

meaning 'the process of making or becoming light (*the task of lightening the burdens of taxpayers*).

like.

- 1 As a conjunction.
- 2 As a preposition.
- 3 A hated parenthetical use.
- 4 Idiomatic phrases.

1 As a conjunction. Fowler (1926) cites this sentence from Charles Darwin (1866): *Unfortunately few have observed like you have done*. The Great Schoolmaster's view of the construction was expressed with characteristic verve: 'Every illiterate person uses this construction daily; it is the established way of putting the thing among all who have not been taught to avoid it; the substitution of *as* for *like* in their sentences would sound artificial. But in good writing this particular *like* is very rare.' The *OED* (in a fascicle published in 1903) cited examples of *like* used as a conjunction from the works of Shakespeare, Southey, William Morris, Jerome K. Jerome, and others, and added the comment: 'Now generally condemned as vulgar or slovenly, though examples may be found in many recent writers of standing.'

The status of conjunctive *like* has been debated many times since then. The most recent authority, *CGEL* (1985), slightly disguises the problem by speaking of 'clausal adjuncts' and 'semantically equivalent phrasal adjuncts', but the verdict is nevertheless much as before. Constructions such as *Please try to write as I do* and *Please try to write like me* are standard; but *Please try to write like I do* is described as being only in informal use, and especially in AmE. Thus, throughout the 20c., the mood has been condemnatory. The use of *like* as a conjunction has been dismissed as 'illiterate', 'vulgar', 'sloppy', or, in the coded language of modern grammarians, 'informal'. Evelyn Waugh spoke for his generation of writers, and for many people still, when he said of Henry Green's *Pack My Bag* (1940): 'Only one thing disconcerted me... The proletarian grammar—the "likes" for "ases", the "bikes" for "bicycles", etc.'

I have reconsidered the matter by examining the works of 'many recent writers of standing', British, American, and from further afield, and the results are,

I think, of interest. After I had set aside some really lazy sentences, four main conjunctive uses of *like* emerged. First, quite frequently, with repetition of the verb used in the main clause, and bearing the sense 'in the way that': *They didn't talk like other people talked*—M. Amis, 1981; *Gordon needs Sylvia like some people need to spend an hour or two every day simply staring out of the window*—P. Lively, 1987; *I'm afraid it might happen to my baby like it happened to Jefferson*—*New Yorker*, 1987. This use, which owes something to the song 'If you knew Susie like I know Susie', is common in all English-speaking countries, and must surely escape further censure or reproach. Naturally, though, we may continue to use other constructions if we wish to, and in good company: *She changed wallpapers and lampshades the way some women changed their underwear*—A. N. Wilson, 1986.

Secondly, it is frequently used in good AmE and Aust. sources (though much less commonly in BrE) to mean 'as if, as though': *It looks like it's still a fox*—*New Yorker*, 1986; *She acts like she can't help it*—Lee Smith, 1987 (US); *I wanted him born and now it feels like I don't want him*—E. Jolley, 1985 (Aust.). One of the few British examples in my files is one from BBC Radio 4 early in 1987: *It looks like Terry Waite will leave for London in two or three hours*.

Thirdly, it is interchangeable with *as* in all English-speaking countries in a range of fixed, somewhat jocular, phrases of saying and telling: *Send for your copy now. Like we said it's free*—*Globe & Mail* (Toronto), 1968; *Like you say, you're a dead woman*—M. Wesley, 1983; *Well, like I told you, I work with him upstairs*—P. Ackroyd, 1985; *Like I said, I haven't seen Rudi for weeks*—T. Keneally, 1985; *My whereabouts are in Merthyr Tydfil, like you said*—B. Rubens, 1985.

Fourthly, it is increasingly used, perhaps especially abroad, in contexts where a comparison is being made. In these it has the force of 'in the manner (that), in the way (that)': *You call us Mum and Dad like you always have*—M. Wesley, 1983; *How was I to know she'd turn out like she did?*—C. Burns, 1985 (NZ); *Like Jack and Jill came down the hill, Dilip also rolled down the box-office in 'Karma'*—*Star & Style* (Bombay), 1986; *The retsina flowed like the Arno*

did when it overflowed in 1966—*Spectator*, 1987.

It would appear that in many kinds of written and spoken English *like* as a conjunction is struggling towards acceptable standard or neutral ground. It is not there yet. But the distributional patterns suggest that the long-standing resistance to this omnipresent little word is beginning to crumble.

2 As a preposition. (a) Unquestioned uses: *drink like a fish; sell like hot cakes; it fits like a glove*; (in written sources) *one of those frilly little wooden stations like gingerbread houses*—A. Carter, 1984; *He saw the sunlight leave the grass like an eye suddenly closed*—P. Ackroyd, 1985; *The Pope was confined like a prisoner in the Vatican*—R. Strange, 1986. (b) Sometimes questioned is its use in place of *such as* meaning ‘of the class of, for example’, as in *a subject like philosophy; good writers like Dickens; When Scottish families came to York, like Mrs Eliza Fletcher’s, Sydney [Smith] ...*—A. Bell, 1980. The difficulty is that in such circumstances *like* can sometimes be ambiguous: for example, the title of Kingsley Amis’s novel *Take a Girl Like You* (1960) could be taken to mean ‘a girl, for example, you’ or ‘a girl resembling you’. Had the title been ‘Take a Girl Such as You’, there would have been no such ambiguity. For *as* used confusingly instead of *like*, see AS 13. Modern example: *New York, as most major cities, has found that the general public is very apathetic*—*NY Times*, 1970 (WDEU).

3 A hated parenthetical use. Used parenthetically to qualify a preceding or following statement, and often no more than a dialectal or popular filler. This use was first noted in Fanny Burney’s *Evelina* (1778): *Father grew quite uneasy, like, for fear of his Lordship’s taking offence*. Further examples are cited in the *OED* from works by Scott, Lytton, De Quincey, Arnold Bennett, and some other well-known writers. As an occasional device it was unexceptionable. By the mid-20c., however, its use as an incoherent and prevalent filler had reached the proportions of an epidemic, and it is now scorned by standard speakers as a vulgarity of the first order. A range of typical examples (in most of which it is being used as a token of unsophisticated speech): *Naa, I was all into that last year,*

but like I don’t really think it’s so relevant now—M. du Plessis, 1983; *I’ll say goodbye, like, and send you a message, like, somehow or other, when she turns up, like*—P. Bailey, 1986; *The Blitz? Like right in London?*—M. Pople, 1986; (waitress speaking) *The crowd here is hard to define. Like, they’re pretty rich*—*New Yorker*, 1987; *Like, I just got this journal in the mail from this microtonal music society*—*Melody Maker*, 1988; *Hayley was pleased. That’s him. He’s, like, got her hypnotized.*—Maurice Gee, 1990; *He was so young he was from the generation of human beings who use the word ‘like’ to mean ‘said’.* I’m, like, “You’ve got to be kidding” was one of his expressions—*New Yorker*, 1991.

4 Idiomatic phrases. Used adverbially in a number of colloquial phrases, e.g. *like always* (20c.), *like anything*, *like blazes*, *like crazy* (20c., = like one who is crazy), *like fun*, *like mad*. These belong only in informal writing or speech. Examples: *Carson’s mill is blazing away like fun*—Mrs Gaskell, 1848; *The horse ... went like blazes*—De Quincey, 1853; *They wept like anything to see Such quantities of sand*—L. Carroll, 1872; *We ... heard our fellows cheering like mad*—W. Forbes-Mitchell, 1893; *There she was, beating them with her umbrella like crazy*—J. Osborne, 1957; *Skate was with him like always*—M. Doane, 1988.

like (noun). In 1988 I was upbraided by a Scotswoman for writing *Who has not seen the likes of the following?* I turned to the *OED*, and noted with satisfaction that the use of *likes* as a (pl.) noun was listed there with illustrative examples from 1787 onward (alternative with *the like of*), including *2,500 [copies sold] in five months is a good sale for the likes of me* from Browning (1872). And I felt even more assured when I came across *that’s a luxury for the likes of me* in Penelope Lively’s *Moon Tiger* (1987).

like (verb). **1** In English-speaking countries where *will* regularly replaces *shall*, i.e. virtually everywhere except in England itself, *I would like* is used instead of *I should like*; in practice, the abbreviated form *I’d like* is widely used instead, esp. in the spoken language. The extended type *I would have liked* is now freely used everywhere (including England) in two distinct constructions: (a) *I/he, etc., would have liked + to-infinitive*: *I would have liked to pause there*—T. Keneally, 1980; *He would*