

# Hypothetical posing

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## Summary

When hypothetical similatives occur as matrix sentences (e.g. *As if that's a good idea*) they involve something like denial of the prejacent (e.g. that that's a good idea). Extant accounts of these constructions analyze them idiomatically, as illocutionary force operators of sarcasm (Camp and Hawthorne, 2008; Camp, 2012) or exclamation (Bledin and Srinivas, 2020). But the immense productivity of this strategy across languages – as well as for other similatives in English (e.g. *as though* and *like*) – shows the need for a compositional account. We expand on our treatment of hypothetical similatives writ large (Rett and Starr, 2022) to argue that this denial of the prejacent and other idiosyncratic semantic properties arises as a natural combination of the semantic ingredients that form hypothetical similatives: a similative relativizer (e.g. *as* or *like*); a non-declarative subordinator (e.g. *if* or *though*); and X-marking (i.e. non-indicative mood). We argue that the conversational import of posing a hypothetical is intrinsically illocutionarily restricted, and speculate that these conclusions can be extended to other constructions in which subordinated clauses are used as matrix utterances (e.g. optatives like (*Oh*) *That you pass the exam*).

## Three semantic properties

The constructions we focus on display three key semantic properties: 1) they exhibit **prejacent denial**; 2) they carry an **expectation existence presupposition**; and 3) they are only felicitous as **commentary** on a salient event. We explain and exemplify those three properties in this section. We crucially differentiate between two types of similatives: those that modify an argument, and those that do not.

- (1) a. A danced as B sang. *modifying similative*  
b. A danced like / as if he were a butterfly. *modifying hypothetical similative*
- (2) a. She lost her job, as you know. *non-modifying similative*  
b. She lost her job, like / as if you didn't know. *non-modifying hypothetical similative*

All hypothetical similatives are non-veridical: they do not entail the truth (or falsity) of the prejacent (that he is a butterfly in (1b) and that you didn't know in (2b)). However, there is an additional layer of meaning in the non-modifying hypothetical similatives that isn't present in the modifying ones: (2b) is infelicitous if the speaker thinks that the prejacent is true. We refer to this property as **prejacent denial**.

- (3) a. A danced like / as if he were a butterfly... Is he a butterfly?  
b. She lost her job, like / as if you didn't know... #Do you know?

Camp and Hawthorne (2008) observe, for the prejacent  $p$ , that “the rather vague and subtle intuition that in using sarcastic ‘like’, speakers do something that is more like denying  $p$  than like asserting not- $p$  outright” (p14). They don't provide any diagnostics for this intuition, but Bledin and Srinivas (2020) motivate the use of the term ‘denial’ over ‘negation’ because of the not-at-issue status of the meaning, as diagnosed in (4).

- (4) A: As if that's a good idea.  
B: #That's true, it's a bad idea.

Non-modifying hypothetical similatives are not embeddable in conditional antecedents or questions (Bledin and Srinivas, 2020), so we can't test its projection properties.

There's an additional component of meaning associated with non-modifying hypothetical similatives: they carry something that's been characterized as an **expectation existence presupposition**. Bledin and Srinivas (2020) describe non-modifying hypothetical similatives as follows: “[the speaker] rejects a prior expectation of [the hearer] (or what [the speaker] takes [the addressee] to expect)... Note that [these constructions] require an expectation to react to” (p86). We borrow a test from Beltrama and Hanink (2019) – a paper on a closely related construction they call ‘mirative *like*’ – to illustrate this property: non-modifying hypothetical similatives are infelicitous in a context in which there are no prior expectations regarding the prejacent (whether it's true or false).

- (5) *context*: A is walking alone on the street and sees her old high school friend C pull up in a fancy car. Taken aback by what she sees, she utters to herself:
- a. (Wow,) C is rich! *exclamation*
  - b. It's as if C is rich! *modifying HS*
  - c. #Like / As if C is poor! *non-modifying HS*

In this context, it's infelicitous to utter a non-modifying hypothetical similative (5c). This is in contrast to an exclamation – a mirative construction that also places restrictions on expectations – but crucially also in contrast to the modifying hypothetical similative in (5b). (Recall that the reason the prejacent in (5b) is the converse of the prejacent in (5c) is because modifying hypothetical similatives also lack prejacent denial.)

Finally, hypothetical similatives have a unique felicity requirement: they cannot be used to convey new information. This is demonstrated in (6), a context that satisfies both the prejacent denial and expectation existence presupposition requirements.

- (6) *context*: A and B are discussing B's upcoming exam. A expects to pass it. The day after the exam, A sees that B has failed the exam.
- a. (Wow,) You failed the exam! *exclamation*
  - b. #It's like / as if you failed the exam. *modifying HS*
  - c. #Like / as if you passed the exam. *non-modifying HS*

This point can also be made using the observation that matrix hypothetical similatives cannot be used to answer (information-seeking) questions.

### Existing treatments

Existing treatments of hypothetical similatives have focused on matrix non-modifying hypothetical similatives like (7), although it's important to note that the three semantic properties discussed above are properties of non-matrix versions like (2b) too.

- (7) As if that's a good idea.

Perhaps as a result of this relatively narrow empirical focus, existing treatments of hypothetical similatives encoded their idiosyncratic semantic properties in an utterance-level illocutionary force operator. Camp and Hawthorne (2008) and Camp (2012) treat *as if* and *like* in sentences like (7) as lexicalizing sarcasm (they characterize *as if* and *like* as 'illocutionary adverbs'), which they take to be an illocutionary force that encodes denial of the prejacent. In Bledin and Srinivas (2019) and Bledin and Srinivas (2020), the modifying and non-modifying hypothetical similatives in (1b) and (2b) (respectively) are treated distinctly – effectively as two distinct idioms – in part because of this difference in prejacent denial (which Bledin and Srinivas, 2020, also characterize as sarcasm). They take for granted that every matrix non-modifying hypothetical similative is an exclamation, and hard-wire in the relevant meaning into an idiosyncratic exclamation operator.<sup>1</sup>

There are several reasons to eschew accounts that hardwire prejacent denial (and expectation existence presupposition) into the denotation of the similative marker. First, **all** similative strategies in English – *like*, *as if*, and *as though* – involve prejacent denial in non-modifying constructions, so it would need to be independently hardwired into all similative relativizers. Second, at least a few of these phrases (*like*, *as if*) have distinct uses that do not exhibit prejacent denial, so we'd have to postulate (at least) two distinct lexical entries for each of these. Finally, as detailed in Mizuno (2018, 2020) and Martínez (2021), 'as if' is quite a crosslinguistically robust construction; a wide variety of languages from a wide variety of families form hypothetical similatives using similative relativizers, question subordinators, and X-marking (see also Rett and Starr, 2022), so we need an explanation of why e.g. prejacent denial arises consistently crosslinguistically. Finally, as mentioned above, **all** non-modifying hypothetical similatives, like (2b) – not just matrix ones like (7) – exhibit prejacent denial and an expectation existence presupposition, so it's best to avoid analyzing these similative phrases as illocutionary force operators.

<sup>1</sup>There is no reason to think that matrix hypothetical similatives are intrinsically exclamatory: they do not require exclamation intonation (e.g. (7) would sound odd with it, and would look odd with an exclamation point), and they are incompatible with exclamation particles like *wow* or *boy*. And, again, non-matrix non-modifying hypothetical similatives like (2b) encode prejacent denial despite not being matrix utterances.

## Our analysis

The goal of this section is to provide a semantic characterization of hypothetical similatives that explains: 1) their status as commentary; 2) their expectation existence presupposition; and 3) their prejacent denial. Our explanation backgrounds the compositional account of ‘as if’ constructions presented in Rett and Starr (2022), and foregrounds the following claim: non-modifying hypothetical similatives function to pose a hypothetical, which amounts to a non-assertoric speech act providing commentary on a salient eventuality.

First, we assume that hypothetical similatives are event relativizers (Rett and Starr, 2022), modifying eventualities that are linguistically or contextually supplied. This cements their status as comments, as argued in Rett (2015) (the equative *A is as tall as B* cannot be felicitously used to answer the question *How tall is B?*). In modifying hypothetical similatives, the relevant eventuality is made linguistically salient: an event of A dancing (1b), or the referent of the subject pronoun (5b). For non-modifying hypothetical similatives, the eventuality *must* be contextually provided and is, intuitively, some salient behavior of the addressee; in the case of (2b), behavior that prompted the speaker to remind them that some person lost her job. In the case of matrix non-modifying hypothetical similatives like (7), the utterance becomes a non-assertoric speech act providing commentary on that eventuality, an act of posing a hypothetical.

This account of non-modifying hypothetical similatives as anaphoric to an event they’re modifying explains their status as commentary, but it also suggests an explanation for the construction’s expectation existence presupposition: whenever a non-modifying hypothetical similative is licensed, it is anaphoric to an event whose salience entails an expectation about that event’s truth or falsity. Consider (7), uttered in a context where two people are watching a baking show together and someone on the show has just substituted salt for sugar in a cookie recipe. The salient event it comments on is the baker making that substitution. The baker’s action suggests that the baker thinks the substitution is a good idea (that public actions can presuppose things is familiar from e.g. Thomason 1990); thus the fact that the modified eventuality is salient in the context – and is being related to the prejacent – amounts to a requirement that the conversational participants have an expectation about the truth of the prejacent.

Finally, anaphora to a salient eventuality in the context of utterance can explain the difference between modifying and non-modifying hypothetical similatives with respect to prejacent denial (repeated from (3)).

- (8) a. A danced like / as if he were a butterfly... Is he a butterfly?  
b. She lost her job, like / as if you didn’t know... #Do you know?

If *x* is like *y*, it could in principle be identical to *y*, and this possibility is left open in (8a), because there is no presumption that the conversational participants know anything about the event the similative is modifying (i.e. A’s dancing). In contrast, the fact that the hypothetical similative in (8b) invokes an eventuality that is salient in the context of utterance eliminates the possibility that the participants are unfamiliar with that event. As a result, the semantically available possibility – that the salient eventuality is one in which it’s true that the addressee didn’t know she lost her job – is not pragmatically available. It’s blocked by the felicity condition on a non-modifying hypothetical similative, namely that it modifies a salient eventuality.

The success of this analysis is its ability to explain the identical but idiosyncratic behavior of *as if*, *as though*, and *like* in English by appealing to the discourse function of the content of these hypothetical similatives as posing hypothetical events as similar to actual, salient ones. We hope to extend the discussion of the semantic behavior of these constructions to similarly odd properties of other constructions in which subordinated clauses are used as matrix utterances (e.g. optatives like (*Oh,*) *That you pass the exam*).

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