

The semantics and pragmatics of demonstrational *like*: A two-tiered approach¹

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Abstract. The English quotative system has undergone a well-documented shift, with *be like* and related *like*-quotatives becoming a major resource for introducing constructed dialogue and stance (Ferrara and Bell, 1995; Tagliamonte and D’Arcy, 2004; Buchstaller, 2001). However, *like*-quotatives are not confined to reporting speech or thought; they also appear with non-communicative predicates, as in *dance like “this is my last dance.”* This study contributes a unified compositional analysis that accounts for this broader distribution. Drawing on empirical diagnostics, I demonstrate that these constructions split into two distinct readings: a manner-oriented reading that characterizes an event’s performance, and a content-oriented reading that characterizes a message or product. To formalize this, I propose a single operator of iconic characterization that interacts with the ontology of the embedding predicate. Building on Davidson (2015), I treat the manner reading as a direct demonstration of the event argument. For the content reading, I extend Moltmann’s (2013) theory of attitudinal objects, arguing that *like* targets the abstract product of the event. Finally, I contribute a pragmatic account of the “approximation” effect: following Grice (1975), I derive non-verbatimness from competition with bare quotation rather than lexical semantics. This framework resolves the tension between manner and content uses, distinguishing pragmatic non-verbatimness from tokenless iconic depiction.

Keywords: quotatives, quotation, iconicity, attitudinal objects, semantics, pragmatics.

1. Introduction

Over the past several decades, English has developed an increasingly diversified inventory of constructions for introducing reported speech and demonstration. Alongside canonical verbs such as *say*, *tell*, and *ask*, speakers frequently employ periphrastic quotative forms involving the particle *like*. While *be like* is the most pervasive and well-documented of these forms (Blyth et al., 1990; Ferrara and Bell, 1995; Tagliamonte and D’Arcy, 2004), it is part of a broader family of constructions including *go like* and *be all like* (Buchstaller, 2001; D’Arcy, 2017). Sociolinguistic work has extensively documented the diffusion of these forms in informal spoken registers, noting their strong association with narrative contexts and their utility in dramatizing past events.

In its canonical use, this class of constructions serves a function broadly similar to that of *say*: it introduces material representing an utterance or thought. However, unlike standard indirect speech, *like*-constructions allow the speaker to enact the reported content, often highlighting affective or prosodic dimensions of the original event rather than committing to a verbatim reproduction (Fox Tree and Tomlinson Jr, 2007). This function is illustrated in (1), where the quotative introduces a representation of the speaker’s internal state or external utterance.

- (1) a. John said, “why not?”
 b. John was like, “why not?”

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Because of its prevalence in speech reporting, *be like* has predominantly been analyzed as a quotative device whose primary function is to introduce reported content. However, this characterization overlooks a critical distributional property: *like*-constructions also occur productively with predicates that do not, on their face, introduce speech or thought events.

This contrast is illustrated by the incompatibility of speech reports with activity verbs like *dance*, as shown in (2).

- (2) Jane danced like, “this is my last dance.”

In (2), there is no plausible speech event being reported. The salient interpretation is not that Jane uttered these words, but that her dancing expressed or embodied an attitude characterized by them. The quoted string functions iconically: it depicts the style, persona, or affective stance of the event itself. This demonstrates that *like* can operate not as a content reporter, but as a modifier of event structure.

The theoretical puzzle arises when we consider predicates that seem to straddle the boundary between these two uses. Consider the case of *scribble* in (3):

- (3) John scribbled like, “I want to leave this place already.”

This sentence admits two distinct interpretations. Under the first reading, the quoted material approximates the content of a product; it suggests that John wrote a message containing roughly those words. Under the second reading, the sentence describes the manner in which John scribbled—perhaps hurriedly, impatiently, or with visible frustration—without committing to the existence of any written text. The ambiguity of (3) suggests that the content-reporting function seen in (1) and the manner-depicting function seen in (2) are both active in the grammar, and that their availability is constrained by the main verb.

These observations bring together two strands of work that have largely developed in parallel. On the one hand, research on quotation has argued that quoted material functions as a form of iconic or demonstrational meaning, targeting events rather than propositions (Clark and Gerrig, 1990; Davidson, 2015). On the other hand, work in formal semantics has shown that attitude and communication predicates introduce abstract content-bearing objects such as claims and messages that exist independently of the events that produce them (Moltmann, 2013, 2019).

The central claim of this paper is that demonstrational *like* bridges these two domains. I argue that the ambiguity observed in (3) reflects two distinct modes of semantic composition available to the construction. In one mode, *like* targets the event itself, yielding a manner-oriented interpretation. In the other, it targets a content-bearing object associated with the predicate, yielding a content-oriented interpretation. This approach provides a unified account of why *like* can introduce approximated speech in some contexts while functioning as a pure manner modifier in others.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the background on demonstrational quotation and content-bearing objects. Section 3 presents empirical diagnostics regarding the distribution of these readings across different predicate classes. Section 4 details

the compositional analysis. Section 5 discusses the pragmatic implications of this account, and Section 6 concludes.

2. Background: Demonstration and content

To account for the dual behavior of demonstrational *like*, this analysis integrates two distinct traditions in formal semantics and pragmatics: the theory of *quotation as demonstration* (Clark and Gerrig, 1990; Recanati, 2001; Davidson, 2015) and the ontology of *attitudinal objects* (Moulton, 2009; Moltmann, 2013, 2019). While these traditions have largely developed in isolation, the empirical profile of *like* necessitates a unification of the two. The particle appears to recruit iconic demonstrations to characterize specific semantic objects—either events or content products—made available by the predicate. This section outlines the relevant components of each framework and identifies the specific theoretical gap that this paper seeks to fill.

2.1. Quotation as demonstration

The first strand of research concerns the mechanism of quotation itself. A central tenet of the demonstration tradition is that quotation acts primarily as a communicative method of *showing* rather than describing. According to Clark and Gerrig (1990), quotations are demonstrations in which a speaker depicts salient properties of a source event, such as words, prosody, gesture, or affect. On this view, a quotation is not a linguistic name for a sentence, but a performance that bears a resemblance relation to its target. A crucial consequence of this framework is that the quoted material need not correspond to a linguistic utterance at all; it acts as a selective depiction that can target any auditory or visual aspect of an event.

This distinction between linguistic reporting and iconic demonstration is clearly illustrated by the felicity of non-linguistic quotations. Consider the behavior of sound-emission verbs, as noted by Clark and Gerrig (1990):

- (4) The car engine went [vroom vroom].

In (4), the bracketed material does not name the sound as the noun *noise* would, nor does it express a proposition. Instead, the speaker produces an acoustic token intended to structurally resemble the auditory event. This mechanism is not limited to sound effects. Wade and Clark (1993) provide experimental evidence that speakers and hearers treat even verbatim speech reporting as a task of selective depiction rather than mechanical reproduction. In this framework, the choice to use a direct quotation signals a commitment to depicting the *manner* of delivery, whereas indirect speech signals a commitment only to the semantic content.

Within formal semantics, Davidson (2015) formalizes this intuition by treating quoted material as introducing a demonstrational object *d*. This object integrates into the composition via a resemblance relation to an event argument. For Davidson, a sentence involving quotation asserts that an event occurred which can be iconically characterized by the demonstration *d*. This formalization provides a natural account of cases where quoted material depicts manner or affect without committing the speaker to a specific propositional content (e.g., *dance like*), as the truth conditions require only iconic similarity rather than identity. However, a purely event-

based demonstration analysis faces difficulties when applied to canonical speech reports. If all quotations are merely iconic depictions of events, it is difficult to explain why constructions like *say like* or *write like* so strongly favor an interpretation targeting the informational content of the message rather than the physical manner of its production.

2.2. Content-bearing objects

While the demonstration tradition focuses on the iconic depiction of events, a parallel tradition in the semantics of attitude reports focuses on the ontology of *content*. Standard analyses, following Hintikka (1962), often treat attitude verbs as relations between an individual and a set of possible worlds (a proposition). However, recent work suggests that this view is insufficient to capture the nominal behavior of attitudes. Kratzer (2006) and Moulton (2009) argue that predicates like *believe* or *claim* introduce specific “content arguments” that serve as the anchor for the subordinate clause.

Moltmann (2013, 2019) expands this ontology by arguing for *attitudinal objects*. On this view, a verb like *think* or *say* is not merely a relation to a proposition, but is associated with a concrete, content-bearing object, such as a “thought,” a “statement,” or a “scream.” These objects are distinct from the event of thinking or speaking; they are the products or artifacts of those events that carry the information. The importance of distinguishing between an event and its associated content object is illustrated by the modification patterns in (5):

- (5) a. John’s screaming was loud.
- b. John’s scream was about the fire.

In (5a), the adjective *loud* modifies the event of screaming itself. In (5b), the nominal *scream* refers not to the acoustic event, but to the *product* or *message* conveyed. Moltmann argues that clausal complements specify the content of these objects much like the prepositional phrase in (5b). While this framework provides the necessary semantic machinery to distinguish between modifying an action and modifying its content, it has typically been applied only to standard propositional complements (such as *that*-clauses) and has not traditionally been extended to iconic or demonstrational modifiers.

2.3. The theoretical gap: Integrating demonstration and content

The theoretical gap addressed in this paper is the lack of a compositional mechanism that can interface between iconic demonstrations and abstract content objects. The two traditions described above solve different problems but leave a crucial intersection unexplored. Existing demonstration theories (Davidson, 2015) successfully model how *like* modifies events but struggle to explain the stability of content readings with speech verbs. Conversely, content-object theories (Moltmann, 2019) explain how content is structured but do not account for how demonstrational material can characterize that content.

The novel contribution of this work is to propose that demonstrational *like* is precisely the operator that bridges this gap. I apply the ontology of attitudinal objects to the domain of quotation, arguing that the ambiguity of *like* is structurally identical to the ambiguity of the noun *scream*

in (5). The construction exploits the resources of the predicate: when the verb makes an event available, *like* demonstrates the event manner; when the verb makes a content-bearing object available, *like* demonstrates the object's content. This unified analysis resolves the empirical puzzle of predicate sensitivity by locating the variation in the availability of semantic targets rather than in the definition of the quotative particle itself.

3. Empirical diagnostics: Manner and content

In this section, I introduce a set of empirical diagnostics that distinguish between the two interpretive construals licensed by demonstrational *like*. The first is a *manner-oriented* construal, in which the quoted material depicts the performance of an event. The second is a *content-oriented* construal, in which the quoted material approximates an abstract content-bearing object associated with the predicate. The goal of this section is to establish that these readings are not merely pragmatically variable, but are systematically constrained by the semantic profile of the embedding predicate.

3.1. Event-oriented construals with non-communicative predicates

We begin with predicates that do not plausibly introduce speech, thought, or symbolic products. With such predicates, demonstrational *like* yields a highly stable manner-oriented interpretation.

This pattern is illustrated by the activity verb *drive* in (6):

- (6) a. He drove like, "I'm going to win this race."
b. He drove like, "get out of my way!"

In these examples, the quoted material cannot reasonably be interpreted as a report of a speech act. The sentence in (6a) does not entail that the driver uttered the words "I'm going to win this race," nor that he held that specific thought propositionally. Instead, the quotation iconically depicts the style or affect of the driving event itself, perhaps aggressive, focused, or competitive.

We can confirm the status of these modifiers using diagnostics applicable to standard manner adverbs (Maienborn and Schäfer, 2011). First, like manner adverbs, these constructions answer *how*-questions rather than *what*-questions.

- (7) a. How did he drive?
Like, "I'm going to win this race."
b. # What did he drive?
Like, "I'm going to win this race."

As shown in (7), the construction naturally specifies the mode of the event. Furthermore, the demonstrational phrase can be substituted with standard manner adverbs that describe the same psychological or physical state.

- (8) a. He drove like, "get out of my way!"
b. He drove aggressively.
c. He drove impatiently.

A further diagnostic involves the scope of negation. Manner modifiers typically do not take scope over sentence negation; they are part of the event description that is negated. As illustrated in (9), the demonstrational construction parallels the adverbial behavior.

- (9) a. He didn't drive like, "get out of my way!"
(≠ He didn't drive, and he did so like "get out of my way!")
b. He didn't drive aggressively.
(≠ He didn't drive, and he did so aggressively.)

Finally, because these constructions target the event manner rather than a message object, they do not license references to products (e.g., #*what he drove*). Consequently, it is infelicitous to deny the accuracy of the wording, as the initial clause never committed the speaker to the existence of a speech act.

3.2. Content-oriented construals with communication predicates

At the opposite end of the spectrum are predicates that canonically introduce information-bearing objects, such as *say*, *write*, or *think*. In these contexts, demonstrational *like* strongly favors a content-oriented construal, where the quotation approximates the information conveyed. Consider the behavior of explicit communication verbs in (10):

- (10) a. John said like, "why not?"
b. Mary wrote like, "I'm not coming."

Unlike the manner cases, these examples support diagnostics characteristic of content selection. First, they allow for reference to the message via product nominals (e.g., *what John said*, *the thing Mary wrote*). Second, the content-bearing status of these verbs is independently confirmed by their ability to license complement clauses, a property that manner verbs lack.

- (11) a. John said that he was hungry.
b. * He drove that he was hungry.

Because the demonstrational construction in (10) targets this content-bearing object, speakers can explicitly deny the accuracy of the quoted string while maintaining that the communicative event occurred.

- (12) John said like, "why not?", but that wasn't exactly how he phrased it.

The felicity of (12) confirms that the demonstration targets the message object. The speaker asserts that the message was *similar* to the quoted string, while simultaneously denying identity. This contrasts with the manner case, where such a denial is infelicitous because no message object exists to be denied.

3.3. Ambiguity and underspecification

Between these two poles lie predicates that exhibit systematic ambiguity or underspecification regarding the availability of a content object.

3.3.1. Product-optional predicates

The verb *scribble* is a representative case of a predicate that introduces an event which may, but need not, result in a linguistic product. This flexibility allows it to support both construals, as shown in (13):

- (13) a. John scribbled like, “I want to leave.”
b. John scribbled like, “I’m so done with this.”

In (13a), the context implies a legible product, which licenses content diagnostics. In (13b), the focus is on the agitation of the action, yielding a manner reading where no legible text is entailed.

This analysis is supported by comparing *scribble* with the closely related verb *doodle*. Unlike *scribble*, *doodle* strongly resists a linguistic product interpretation. Even in contexts where the agent is expressing boredom, the “message” is purely expressive manner.

- (14) a. Context: John is bored at a conference.
b. He doodled like, “I can’t wait for this to be over.”

In (14), the quotation modifies the manner of John’s doodling, perhaps characterizing it as listless or repetitive. It cannot mean that he wrote those words. This minimal pair confirms that the availability of the content reading depends on the lexical semantics of the verb and specifically its ability to take a content object.

This ambiguity extends to mental activity verbs like *think*. While *think* is strongly associated with content objects, thoughts in this case, it can yield manner readings when the focus shifts to the intensity or quality of the mental process.

- (15) a. Jane thought like, “I need to solve this.” (Content)
b. Jane was thinking like, “ahhhhh!” (Manner)

In (15)b, the quotation “ahhhhh!” does not represent a proposition Jane is pondering; rather, it characterizes the manner of her thinking (e.g., straining, confused, or overwhelmed). Like *scribble*, *think* makes a content object available optionally; when that object is not the target, the manner reading surfaces.

3.3.2. The unique case of *be like*

The quotative *be like* presents a distinct challenge because it appears to fail the standard diagnostics for both manner and content predicates. Unlike *scribble* or *think*, the copula *be* is lexically underspecified.

On the one hand, the copula resists standard manner modification. While activity verbs like *drive* or *dance* can be modified by manner adverbs, *be* cannot be modified in this way, even when used to describe behavior.

- (16) a. Jane was like, “I’m hungry.”

- b. *Jane was aggressively.

On the other hand, *be* also fails to behave like a true communication verb. Predicates like *say* or *think* license complement clauses that specify their content, but *be* strictly prohibits this structure.

- (17) a. Jane said that she was hungry.
b. *Jane was that she was hungry.

The ungrammaticality of (17b) indicates that *be* does not lexically select a content argument. Despite failing both sets of diagnostics, *be like* successfully conveys both meanings.

- (18) Jane was like, “I’m hungry.”

In (18), the reading is systematically ambiguous. It can report an internal monologue (simulating content) or it can depict a physical performance of hunger (simulating manner). This hybrid behavior suggests that *be like* is an innovative construction where the demonstrational particle *like* carries the entire burden of introducing the simulation, without the lexical support of a specific event or content object from the verb *be*.

3.4. Summary of findings

The diagnostics presented here reveal that the interpretation of demonstrational *like* is strictly governed by the semantic profile of the embedding predicate. Activity predicates (*drive*, *dance*) introduce an event but no content-bearing object; consequently, they pass manner diagnostics and fail content diagnostics, forcing a manner-oriented construal. Conversely, communication predicates (*say*, *write*) introduce both an event and a content-bearing object, allowing them to pass content diagnostics and favoring a construal where the quotation approximates the message. Between these poles, product-optional predicates (*scribble*) allow for context-dependent availability of a content object, while underspecified predicates (*be like*) rely entirely on the demonstrational particle to simulate either reading. This distribution confirms that *like* does not have a single fixed meaning, but rather functions as a flexible operator that targets whichever semantic entity—event or object—the predicate makes available.

4. A two-tiered compositional analysis

The empirical diagnostics in Section 3 established that demonstrational *like* alternates between two distinct construals: a manner-oriented construal, in which the quotation characterizes the performance of an event, and a content-oriented construal, in which the quotation characterizes a message or product. The present section provides a compositional implementation that makes this contrast explicit in the semantics.

The core proposal is that this variation does not stem from a lexical ambiguity in the particle *like* itself. Rather, I argue that *like* introduces a uniform semantic relation— $\text{DEMO}(d, x)$ —between a demonstration d and a target x . The ambiguity arises entirely from the nature of the target x . In non-communicative environments (e.g., *dance*), x resolves to the event argument e . In communicative environments (e.g., *say*), the grammar provides (or contextually accommodates) an

abstract content-bearing object o linked to the event, and x resolves to this object. Modeling both options within a single compositional framework allows the predicate-conditioned distribution from Section 3 to fall out from independently motivated lexical-semantic differences.

4.1. The semantics of demonstrational *like*

To formalize this analysis, we must first establish the semantic contribution of the quoted material itself. Following Davidson (2015) and Clark and Gerrig (1990), I move beyond the view that quotation simply contributes a proposition or a string type. Instead, I treat quoted material as introducing a *demonstrational object* d . In this framework, a quotation is an event-like entity characterized by its perceptible form—its phonetic string, prosodic contour, gestures, or even non-linguistic sound.

Instead of employing a secondary predicate to map strings to tokens, the quotation directly supplies this selective performance token d to the derivation. The compositional role of the particle *like* is to mediate between this demonstrational object and the rest of the clause. I define *like* as a modifier that introduces an existential quantifier over demonstrations. It asserts that there exists a demonstration d that stands in a specific relation, DEMO, to a target x .

$$(19) \quad [[\textit{like} \text{ “}\Delta\text{”}]] = \lambda x. \exists d [\text{DEMO}(d, x)]$$

Three features of this definition are crucial for the analysis. First, the relation $\text{DEMO}(d, x)$ is a relation of iconic characterization: it requires d to depict, resemble, or simulate properties of x . Second, the operator behaves as a predicate modifier, attaching to an entity and restricting it. Third, and most importantly, the variable x is underspecified. The lexical entry for *like* does not dictate whether x must be an event, an individual, or an abstract object. Instead, x is a variable that must be saturated by whatever suitable semantic argument is made available by the embedding predicate. The logical form of the full sentence is therefore determined by the ontology of the verb. If the verb provides only an event, x becomes that event. If the verb provides a more complex ontology including content objects, x can resolve to that object.

4.2. Targeting the event argument

I first apply this mechanism to activity predicates like *drive*, *dance*, or *run*. As discussed in Section 3, these verbs force a manner-oriented reading. In terms of lexical semantics, these predicates are standard eventives. They introduce an event argument e representing the action itself but do not introduce any independent content-bearing object or product. When the *like*-phrase combines with such a verb, the only available target for the variable x is the event variable e . The composition proceeds via predicate modification, intersecting the set of driving events with the set of things characterized by the demonstration.

Consider the analysis of the manner example from (6), where the subject drove like “get out of my way!” The verb *drive* denotes a set of driving events, formalized as $\lambda e. \text{DRIVE}(e)$. Because no content object is lexically available, the target x resolves to e , yielding the following logical form:

$$(20) \quad \exists e [\text{DRIVE}(e) \wedge \text{AGENT}(e, \text{he}) \wedge \exists d [\text{DEMO}(d, e)]]$$

The truth conditions in (20) state that there was a driving event e performed by the agent, and that this event is demonstrationally characterized by d . This derivation explicitly captures the intuition of “manner.” The condition $\text{DEMO}(d, e)$ asserts that the driving event *looked like* or *sounded like* the demonstration. Because the resemblance relation holds directly between the quote and the physical event, there is no structural room for a message or proposition. This explains why manner diagnostics succeed, such as the ability to answer *how* the event happened, while content diagnostics fail, given that there is no message object to refer to or deny.

4.3. Targeting the attitudinal object

The derivation changes significantly when applied to communication predicates like *say*, *write*, or *think*. Following Moltmann (2013) and Moulton (2009), I assume that the semantics of these verbs is richer than simple event description. A verb like *say* introduces not only an event e representing the act of speaking, but also an *attitudinal object* or *product* o , such as the statement, the claim, or the text, that carries the content. To formalize this, I posit that communication verbs involve a relation $\text{PRODUCT}(o, e)$ which links the event to the abstract object it creates.

$$(21) \quad [[\text{say}]] = \lambda e. \exists o [\text{SAYING}(e) \wedge \text{PRODUCT}(o, e)]$$

When demonstrational *like* modifies such a predicate, it finds two potential targets for the variable x : the event e and the product o . The empirical preference for content readings with these verbs suggests that the demonstrational operator targets the product o , characterizing the message rather than the biomechanics of speech. The resulting logical form is qualitatively different from the manner case:

$$(22) \quad \exists e \exists o [\text{SAYING}(e) \wedge \text{AGENT}(e, \text{John}) \wedge \text{PRODUCT}(o, e) \wedge \exists d [\text{DEMO}(d, o)]]$$

In (22), the demonstration targets the product o . The condition $\text{DEMO}(d, o)$ asserts that the quoted string is an iconic representation of the product o , which corresponds to John’s statement. This formalization provides a precise definition for the approximation effect often attributed to *like*. The quotation is not equated with the message, as it is in standard identity semantics; rather, the quotation *demonstrates* the message. Just as a map demonstrates a terrain without being identical to it, the quoted string d characterizes the form or content of the abstract object o . This allows the speaker to deny verbatim accuracy, such as by adding “...but those weren’t his exact words,” because the semantic claim is one of similarity, not identity.

This definition of the target o also resolves the status of creative activities like *draw* or *paint*. While intuitively “about” something, these verbs typically pattern as manner predicates because they do not lexically introduce a discrete, grammatically accessible product that behaves like a message. In this framework, “content” is not merely representational intent; it is the availability of an object o that supports linguistic paraphrases (e.g., *what she said*). Unless the context explicitly frames the drawing as a communicative act with a propositional message, the predicate fails to provide the necessary target o , and the demonstrational operator defaults to characterizing the manner of execution e .

4.4. Target resolution and predicate sensitivity

The advantage of this analysis is that it unifies the seemingly disparate behaviors of *like* under a single compositional rule. The distribution of readings observed in Section 3 is not due to the polysemy of *like*, but follows directly from the availability of the target x in the lexical entry of the verb.

For **event-only predicates** (e.g., *drive*, *dance*), the ontology is sparse. The verb introduces e but no accessible o . Since the target x cannot resolve to a non-existent object, it must resolve to the event, forcing the manner reading.

For **content-available predicates** (e.g., *say*, *write*), the ontology is rich. The verb introduces both e and o . While e is technically available, the product o is the salient locus for linguistic characterization. Pragmatically, when a speaker introduces a linguistic demonstration with a speech verb, the relevant dimension of similarity is typically the linguistic content (the product), not the acoustic event, thus preferring the content reading.

Finally, for **underspecified predicates** (e.g., *be like* or *scribble*), the resolution is context-dependent. The verb *scribble* allows for a product o , such as a note, but does not require it. If the context supplies a product, DEMO targets o , yielding a content reading. If the context foregrounds only the physical agitation, DEMO defaults to e , yielding a manner reading. Similarly, *be like* relies on the quote itself to simulate a target. If the quote resembles speech, we infer a temporary product o . If the quote resembles a sound or gesture, we infer a target event e .

In summary, the semantics of demonstrational *like* is uniform: it is always an operator of iconic characterization. The interpretive variation is a function of the structural resources provided by the verb phrase it modifies.

5. Pragmatic competition and non-verbatim effects

A recurrent descriptive claim about quotatives with demonstrational *like* is that they are compatible with, and often invite, non-verbatim reporting. However, the empirical profile of this non-verbatimness is not uniform across the construction family. It is most salient with canonical communication predicates such as *say like*, it is less stable with *be like* in its quotative use, and it is largely absent with non-communicative predicates such as *dance like*, where the quotation is not understood as reporting an utterance at all. This section develops a pragmatic account that derives this asymmetry from competition with available alternatives rather than from a lexical approximation feature encoded in *like*. I argue that the approximation effect arises from standard Gricean reasoning (Grice, 1975), where the choice of a marked form triggers an inference that the speaker is avoiding the strict fidelity commitments associated with standard quotation.

5.1. The distribution of non-verbatim readings

The starting point for the pragmatic analysis is the observation that *like*-quotatives differ in how strongly they signal a departure from verbatim accuracy. Consider the minimal alternation with a standard speech predicate in (23). In ordinary contexts, the bare quotation in (23a) presents the quoted string as a direct quotation. While research on spontaneous speech shows that even

direct quotations are often reconstructions rather than tape-recorder playbacks (Tannen, 1989), the bare form remains the standard, unmarked convention for purporting to present original wording. By contrast, (23b) explicitly accommodates a looser relation between the report and the original event.

- (23) a. John said, “no way!”
b. John said like, “no way!”

The speaker uses the insertion of *like* to foreground the affect, prosody, or general gist of the utterance rather than its specific lexical content. Crucially, however, this contrast disappears when bare quotation is not a salient competitor. With non-communicative predicates, the quoted material is not naturally evaluated for accuracy of wording because there is no expectation of a linguistic product.

- (24) a. Jane danced like, “this is my last dance.”
b. * Jane danced, “this is my last dance.”

The ungrammaticality of (24b) is decisive. Since *dance* does not license a bare quotation alternative, no competition arises. Consequently, the listener generates no implicature regarding verbatimness, and the reading defaults to pure manner depiction. This pattern suggests that approximation is not an intrinsic semantic feature of *like*, but a pragmatic effect that arises only when the construction stands in opposition to a stricter alternative.

5.2. Markedness and the maxim of manner

The theoretical mechanism driving this effect relies on the Gricean Maxim of Manner, specifically the sub-maxim *Be brief* (Grice, 1975). This interaction is formalized in the literature as the Division of Pragmatic Labor (Horn, 1984), which posits a systematic correlation between the complexity of a form and the markedness of its meaning. The principle states that unmarked, brief forms tend to signal a stereotypical situation, while marked, complex forms signal a non-stereotypical one. Applying this logic to quotatives reveals a clear markedness asymmetry. For communication predicates such as *say*, *write*, or *mutter*, the bare quotation structure is the routine and economical device for introducing a string. It constitutes the unmarked option. The construction with *like* is structurally more complex as it involves the insertion of an additional syntactic operator. Following the Maxim of Manner, the use of this marked form signals that the described situation deviates from the stereotype of reported speech. Since the stereotype of reported speech involves a commitment to faithfulness or verbatim reproduction, the marked form implicates a deviation from that norm—namely, approximation, exaggeration, or a focus on manner over matter.

This inference can be derived formally as a calculation of conversational implicature. The listener reasons about the speaker’s choice of form relative to the available alternatives:

- (25) a. **The Goal:** The speaker intends to report the content of John’s utterance.
b. **The Alternative:** The speaker could have used the simpler, unmarked form *John said*, “...”.

- c. **The Presupposition:** The unmarked form conventionally implicates a commitment to the faithful reproduction of the original string.
- d. **The Observation:** The speaker chose the more complex, marked form *John said, like, “...”*.
- e. **The Inference:** The speaker must have a specific reason to avoid the commitment associated with the unmarked form.
- f. **The Conclusion:** The speaker is likely unable or unwilling to vouch for the exact wording, or wishes to prioritize the dramatic or affective dimensions of the utterance over its lexical form.

This derivation explains why *like* is so often associated with concepts such as loose talk (Sperber and Wilson, 1986) or constructed dialogue (Tannen, 1989) without requiring us to encode approximation in the semantics of the particle itself. The particle simply introduces a demonstration. The interpretive flexibility is an inference generated by the listener to explain why the speaker chose to demonstrate the content rather than simply report it.

5.3. Deriving the asymmetry

This competition-based account naturally derives the distributional asymmetry noted in the introduction: why “non-verbatimness” is a strong inference for some verbs but not others. The strength of the inference depends directly on the availability and salience of the competitor in the specific context. For canonical communication predicates such as *say*, the competitor is highly salient. The verb *say* is the paradigmatic quotative introducer and the bare form is available in all registers. Consequently, the use of *like* triggers a robust manner implicature of non-verbatimness. This aligns with sociolinguistic findings that *like* allows speakers to hedge their commitment to the reported content while retaining the vividness of direct speech (Buchstaller, 2013).

The situation is strictly different for non-communicative predicates such as *dance* or *run*. As noted in Section 5.1, the bare quotation alternative is ungrammatical. Because the unmarked alternative is unavailable, the markedness logic does not apply. There is no faithful report stereotype to deviate from, so the listener effectively defaults to the semantic core of the construction, which is a pure demonstration of the event’s manner. This explains why *dance like* feels descriptive rather than approximate—it is the only way to express that specific meaning. Finally, product-optional predicates such as *scribble* occupy an intermediate position. Here the salience of the competitor varies with the context. If the discourse has established the existence of a specific written note, the bare quotation competitor becomes salient (e.g., *He scribbled, “Gone fishing”*). In such a context, using *scribble like* would trigger the non-verbatim inference. However, if the context focuses on the physical agitation of scribbling without a salient product, the competitor is less active and the reading shifts toward pure manner demonstration.

5.4. Implications for the theory of quotation

This analysis refines the view of quotation advocated by Clark and Gerrig (1990) and Davidson (2015). While these theories correctly identify demonstration as the central mechanism of quotation, the addition of a pragmatic competition component explains why explicit markers of

demonstration have specific effects in speech reporting. The particle *like* does not change the semantic type of the quote but rather flags the act of quotation as a demonstration rather than a mere mention. In environments where mentioning is the norm for reporting content, flagging the demonstration aspect serves to distance the speaker from the form of the words. This division of labor allows for a parsimonious theory where the semantics, as outlined in Section 4, handles the target of the demonstration (event vs. product), while the pragmatics handles the commitment to fidelity. We do not need separate lexical entries for approximate *like* and manner *like*. Instead, we have a single operator that targets different ontological entities and enters into different competitive relationships depending on the lexical semantics of the embedding verb.

6. Conclusion

This paper has argued that demonstrational *like* is not a mere marker of informal quotation, but is governed by the interaction between the predicate's ontology and the target of the *like*-phrase. The central generalization is that *like* alternates between two distinct construals: a manner-oriented construal, where the quote characterizes an event's performance, and a content-oriented construal, where it characterizes a message or product. Diagnostics confirm that these readings are stable and predicate-sensitive.

The proposed analysis captures this alternation through target selection. When a predicate provides only an event (e.g., *dance*), the manner reading is forced. When it introduces a content-bearing object (e.g., *say*), a content reading becomes available and is typically preferred. This architecture derives the empirical landscape without positing lexical ambiguity, effectively bridging demonstration-based theories of quotation with object-based theories of attitudes.

Finally, the non-verbatim or "approximate" effects associated with speech reports are shown to arise from Gricean competition rather than lexical semantics. Because bare quotation serves as a standard alternative for signaling fidelity, the choice of the marked *like*-construction invites an inference that exact reproduction is not the priority. This analysis disentangles pragmatic approximation from the core semantic contribution of iconic characterization. Broadly, the study demonstrates that the grammar of quotation interacts transparently with semantic ontology, recruiting demonstrational material to characterize either events or their products in a way that is compositionally tractable.

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