be found in
Miller and Weinert (1995) and Andersen (1998). For some scholars, its use is
redundant or expresses modification, paraphrasable as ‘somewhat’, ‘as it were’
‘not altogether’. For others, it expresses an after-thought, vagueness, it tones
down an expression or whole sentence.

In more recent treatments of the term, its discourse function is recognized,
and relevant literature seems to indisputably accept the existence of two func-
tions, the quotative and the DM one, which some view as a hedge, others as a
focuser. The distinction of two functions is supported by their different distribu-
tion in discourse.

The quotative function (Underhill 1988, Daily -O’Cain 2000) has a more
fixed syntactic position, occupying the position before unuttered thought or
possible direct quotation. Discourse marker like, on the other hand, has no clear
grammatical function, and only receives one restriction, that what follows must
be new information.

5.1 Quotative ‘like’

One of the most extensive treatments of like in the literature is that of Romaine
and Lange (1991), examining the quotative function, as an introducer of semi-
reported speech. To elucidate the exact slice of quotative function like has, Ro-
maine and Lange contrast it with the other quotative markers, go and say. The
example below that the authors offer is characteristic of how like is closer to the
Speaker’s interpretation of what was said, an inference of the actual words.

(7) She goes, “Mom wants to talk to you.” It’s LIKE, “Hah, hah. You’re
about to get in trouble” (Romaine and Lange:1991:230).
On a formality scale from least (no introducer) to most formal (say), like is next to the use of no introducer, as it conveys vividness, and of the three variants, like, go and say, like ‘dramatizes internalized feelings’ (in their data, like correlates best with the first person, these cases accounting for 58% of the total). We could, thus, say that like is called upon to meet the problem of the inability of reported speech to capture the emotive aspects of discourse. Vividness of report in the function of like in narrative is supported by the fact that go and be like tend to co-relate with a switch of the tense to the (historic) present.

Quotative like is also examined by Blyth et al. (1990), who involve the greatest variety of parameters in a relevant study, namely, age, grammatical person, gender, sequence in narrative (more frequent in non-initial position). They too observe that it is used for dramatic effect, a fact reflected in the correlation with the present tense, as opposed to its variant, say.

5.2 Discourse marker ‘like’

As was previously mentioned, unlike the quotative, DM like displays considerable multifunctionality and has attracted a number of different interpretations in the literature, ranging from that of a hedge, to that of a focuser. The presentation will begin with the latter approach, as it is the one most conflicted with others.

5.2.1 ‘Like’ as focuser

The view that like is a focuser was put forward by Underhill (1988) and Miller and Weinert (1995).\(^6\)

Underhill argues that like marks subsequent discourse as focus, examining its occurrence before new concepts or entities, in statements, questions and responses to questions, before unusual notions and stereotyped expressions such as ‘That’s like SO not happening!’ For him, focus marking is a more likely function for the DM than approximation, as seen in the example he offers (Underhill 1988: 245):

(8) Teacher (confirming): Friday at one.
Student: Change mine to Wednesday. I’ll do it like twelve to two.

Miller and Weinert argue that like is a non-specific, non-contrastive focuser, a discourse marker assigning salience to what follows, basing their view on a research conducted on map task dialogues. Two of the arguments proposed in

\(^6\) The authors date the emergence of this use as early as in the early 19th century and base their assumption that it must have quite a long history on the fact that linguistic phenomena appear first in spoken language and then in the written.
favour of the focuser hypothesis are that (Miller and Weinert 1995:378-9) the occurrences of like were produced in cases of misunderstandings and argument and that in 32 dialogues, half the fully coded corpus, 76% of the occurrences of like could be paraphrased by a WH-cleft, 8% by an IT-cleft, and 4% by a DO YOU MEAN construction. This was taken to indicate that like assigns salience to what follows.7

Furthermore, the authors reject the interpretation of like as approximative, on the grounds that there were cases in their data in which like co-occurred with just followed by directional and locative adverbs, which would indicate accuracy, that is the exact opposite of approximation, as can be seen in the example (9) they offer.

(9) I'm just like underneath the telephone box about like about fifteen fourteen centimeters away from the telephone box

My objection against the interpretation of like as indicating accuracy in this context relates to the fact that the direction ‘underneath the phone box’ is further qualified by ‘about 15 centimeters away’. Why is there need for further qualification if accuracy was achieved with the use of like? Let alone that one cannot be literally directly underneath a phone box. If anything, this seems to be a case of preservation of the maxim of quality, while at the same time reserving one’s right to exaggerate for greater expressivity.

It thus appears more likely that it is implicatures of focusing that are detected in such examples, implicatures that arise from the interaction of the core pragmatic function of the DM with the particular discourse genre in which it is used. That is, implicatures will be different when like is encountered in the context of free narrative, such as in a film description task, as opposed to when it is used in a more rigidly structured register/genre such as a map-task dialogue. In this sense, we could speak of more and less prototypical contexts of use, and the most prototypical context of the use of like seems to be what Redeker (1990) calls “monologic story enactment” in her examination of the frequency of like in a film description task.

Before proceeding to other approaches to the discourse use of like, there are two further arguments against the focuser hypothesis, proposed by Siegel (2002):

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7 Furthermore, in spontaneous conversations, clause-final like examples (which will not be examined in this paper) were found to counter potential inferences, objections, doubts. One example offered was that of the research assistant, Mike, who announced one day that his father ‘is back in hospital like’ in an effort to dispel thoughts that it might be serious. Meanwhile, clause-initial like was found to elucidate a previous comment.
Firstly, speakers’ elicited responses to their use of the DM show that it is not synonymous to ‘exactly’, nor to ‘about’, so it is neither a fuser, nor an approximator.

Secondly, the high frequency of like she observed in the same strings of discourse suggests that it would be impossible for all sections in its scope to be focused. Rather, the fact that some theorists claim it is a fuser is coincident of the fact that it is new material that “speakers are most likely to be insecure about describing accurately” (p. 41).

5.2.2 ‘Like’ as a processing device

Schourup (1985) (focussing on the AmE use of like) classifies like among what he calls, evincives, which are a result of the co-existence of 3 worlds in active conversation: the speaker’s thinking, the hearer’s world and the shared world. Like, for him “is used to express a possible unspecified minor nonequivalence of what is said and what is meant” (Schourup 1985: 42). Furthermore, the fact that it tends to occur at points where possible lexical variation is greatest suggests that it indicates selectivity on the part of the speaker.

In a similar vein, for Jucker and Smith (1998), discourse markers represent a way of negotiating common ground, the attempts the speaker makes to reconcile his/her own state of knowledge with that of the interlocutor. The fact that there is a tendency for presentation markers, like as well as you know, to be more frequent in conversations among friends than among strangers is interpreted to be due to the better insight friends have into the interlocutor’s state of knowledge.

Gisle Andersen (1998), finally, attempts to provide a unitary account of the functions of like within relevance theory, suggesting that it is a loose talk marker. Within a relevance framework, loose talk relates to the use of pragmatic markers to reduce processing effort by providing cues as to their processing. In this light, much like the proposals of Jucker and Smith (1998) and Schourup (1985), like is an interpretive, procedural element guiding and constraining interpretation, signalling a discrepancy between the propositional form of the utterance and the thought it represents:

(10) We were having baths together when we were like two years old

In this case, the literal version specifying the exact period in which this clause was true would be an exception rather than the norm because it would not

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8 Relevance (Sperber and Wilson 1985/86) being all about the trade-off between contextual effects and processing costs.
reduce processing effort and would not convene with Grice’s maxim of quantity, which is to make your contribution no more informative than necessary. As a loose talk marker, *like* is incompatible with exactness and strong communication, thus it does not occur in strong statements, as in *My name is Mary* and imperatives, as in *Pick up that piece of paper immediately!*

5.2.3 ‘Like’ as having semantic significance

Closing this overview of approaches to *like*, it is worth considering one that underlines that the marker also has semantic significance, rather than simple pragmatic function. This is Siegel’s (2002) view, according to whom, while *like* does not change the main assertion of the sentence, it *does* interact with core semantics in that:

(a) it affects truth conditions, e.g.

(11) If the sentence ‘*He has 6 brothers*’ is F,
   ‘*He has like 6 brothers*’ is T

(b) it weakens strong determiners:

(12) *They invited, like, everybody, so we’ll have to find out WHO (STRONG + like : WEAK)*

Accounting for this semantic behaviour of the DM, Siegel makes reference to both Sperber and Wilson’s (1985/86: 61) notion of “loose talk”, and to Laserhorn’s (1999) theory of “pragmatic slack”, whereby, preserving Grice’s maxim of quantity (“do not be more precise than you have to”) the speaker’s contribution gives rise to a ‘pragmatic halo’, “a set of objects made up of the denotation itself and other objects of the same logical type as the denotation, assigned by the context”. This is reminiscent of James’ (1983: 198) discussion of compromisers like sort of, *like, you know*, which allude to a paradigm of lexical choices, “synonyms of other items and constructions which may be considered as substitutable for them within the same discourse slot”.

6. The proposal: Reconciling the different approaches

In searching for the core meaning of the word, given the preposition and conjunction meanings of *like*, the main intuition is that metaphorical extension is the cognitive process at play and that the notion of comparison must feature

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9 Underhill (1988), however, does mention an example of a middle-aged brother remarking to his teenage sister as she lights up a cigarette:

Brother: *That’ll stunt your growth.*

Sister (very scornful): *Like be serious.*
in the metaphorical mapping somehow. With a numerical expression, the effect of ‘something similar to’ would give an implication of approximation. The function of a hedge would equally well arise by the implication of inexactness, hence, lack of certainty regarding the accuracy of the proposition of the utterance that follows. This, in environments of requests, might convey a sense of politeness (Underhill 1988) as it mitigates the mandatory force of the speech act.

Proceeding to the quotative, like does seem to point to a discrepancy between the real speech/ thought and what is actually uttered by the speaker. Suffice one to remember that unlike its counterparts say and go, it can introduce reported thought, therefore having little connection with actual utterance. This is little surprising given the meaning of preposition like which indicates similarity rather than identification.

Concerning like as a procedural device, suggesting common ground between interlocutors does build on the notion of comparison, that between the ‘different worlds’. ‘Loose talk’, finally, builds on the same notion, suggesting a version similar to but possibly not the exact one for reasons of processing ease.

The only departure from Andersen’s (1998) and Siegel’s (2002) views regards the argument that processing ease attained with the use of the DM convenes with the maxim of quantity. It is felt that like affords the speaker expressivity (vividness of narration, exaggeration perceived as focusing), without violating the maxim of quality, the speaker’s taking leave of his/her commitment to the truth of his/her utterance.

Returning to the approach that was the most difficult to fit into this prototype of the functions of like, the focuser approach as represented by Underhill (1988) and Miller and Weinert (1995), this is taken to be evidence of the interaction there exists between the DM and the contexts of its use, the particular discourse genre. Miller and Weinert conduct their research on the basis of (significantly structured) map-task dialogues, and in giving people instructions/ directions, one is committed to the accuracy of one’s utterance.

7. Conclusion: Unifying approaches under grammaticalization

The purpose of this paper was to attempt to reconcile existing views on the discourse function of like and propose a grammaticalization account of its current DM function and polysemy. Regarding the cognitive aspect of grammaticalization, the key to an account of like is the notion of comparison, already present in the preposition function of the word, together with its Janus-like other aspect of nonequivalence (Schourup 1985). The central meaning of like seems to be ‘bearing some similarity to, suggesting some sort of approximation’. What is at
play is metaphorical mapping, forcing, a likeness upon a situation characterized
by nonequivalence, discrepancy. Likeness is a concept in which both disparity
and significant similarity co-exist. In juxtaposing two concepts, we perceive
them to be non-identical, therefore, different, yet at the same time comparable
in some sense that licenses comparison in the first place. Forcing comparison
upon a situation characterized by discrepancy may well be the reason why
emphasis is felt, interpreted as focusing, or as a sense of climax in the case of
narration.

Turning to the linguistic cycle, given the etymological link to the word ‘liche’,
it was mentioned that this is indeed a prototypical case of grammaticalization.
A lexical item is stripped of all but the prototypical meaning, it becomes a (syn-
tagmatically fixed) preposition meaning ‘in the guise of’, indicating similarity, then
a conjunction preceding clauses, then a syntactically free DM. In terms of
Traugott’s (1989) three Semantic Pragmatic Tendencies, the word begins with
referential meaning, it then becomes a conjunction, the colloquial equivalent of
as (shift into the textual domain under Semantic Pragmatic Tendency II), and,
thereafter, it becomes a DM, a marker of direct discourse (shift into the interper-
sonal/modal domain under Tendency III). As a DM, like indicates vividness of
report, while also suggesting speaker dissociation/lack of commitment to the
exactness of the content of what he/she reports.

Finally, concerning the pragmatic motivation of the process, it is felt that it is
the need for greater expressivity rather than processing ease, the maxim at
play being that of quality rather than quantity.

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10 The issue of competing motivations of language change has concerned a significant part of
grammaticalization theory, the most important motivations being code efficiency/simplicity
on the one hand, and informativeness on the other, in Hopper and Traugott’s (1993) terms,
routinization versus innovation/creativity.


