

# Grammars, Words, and Embodied Meanings: On the Uses and Evolution of *So* and *Like*

By Jürgen Streeck

This paper is about two Germanic words, one German (“so”), one American English (“like”). Each, in one of its usage variants, makes “nonverbal behavior” salient, serving as preface or relevance marker for some unit of body behavior. Both words also give these nonverbal behaviors grammatical status, anchoring them in unfolding structures of sentences and assigning them specific semantic-syntactic roles. In the case of *so*, the enactment characteristically is a descriptive gesture; in that of *like*, a mimetic enactment, that is, a performance in which the speaker acts “in character” rather than as situated self. I have elsewhere referred to the conversational practice of (re-)enacting a character’s behavior as “body quotation” (Streeck, 1988); the forms *I’m like*, *I was like*, *he was like*, and so on, accordingly can be classified as “body quotatives” (i.e., as expressions that mark body quotes).

The histories of *so* and *like* differ with respect to how deeply these embodiment-marking roles are etched into them. *So* appears to have been serving its duty of marking descriptive gestures for centuries. *Like*, although it is very old (as is its connection to the body), has only recently acquired (or reacquired) the task of marking expressive behavior. There is a remarkable parallel, however, between American English and German in the very fact that new body quotatives have recently evolved and that body quotation has gained new prominence in both language communities at about the same time. This makes the story of *so* and *like* a case study in the relationship between language and communication and their overlapping yet distinct courses of evolution: Two languages may be as closely related genealogically as English and German and be under the influence of similar social forces that result in parallel changes in communicative practices (i.e., the new trend toward “body quotation”), and yet the linguistic resources that are recruited for these practices and with which they are enacted can be structurally different and have different “values within the system” (Saussure, 1964), as well as different syntactic and interactional implications.

## So

When Germans depict the world with their hands as they talk—when they make descriptive (iconic) gestures—they almost always utter *so* in the process. *So* in this

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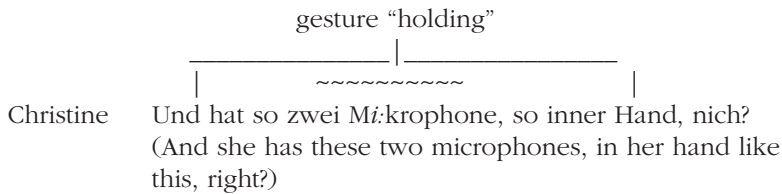
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tered concurrently to the gesture (*so in diesem Format*) specifies its syntactic role as attribute to an object, *Fotos*.

In Example 2, from the same conversation, *so* is uttered twice, once immediately before and once immediately after the speaker looks at her hands. Both hands are configured in a grip, a posture of holding, and held out before the chest.

Example 2.



The first occurrence of *so* is prenominal and marks the gesture as part of a noun phrase, “two microphones”; the second is adverbial and marks the gesture as part of the verb phrase and thus as part of the depiction of the actress holding the microphones. In other words, by inserting *so* a second time in the utterance, reference of the gesture is shifted from undergoer (i.e., object) to action. The utterance is thereby brought into better semantic alignment with the gesture, which physically depicts an act, not an object acted upon.

These brief examples should suffice here; they represent the “canonical,” standard use of *so* in the context of descriptive gesture (for more detail, see Streeck, 1993). German does not seem to be the only language that has units specifically designed to mark gestures or other bodily enactments. In Japanese, for example, not unlike German, a deictic adverb, *kou* (“like this”), habitually occurs in coordination with gaze and gesture in constructions that parallel the coordination of gaze, gesture, and *so* in German conversations. The range of syntactic environments in which *kou* can occur, however, is more restricted as *kou* is strictly an adverb. In the Philippine (Austronesian) language Ilokano, the demonstrative *kastoy* (“like this, near the speaker”) occurs as a verb stem, pointing to an accompanying gesture (“like-*this*-ing”), whereas another demonstrative, *kasdiay* (“like that, far from speaker and hearer”), may be used at the conclusion of utterances that have included gesture as part of a description or account.

### Like

English, including American English, *so* far does not have a single word that serves as prototypical marker of bodily enactments in the same way in which *so* fulfills this role in German. It is conceivable, though, that *like* will grow into this role. *Like*, which has always retained semantic connections to the body, however pale, has recently experienced expansions in its range of uses, one of which brings it closer again to the semantic field of “body.” *Like* has taken on, first, a role as “discourse marker,” specifically as “focus marker,” a type of unit that marks subsequent talk as salient (for example, as new information). Second, in combina-

tion with *be* (and less frequently *go*), *like* forms part of the new quotative, *to be like* (*go like*). It is not clear yet how *like*, in the expression *be like* (as in, *and I'm like*) should be analyzed, syntactically speaking: Is *like* in this context just the discourse marker that also appears in many other places (and *be* itself is the quotative verb), or should the phrase *be like* be seen as stem of a new, compound quotative verb? The first analysis is presupposed by the punctuation practiced by many newspaper editors, which brackets *like* by commas: "And I was, like, 'Oh my God!'" I suggest that, although this may or may not be how *be like* became a quotative verb, it does not represent the current state of the evolution of the language (in which *be like* is fully lexicalized as a verb). Either way, *like* is a prime example of a linguistic unit that, because it has undergone multiple stages of grammaticalization, relexicalization, and expansion of use, affords members of the speech community a wide range of things to do with it. New senses of the word coexist with vestigial ones. For example, although now a discourse marker, *like* continues to exist as a preposition. In fact, because it has multiple meanings (and sentences can accordingly be continued in a variety of ways after *like* has been uttered), speakers may utter *like* even though what it exactly means or is being used to do is established only as the sentence unfolds.

In the following, I will describe ways in which *like* is used in a single conversation. Joey and Tony, ages 9 and 10, talk about horror movies in the living room of a home in which they are having a sleepover during a summer night in Texas. I will delineate the range of syntactic and pragmatic frames within which *like* occurs, including, in particular, the frame of bodily quotation. I will then relate these different uses to the grammatical and lexical history of *like*, that is, to the stages of role assignment and change that it has previously undergone, and subsequently demonstrate how *like*—notably within the construction *it's like*—can serve in the unit-by-unit coordination of action and talk.

The first extract (Example 3) serves as an example of the canonical role that *like* plays in the integration of talk and bodily enactments. Joey talks about various opportunities to watch movies on airplanes and at airports and describes a machine that plays movies when one inserts a card into a slot.

### Example 3.

- 1 J But they ha- they have awesome films I mean,
- 2 they like give you a card
- 3 and go like "Cool! Save your card."

onset                      gesture "sticking card into"

\_\_\_\_\_ | \_\_\_\_\_ | \_\_\_\_\_ | \_\_\_\_\_ |

4 → But then they're like "Stick this card into this machine

Joey uses *be like* as a quotative verb (roughly equivalent to *say*), but accompanies the verbal quote by a gesture showing the act of inserting the card into the machine. (Because the focus of this article is not on gestures and their interpretation,

but rather on the uses of *like*, I refrain from giving “etic” descriptions of bodily enactments and simply assume that assignment of meaning is unproblematic. Notice that *like* is used here as an idiomatic, quotative verb, parallel to *be like* in Line 4.)

In Example 4, in contrast, *go like* is used in a slightly different way. Here, *like* occurs in the role of preposition (*like this*), and *goes like this* indexes an imminent enactment: a would-be kiss. Joey reenacts a hug and kiss that he witnessed while watching the *Brady Bunch* television series: He throws his arms around Tony and pretends to kiss him three times on the cheek (something he surely would not do “for real”), to demonstrate how tourists are greeted by hula dancers as they step off the plane in the South Pacific.

#### Example 4.

- 1 J ((chuckles)) You know? On the Brady Bunch?  
 2 It's like- the Brady Bunch goes to Hawaii.  
 3 And it's like- You know how they always on the plane?  
 4 Like- all these hula dancers?  
 5 And they give you this- flower-ribbon.  
 6 And then they like kiss you?
- hug, 3 kisses  
 |           |  
 |           |
- 7 And it's like- what? Brady goes like this.

The several uses of *like* in this segment represent different stages in the evolution of *like*: *It's like*, in Lines 2, 3, and 7, represents the most recent stage. In Line 4, *like* is used as a “conjunctive” or “backward-linking device” (see below), which is a recent usage, though not as recent as the quotative; in Line 6, it is used as discourse marker. I will return to these stages and senses below.

Because multiple variants of *like* coexist, a sentence and utterance in which *like* is uttered can often be continued in a variety of ways. This makes *like* particularly suitable as a “filler,” that is, as a device used when the speaker is hesitating in committing to a continuation of the talk. In this regard, *like* resembles various other grammatical devices across languages, items such as complementizers, “linkers” (Streeck, 1996), and some conjunctions (Jefferson, 1980). One value of these words or forms as devices of a “participants' syntax” or “syntax of sentences-in-progress” (Lerner, 1991) is that their use delays the moment when the speaker must commit to a type of utterance completion (or continuation). They secure the “progressivity” of talk (Schegloff, 1979).

Consider the following pairs of utterances. In the first half of each pair, *like* comes off as an element of an unbroken, fluid construction; in the second, it becomes the anchor in a two-part construction. In Example 6, the speaker hesitates before a name and then produces it with question intonation, apparently soliciting a sign of recognition; the predication (what is said about the carrier of

the name) is farmed out to the next clause. In Example 5, this production format exists as a possibility, but it is not used.

Example 5.

It's like Ripley gets into this transport suit.

Example 6.

Well an' it's like uhm- uhm Ripley? You know how she like tied-

In Example 7, *be like* is followed by a narrative sentence, whereas in Example 8, it is followed by reported speech plus enactment.

Example 7.

He's like- sliding on the floor.

Example 8.

They're like "Stick this card into this machine and . . . ."

In combination with *something*, *like* can be used to append various kinds of components to units of talk, as Examples 9 and 10 illustrate.

Example 9.

or something like that

Example 10.

something like "Now it's finally over."

Each time, then, the choice of a construction with *like* postpones the choice point at which the speaker must commit to a grammatical frame for the rest of the sentence. *Like* enables speakers to make up their sentences as they go along, instead of being bound to a particular construction type from the beginning. This is because different grammatical varieties of *like* coexist in contemporary American English, and the determination of which version a particular instance is can be left to subsequent talk. What seems especially important is that *like* buys the speaker the option of continuing the utterance with an enactment of some sort, to switch from the verbal to the nonverbal mode. *Like* gives this shift organization and intelligibility. In this role, *like* revives its own history as a word that originally meant "body."

### The Evolution of *Like*

*Like* derives from a Proto-Germanic noun \*llk- (pronounced "leak"), which means "body." In German, the root is highly visible in the word *Leiche* ("corpse"). In the

word's German and English derivatives *g-leich* and *a-like*, the notion of likeness prevails instead, and the connection with "body" is submerged and forgotten: Speakers of German are not aware that there is a connection between *gleich* ("alike") and *Leiche* ("corpse"). Moreover, other senses of *gleich* have been lexicalized that have even less transparent connections to "body," including "soon," "in a minute." Neither are speakers of English aware that the two parts of *likely*, *like* and *-ly*, derive from the same word, meaning "body." But the *languages* "remember" this connection; they can keep it in play and available for renewed use. Across many of its uses as a grammatical device—that is, after these uses first separated from the original noun, which presumably continued to exist for a while—*like* has retained a semantic profile in which the descent from "body" can still be felt. This is true especially for the meaning that *like* expresses in its incarnation as preposition, namely *likeness*. Likeness between people, for example, is first of all a physical, that is, bodily, affair, and this notion is summed up in the Gothic version of *like*, *ga-leiks*, which means "having the same/a common body."<sup>1</sup>

There appears to be widespread agreement on the grammatical history of the word *like*, as demonstrated by a lively debate on the pages of *American Speech* (Blyth, Recktenwald, & Wang, 1990; Ferrara & Bell, 1995; Romaine & Lange, 1991; Underhill, 1988; see also Meehan, 1991). One point of agreement is that multiple senses of *like*, although they evolved at different historical stages, coexist in present-day American English.

One of its first grammaticalizations in English shows *\*llk* becoming the suffix *-ly*, via composite nouns in which it occupied the second part, and giving the words in which it occurred the meaning, first, of "having the body of," and then of "having properties of" or "in the manner of/in an X-like manner." By implication, *-ly* also became the form marking an entire word class (or part of speech), that is, adverbs (adverbials). This is a nice example of the distant, archaic meanings that sometimes look at us when we look at grammar: We find a concrete and very meaningful way in which a grammatical concept is expressed. Here, *manner* (the meaning of the word class, adverb) is related to *body* (the original meaning of *-ly*), and indeed, the manner in which an action is carried out is, in the first place, the way it is embodied and enacted. Linguists call these processes of drift *clines* (Hopper & Traugott, 1993). Clines are stepwise processes of grammaticalization in which words with concrete meanings are applied to ever more generic and abstract contexts and thereby lose most of their semantic profile or detail—they are "bleached," made to encode purely relational information. At the same time, the units often undergo reduction of their outer form (attrition): *llk* becomes *ly*, *going to* becomes *gonna*.

Whereas *llk* thus developed into a *post*-positioned grammatical unit (a suffix), a separate but similar strand of development linked it to the word that it precedes in the sentence: *like* thus became a *pre*-position, put before a noun phrase in a comparative construction to express likeness. Semantically, *-ly* and *like* are much the same; what differs is simply the grammatical role each plays. The old core that

<sup>1</sup> Mark Southern provided this information.

reverberates is still “sharing a body with,” as in Gothic *ge-llk*: “He eats like a pig”; his embodiment is that of a pig.

Then (probably during the 19th century), *like* began to get placed at clause beginnings and thus evolved into a conjunction, as in this example from 1886 (from *Harper's*, cited in Meehan, 1991):

Example 11.

None of them acted like they belonged to the hotel.

Meehan (1991, p. 41) notes that, until very recently, such positioning of *like* was considered incorrect English: The proper form would have been (according to the purists, that is), *as if*. The use of *like* in this context, though, is just as meaningful—and the generalization from preposition to conjunction just as motivated—as the use of *as if*. After all, it is of no consequence whether something is described by a phrase or a clause; *Harper's* might as well have written: None of them acted like hotel guests.

Thus, a new sense of *like* is added to the lexicon, another member of the small grammatical class called conjunctions. Again, though, this multiplication of senses remains anchored in a single semantic core, which is more transparent in some, generally concrete, contexts and less so in others, where *like* appears as a mute and pale grammatical connector. We see this paling of semantic profile as *like* becomes generalized from contexts in which it clearly denotes equivalence (of the *as if* type) to ones where it is but an empty, backward linking device that, although it superficially asserts that there is some relation of paraphrase or equivalence between the clauses, in fact only serves to make a new turn unit out as connected to the prior. For example, in Example 4, Line 4 initiates a turn unit that is a repair on the prior: A pronoun is replaced by a quantified noun phrase.

Example 4.

- 3       And it's like- You know how they always on the plane?  
4       Like- all these hula-dancers?

*Like* again loses semantic profile and becomes a generalized (backward) linker, with which a new bit of talk can be made out as a respecification of what has been said before, by self or other. Among other things, it enables speakers to “recomplete” utterances that had already come to syntactic completion (cf. Lerner, 1987).

This backward orientation distinguishes “conjunctive” *like* from the word's use as a “discourse marker,” that is, as a marker of new information or other types of “focused material,” according to Underhill's (1988) analysis. In this usage, one of the most recent ones, *like* again is “forward looking”; it “marks” the subsequent unit of talk, often just the word following it. The oldest source in which I have encountered the discourse marker *like* is Jack Kerouac's (1958) novel, *The Subterraneans*, in a segment of monologue by Kerouac's black lover, Mardou:

Example 12.

I was just an innocent chick when I met them, independent and like well not happy or anything but feeling that I had something to do. (p. 23)

What exactly *like* accomplishes in this usage is not entirely clear; different functions or semantic effects occur. Here, *like* seems to be a marker of hesitation, an indicator that what follows is a less than perfect formulation, a circumscription rather than description, thus keeping with previously established senses of *like*—not the thing itself, but something similar. Meehan (1991) notes the sense of “approximation” that the discourse marker often conveys. Underhill (1988) emphasizes the marking of a focused constituent, that is, an utterance part that carries the essential part of the “message.”

Example 13.

He’s like- sliding on the floor.

Example 14.

Well, the alien like- sticks this- long spike into his back

According to Underhill (1988) and Meehan (1991), what is happening is that the lexeme *like* in its variety “approximately” (or “for example”) is in the process of being reanalyzed as a marker of new information. In this incarnation, two unrelated senses of *like* overlap: that of approximately (“what I mean, roughly, is this”) and that of marker of new information (“prick your ears”). Underhill (1988) observes that as a discourse marker, *like* is mainly used to introduce new concepts or entities, to mark focused information, to mark the focus in questions, to hedge, and to set off stereotyped expressions.

By Underhill’s analysis, *like*’s marking of the next item as focused is an intended effect—the intended effect—of the use of the word. This presumes that speakers at this point know roughly how they will continue the turn. However, this contradicts our intuition that *like* is also frequently used when the speaker does not quite know how to continue (see Example 12). What might bear on this usage of *like* is that the word has so many different functions, because this implies that one can use it in a noncommittal fashion. What exactly it means will be clarified by further talk. In other words, *like* allows for a considerable variety of types of “next.” It may very well be that, in a given case, *like* marks salient, focused information, but this effect might be brought about retrospectively, after the fact, for example, by an according delivery of the next word. During its production, in other words, *like* might still be open—even intendedly so—to multiple readings. This is the result of the historical circumstance that several varieties of *like*, each the result of one grammaticalization or grammatical expansion, coexist.

The most recent stage in the grammatical and lexical evolution of *like* is the appearance of the new quotative, *be like* (in both personal and impersonal ver-

sions: *I'm like/it's like*), which coincides with the arrival of other new quotative verbs, notably *go*, *go like*, and *be all*, which are also made from recycled language materials. This usage of *like* immediately precedes and prepares an embodiment or enactment of a character, an act of mimetic representation. In this usage more than others, the original meaning of *like* comes close to the surface. For example, when someone says "and I'm like," and then produces a strip of behavior, what is meant by "I'm like" is that the situated self "shares the same body" (i.e., embodiment) with the narrated self; the two selves share a similarly behaving body. Again, although this sense is very vivid in many cases where what follows *like* is indeed a full-fledged bodily enactment, *be like*, too, has become generalized and now is little more than a generic—perhaps *the*—verb of speaking in American English. American English does, however, preserve the feature of making room for enactments. Enactments thus become more standardized parts of "reported speech." More often than not, a clause introduced by *be like* contains at least a whiff of mimetic intonation.

*Be like* can mark reported speech as well as reported thought or emotion, whereas *say* and the other recent quotative, *go*, can introduce only quoted speech. To put it differently, like *go*, *be like* marks moments when the speaker is changing footing (Goffman, 1981), lending the body to a character who through its sounds and motions comes alive. This constitutes a particular social form, a form of intersubjective relatedness through the reanimation of some form of social life. (I will discuss this below). With *go*, the character becomes alive only "externally," through reanimated public behavior. *Be like*, in contrast, allows for a discursive enactment of someone's inner state and is particularly apt at introducing the speaker's feelings, "which may or may not have been lexicalized at the time of the event" (Romaine & Lange, 1991, p. 238). It allows the speaker "to express an attitude, reaction, or thought, as well as something actually said" (Blyth et al., 1990, p. 215). Note, however, that this inner state is displayed in the mode of public interactive behavior: Even if cast as a reenactment of thought, a quote such as *I'm like 'Oh no::!'* displays internal *as* public behavior. In other words, when thought is reanimated in this fashion, it is reanimated as an inner version of public discourse (cf. Mead, 1934).

*Be like* can also be used with sound effects (nonlexicalized sounds), gestures, and "probable facial expressions" (Ferrara & Bell, 1995), as well as other visual displays. According to Romaine (Romaine & Lange, 1991), a paradigmatic unit type that is marked by *be like* are "response cries" (Goffman, 1981), "openly theatrical, conventionalized utterances meant to clearly document or index the presumed inner state of the transmitter" (Ferrara & Bell, 1995, p. 282).

The heightening of drama is what both response cries and *be + like* utterances accomplish. They do so by revealing internal states. . . . Like response cries, the prototypical case of *be + like* is a theatrical, highly conventionalized utterance which makes the attitude transparent to the audience. (Ferrara & Bell, 1995, pp. 282–283)

Although I agree with this analysis, I believe that Ferrara and Bell and the other authors give insufficient attention to the bodily, nonvocal components of the en-

actment and therefore also miss the embodiment-related semantic core of *like* that gives its various senses their coherence and historic continuity.

### Body Quotes as a Social Form

Let us briefly digress to consider reanimated dialogue as a social form, a pattern of interpersonal relatedness through the discursive reanimation of others. During an enactment, the speaker pretends to inhabit another body—a human one or that of an alien, perhaps even a machine, or her own body in a different situation—and animates it with her own body, including the voice. Enactments have the character of samples: They are made out to possess the features of, and to be of the same kind as, the phenomena that they depict. In other words, in enactments, speakers' expressive behaviors exemplify actions of the story's characters.

To the extent to which the audience's attention shifts from the displayed "content" to the speaker's mimetic and performative skills, enactments take on the features of an art form. Mime is rooted in these ordinary enactments that almost anybody can do. What happens on the stage has its roots in ordinary conversation, in the form of bits of reanimated dialogue, sound effects, gestures, and facial contortions. As Goffman has pointed out, in contrast to "primary" conversational actions, what he called "fresh talk" (Goffman, 1981), replayings do not seek

the shout of responsive action . . . but murmurings—the clucks and tsks and aspirated breaths, the goshes and gollies and wows—which testify that the listener has been stirred, stirred by what is being replayed for him. . . . The response we often seek is not an answer to a question or a compliance with a request but an appreciation of a show put on. (Goffman, 1974, pp. 541, 546; see also Bergson, 1899/1911)

Replayings therefore call upon a particular mode of orchestrating talk and bodily behavior: dramaturgy—a skillfully timed sequencing of reanimated words and reanimated actions that will keep the audience engrossed. Minimally, it presents the self as performed like a well-known character or role, exemplifying well-known characteristics: We are all familiar with the figure enacted in "And I was like 'Oh my God!'" Social life, in other words, gets typified in a fashion that not only provides for understanding, but also entertainment, in which talk becomes, however briefly, show, or performance.

### So Revisited

Interestingly, the trend toward enacted forms of quotation in American English for which the new quotative *be like* is a principal device, has a counterpart in German, where a new quotative with similar implications for the social form of conversational interaction is also on the rise. This quotative is the phrase *und ich/er/sie dann so*, literally "and I/he/she then like this" (Vlatten, 1997), the minimal

version of which is simply *ich so*, “I like this,” which Vlaten appropriately translates as “I’m like.”

Vlaten gives an example in which the speaker describes being stopped by the police and reenacts how she tried to wake up her companion; *ich so* appears in Line 1:

Example 15.

- gesture turning steering wheel
- |—  
| |
- 1 A Polizei. Ich so ( . )  
(Police. I’m like)  
covers mouth with left, gesture “shaking awake” with right
- |—————  
| |
- 2 Ohhh, Tobia:s h(h)eh h(h)eh h(h)eh  
(Ohhh, Tobias)
- 3 Wach auf.  
(Wake up.)

In contrast to *be like*, however, *ich so* occurs only with embodiments; it has apparently not yet been generalized to other forms of reported discourse. *Ich so* and its variants are presently exclusively reserved for body quotes.

As in the U.S., the practice of body quotation appears to have gained in prominence and ubiquity in Germany. We could only speculate about the forces behind this apparently transnational trend. Is the practice more proof that we are all amusing ourselves to death, as Neil Postman (1985) has suggested, that today’s speakers prefer entertainment to serious conversation? Or is it a reflection of the media, for example, of the need to reanimate movies and television shows packed with embodied action and sound effects, which explode the format *I/he/she said*? Or is a lesser force at work? In any case, the practice became sedimented as new linguistic formats or routines in the two speech communities and their languages. Old, dry, lexical matter—things such as *be*, *go*, *all*, and *like*, or *und*, *dann*, and *so*—is recycled and recombined and finds itself in the middle of very lively and expressive procedures: *I’m like* involves extroversion, *ich dann so* action and suspense.

Formally, the construction *ich dann so*, “and I then like this,” is achieved by deleting, or, rather, suppressing, the (often quotative) verb (e.g. *sag-* or *mach*, “say” or “do”)—that would normally have to appear before *dann*. Thus, *dann so* occupies the space of the verb in unfolding talk, and it plays the functional role of quotative verb. That *so* is assigned to this task seems even more natural and motivated than the recruitment of *like* for this purpose in English. Grammatically, what seems to have happened in the case of *be like* is that in this type of placement, before enactments, the phrase consisting of *be* and the discourse marker *like* (as expressed in the newspaper convention: *And I’m, like, ‘Oh my God’*) can be given a different reading, one in which the meaning that *like* has as a proposi-

tion but has lost as a discourse marker is revived (i.e., comparison) and the syntagma *am, like*, is reanalyzed as a compound verb (*like* is reanalyzed as a verb satellite), and the meaning of the verb *be like* is reanalyzed as “to embody.” This meaning serendipitously overlaps with the original meaning of *like*, namely body. That sense is thus revived in the language, in a process not noticed by its speakers.

### ***Like* in the Coordination of Talk and Embodied Action**

We have seen before that the German word *so*, when it is coupled with a descriptive gesture, is typically (also subtly) coordinated with gaze. The precise positioning of the word brings about a format for integrating a manual description into a sentence and turn-at-talk. At the same time, the coupling of the demonstrative *so*, combined with a gaze shift, serves to direct the interlocutor’s visual attention. *Like* (which, after all, is not a demonstrative) does not direct the interlocutor’s attention. Rather, this is achieved by the demonstrative *this* in constructions such as *like this* and “she was *this big*” (Goodwin, 1986), where *this* is coordinated with gesture and gaze. Still, *like* does play an important part in the coordination of gesture or mimetic enactments on the one hand and speech on the other; particularly common is the phrase *it’s like*: It creates the space (i.e., the time) for the preparation of the enactment.

Bodily performances can take time to prepare. For a gesture, for example, the hands may have to be brought to a position from which they can freely perform a stroke. Therefore, if gesture and talk are to be produced together, as a single, compound meaningful unit, it may be necessary to delay the talk just enough so that the body can be configured for the execution of the gesture. *Like* can provide this delay, as in Example 16. *Like* is coupled three times with preparations (prep) for enactments:

Example 16.

- prep sticks
- |—|—  
| | |
- 1 J—>Well, the alien like- sticks this- long spike into his back?
- prep throws
- |— | ———|—  
| | |
- 2 —> It’s like- rips him open, throws him up and rips him apart.
- 3 Kind of (like) you see him get ripped apart.
- prep circular gesture
- |— | ———|—  
| | |
- 4 —> And he’s like- sliding on the floor.

In Example 17, *and then like* provides the slot during which the hand can be retracted from one gesture and positioned for another.

Example 17.

1 know and it has a long spike on it

2 T Oh yeah

3 J → and then like rams it into Bishop's back.

In order to make the second gesture, Joey must retract his hand to a point from which it can effectively “ram.” His hand retracts while he says *and then; like* coincides with the shift from retraction to the new stroke.

That *it's like* can “make room” in an utterance for a repositioning of the hands so that gesture and affiliated talk can emerge together is particularly clear in the following example in which Joey recovers his left (dominant) hand from under his leg while uttering “and it's like.”

Example 18.

1 J When- it's like Ripley?

2 T Mh hmm.

3 J She has a dream?

4 J And it's like she dreams that ( - - - )

5 it's like this alien almost popping out of her uhm stomach there

*So* and *like* are centrally responsible in their languages for providing structured frames within which symbolic body action can be produced and understood, but they do not fully translate into one another. They encode subtly different activity prototypes. *So* corresponds to a pointing with the eyes to a location or target in the environment. One such location that the eyes can point to are the speaker's hands. *So* can encode the presence of manual-visual activity; its core meaning can be paraphrased, “as I am demonstrating to you here.” *Like*, in contrast, characteristically prefaces enactments that involve the face, the shoulders,

and the voice and require attention to the speaker's full upper body (unless *this* cues a narrow visual focus: *like this*). The meaning of *like* is: "as I am about to act out for you."

### Conclusion

What seems to have happened is that, for reasons difficult to determine, the mimetic mode of narrative representation has gained new popularity in the U.S. and other societies, a mode of reporting experiences and events that favors re-enactments, however stylized and brief, over descriptions. How massive this trend is—even how real it is—is difficult to ascertain. We would probably agree, however, that speakers are more likely to say "and I was like 'what *is* this?'" instead of "and I wanted to know what it was," than they were, say, 20 years ago. In this sense, there is a trend or a tendency. The practice of bodily quotation, of course, is older even than language, and the craft of mime has been practiced both on the stage and in conversation throughout human history.

One way to conceive of the stories of *so* and *like* perhaps is to see them as "viable histories of structural coupling" (Maturana & Varela, 1987/1992): slight changes in interactional (conversational) practices, motivated perhaps by changes in material considered worthy of narrative reproduction (e.g., television shows), make standard devices (standard quotative verbs, e.g., *say*) less than ideally adapted. New devices, invented by someone in some conversation(s), prove better adapted and therefore grow in popularity, eventually becoming default devices themselves. The devices are found among the ones that the languages already possess, but have so far used (and continue to use) for other purposes. They are given new jobs, and they may adapt to those jobs and the conditions under which they are carried out (e.g., *llk* loses the final consonant when it is de-emphasized and loses stress in its suffix position, thus morphing into *ly*).

In his *Notes on the Synthesis of Form* (1964), the design theorist Christopher Alexander described "unselfconscious" design processes, such as the evolution of a new linguistic form, as resulting from irregularities in "diagrams of forces." Cultural forms—words and grammatical morphemes as much as window frames or chairs—must typically balance several forces or pressures, and when irregularities in the "diagram of forces" operating on a traditional, standard form appear, newly invented forms may gain currency or existing forms may become realigned (as happened to the words *be*, *go*, *all*, and, of course, *like*, among others). This may have happened in the change from *say* to *be like* as standard quotative verb in American English. *Be like* allows for body quotation as a matter of routine and of grammatical normality, but does not require it. It is thus universally applicable, which *say* is not.

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