"Me *likey*!" A new (old) argument structure or a partially fixed expression with the verb *like*?

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Abstract. This paper explores the current use of the verb *like* in sequences such as "me *likey*". This new use is practically limited to modern variant spellings (*likey*, *likee*, *like-y* and *likie*) and resembles the original (and now obsolete) impersonal structure of the verb in which the experiencer was encoded in the objective case and the verb was used invariably, among other aspects. However, rather than the re-emergence of an impersonal construction, the sequence "me likey" seems to be the result of a situation of language contact and it is in line with the informalisation of English as seen, for example, in the increasing tendency for objective pronouns to be used in subject position in a variety of constructions. In light of the evidence from the Corpus of Contemporary American English and the TV Corpus, we can conclude that the sequence is used in highly informal registers, and that it tends to appear in rather formulaic expressions, especially in two-word sequences.

Keywords: *like*/*likey*; argument structure; impersonal constructions; language contact

1. Introduction

Verbs which denote psychological or mental states are known as *psych verbs* (Belletti & Rizzi 1988, Levin 1993, Landau 2010, Miglio & Flores 2012, Miura 2015). Languages around the world differ in the way they encode the argument structure of these verbs, especially when it comes to the morphological case assigned to their (pronominal) subjects. Thus, in languages such as Spanish (where *like* translates as *gustar*), the argument which experiences a certain feeling or state is expressed through an indirect object and the stimulus of that state through the subject, whereas in English the experiencer is coded as subject and the stimulus as object (see Vázquez-Rozas 2006: 80 or Miglio & Flores 2012, among others). These two syntactic patterns represent two types of constructions, namely personal (experiencer as subject) and impersonal (experiencer as object), illustrated in the following examples (note, however, that the term *impersonal* is typically used to denote constructions which do not involve any personal argument, although it is frequently extended to include clauses which do have a personal argument though this is encoded in the objective case; see Möhlig-Falke 2012: 6 and Miura 2015: 3, among others). These and other features of impersonal constructions are explained in detail in Section 3.1 below):

(1) *Spanish*: (a) Me gusta leer
(b) Me gustan los libros
(2) *English*: (a) I like reading
(b) I like books

In (1), the Spanish verb *gustar* is used in an impersonal construction since it agrees in number with the unit immediately after it, that is, the stimulus, which is in fact the syntactic subject of the sentence. This is the reason why in (1)a it appears in the singular but in (1)b it is conjugated in the plural. In turn, the English counterparts of these examples, which are given in (2), exemplify personal constructions since in both cases the subject is the pre-verbal argument, namely the animated experiencer *I*. The use of English *like* in personal constructions is relatively recent (it is attested in this kind of constructions since medieval times; see Section 3.3 below), and in earlier stages of the lan-

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guage it was used impersonally, as shown in (3) below, which dates from c1425. However, in recent times *like* seems to be developing syntactic uses which resemble earlier English impersonal constructions in a number of ways (for instance, the experiencer is encoded in the objective case and does not control subject agreement). Let us consider (4) below. Here, the verb shows a new spelling, *likey*, and the experiencer appears in the objective case, *me*.

(3)   Me ***liketh*** nat to lye. [MED, c1425(a1420) Lydg. *TB* (Aug A.4) 4.1815] (taken from Castro-Chao 2018: 178)
       Me-OBJ pleases-3SG not to lie
       "I do not *like* to lie"

(4)   Who's that? Me ***likey***. / Oh, that's Debbie. She's great. (TVC, 2014, *Men at work*, "Holy New Boss!")

The aim of this paper is to explore this new argument structure of the verb *to like*, placing particular emphasis on the variation of the pronominal case in pre-verbal position. Data are taken from two English corpora, the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (henceforth COCA; Davies 2008–) and the *TV Corpus* (henceforth TVC; Davies 2019). A preliminary analysis indicates that the conventional spelling *like* hardly attracts objective case in this position in the corpora selected, and hence we will restrict our search to the new spellings which this verb adopts in the material consulted. These are *likey*, *likee*, *likie* and *like-y*. For ease of reference, the label *likey* will be used here to encompass all the modern spelling variants, unless otherwise stated. The paper aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. What is the argument structure of the verbal form *likey* in Present-day English?
RQ2. Are the current uses of *likey* influenced by the discourse-pragmatic process known as *informalisation*?
RQ3. Is the sequence *X likey* used as a replicable or re-usable phrase?
RQ4. Is *likey* favoured in some text-types? Is this preference explained by informalisation processes?

The article is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews the existing literature on the English case system in various structures, whereas Section 3 focuses on impersonal constructions. Section 4 describes the corpora used and the procedure for data collection. Section 5, the core of the study, presents a corpus-based analysis of *likey*. Finally, Section 6 summarises the main findings.

2. Subjective and objective cases in English

Profound changes have occurred over the course of the history of the English language. One such change has to do with a drastic simplification of its case system: inherited from Indo-European, Old English nouns, pronouns and adjectives were inflected for number, gender and case. However, English cases first underwent syncretism or levelling as one inflection might indicate more than one function (in other words, inflections lost functionality; see, for example, Lass 1992: 117-118 or Johnson 2016: 125-126) and then, eventually, they were lost. At present, the only remnants of this crumbling inflectional system are to be found in pronouns, where two main cases can still be identified: subjective (*I*, *he*, *she*, *we*, *they*) and objective (*me*, *him*, *her*, *us*, *them*) (a third case, namely genitive –*mine*, *yours*, *his*, *hers*, *its*, *ours*, *theirs*–, has also survived, but it is not pertinent for our study). Although traditionally these cases have been referred to as *nominative* and *accusative/dative*, respectively (note that this is also the terminology used in Payne & Huddleston 2002: 465, which is the most recent authoritative grammar of English), such labels seem to be outdated as the contemporary pronominal system no longer distinguishes between accusative and dative (i.e. there is case syncretism between these two forms; see Hristov 2013: 568), which is why in the current paper we will use the subjective/objective distinction when referring to Present-day English (in line with, for example, Quirk et al. 1985: 335). In this regard, Quirk et al. (1985: 337) identify the existence of two main areas within a finite clause, namely subject territory (i.e. pre-verbal subject position) and object territory (i.e. post-verbal position). Nonetheless, as pointed out by Hristov (2013: 568), the labels *subjective/objective* are also far from perfect, in that an objective argument may also function as subject (e.g. "*me* and my brother are gonna be off at the same time") or subject complement (e.g. "I'm sure they're as good as we are, but they're *them* and we're *us*"), as will be amply demonstrated in this paper. It should also be noted that some scholars wholly deny the existence of cases in English, as Hudson (1995) observes.

While in most cases the distinction between subjective and objective cases is unproblematic, there are some constructions in which there is a certain degree of uncertainty, which is why the "right use" of subjective and objective forms is deemed "one of the knottiest points in English grammar" (Jespersen 1933: 132; see Maier 2013). As Kjellmer (1986: 445) puts it, "[t]here is a well-established drift in English personal pronouns towards objective forms in nominative contexts". Over recent decades, recurrent attention has been devoted to the study of non-canonical case assignment, to the point that Gilman claims that "[o]ne of the favorite pastimes of writers on usage is to find examples of pronouns that are in the objective case when they should be in the nominative, or are in the nominative when they should be in the objective" (Gilman 1989: 777).

However, Hristov (2013: 570) argues that this non-canonical use of objective pronouns in subject (or subject complement) position is not random and it is only possible in contexts in which the pronoun is not the head of the relevant construction. He illustrates his claims with examples (5)-(11) below (taken from Hristov 2013: 569-570). Except for those instances marked with an asterisk (which are neither grammatical nor even accepted in spontaneous oral speech), all the rest illustrate the possibility of using an objective pronoun in places where a subjective form would be expected (i.e. subject in (5) and (6) or subject complement in (8)), or vice versa (e.g. in (9) the objective case would be expected as the pronouns are here used after a preposition).

(5) (a) *He and I* tried to make conversation. (COCA)
     (b) *Him and me* tried. *We* used a fingernail file once. (COCA)
(6) (a) *We two* speak together. (COCA)
     (b) If *us two* don't play, then it's strictly political. (COCA)
(7) (a) *We all* left at the same time. (BNC)
     (b) **Us all* left at the same time.
(8) (a) It was *I* who opened the door. (COCA)
     (b) It was *me* that had to tell her. (COCA)
(9) (a) The affinity *between him and me...* (BNC)
     (b) all the protection to *both he and I* (BNC)
(10) (a) *I* probably won't go. (BNC)
     (b) **Me* probably won't want to go. (Grano 2006: 6)
(11) (a) *She* poisoned *him* against *me*. (COCA)
     (b) **Her* poisoned *him* against *me*.
     (c) **She* poisoned *him* against *I*.
     (d) **She* poisoned *he* against *me*.

Examples (5) and (9) illustrate pronoun variation in coordinated noun phrases in subject and object position, respectively. These two types of coordinated nominal phrases have different degrees of acceptance among scholars. Thus, objective forms in subject position may even be found in standard English when they are the non-initial member of the coordination, but their use is restricted to informal, relaxed speech if they are the first item in the coordination (Erdmann 1979: 69-70). By contrast, conjoined subjective pronouns in object position have been severely criticised. For some authors, they are the result of hypercorrection (see Maier 2013). One of the fiercest detractors to this use was Burchfield, as we can see in his revised edition of *The New Fowler's Modern English Usage*:

> The regrettable type *between you and I* […] must be condemned at once. Anyone who uses it now lives in a grammarless cavern in which no distinction is recognized between a grammatical object and a subject. The same applies to the use of *I* as the second member of an objective phrase, e.g. *He drove Kirsten and I home*. (Burchfield 1998: 373)

His is just one name from a long list. Angermeyer & Singler (2003: 172-173) recount some of the most staunch opponents to the use of subjective pronouns in object territory, who broadly assert that this use is "illiterate" (Nicholson 1957: 188; see Redfern 1994:188), "inescapably a blunder" (Copperud 1980: 47) and used by "uncomprehending souls" (Bernstein 1965: 322) (since it is beyond the scope of this article to provide a thorough and detailed overview of all the contexts in which objective forms may replace subjective ones, for further information the reader may resort to Erdmann 1979, Harris 1981, Kjellmer 1986, Sobin 1997, Quinn 2005, 2009, and Hristov 2013, among many others, and references therein).

Non-canonical case assignment (and, more specifically, the drift towards objective forms) is not a recent innovation of the language (Gilman 1989: 778) and has existed since as early as Old English times (see Gisborne 2011: 178). In the Middle Ages, the most extreme example illustrating this tendency took place: in the 14th century, the objective form *you* started to be used in subjective positions replacing *ye*. After two centuries of competition, *you* became the dominant form by the end of the 16th century in both subjective and objective contexts, while *ye* eventually died out (OED, s.v. *you*, pron., adj., and n., Etymology (i)). Although other personal pronouns have also shown hesitation and competition between these two cases, none of them shows a complete transition like that of *ye/you*.

At present, objective forms seem to have become the unmarked set of pronouns, mainly in informal speech (see Erdmann 1979: 79 and Quirk et al. 1985: 338). Thus, despite prescriptive grammarians raising an eyebrow over the use of objective forms in place of subjective pronouns, this is an especially common feature of oral speech. The tendency is not exclusive to English, and in fact it is in line with that found in other languages. In French, for example, the subjective form *je* is solely used in combination with a verb (i.e. clitic position in finite verb phrases), whereas the objective form *moi* is used elsewhere. Authors such as Erdmann (1979) and Harris (1981) speculate that this is the path that English will eventually follow until the objective set of forms becomes the one used by default in most contexts, whereas subjective forms would behave as clitics dependent on an adjacent verb (see also Kjellmer 1986 and Maier 2013). In fact, this is not a novel idea. Back in 1876, Sweet stated the following:

> The real difference between "I" and "me" is that "I" is an inseparable prefix used to form finite verbs, while "me" is an independent or absolute pronoun, which can be used without a verb to follow. These distinctions are carried out in vulgar English as strictly as in French, where the distinction between "je" and the absolute "moi" is rigidly enforced. (Sweet 1876: 495)

Examples (12) and (14) below contain the weak French form *je* in preverbal position, whereas the strong form *moi* is used in a wider range of clausal slots, as shown in (13) and (14). Only the future development of English will tell us whether or not the ultimate distribution of *I/me* forms will parallel that of French *je/moi*.

(12) *Je* ferme la porte. (Maier 2013)
       '*I* close the door'
(13) C'est *moi* qui ferme la porte. (Maier 2013)
       'It's *me* who closes the door'
(14) *Moi je* trouve que c'est pas normal. (*Corpus Orléans*, *Moi* 365; taken from Detges 2013: 34)
       '(*Me*) *I* think this is not normal'

There are certain contexts which favour the use of objective pronouns in subject position. Thus, there is a tendency for children learning their L1 and adults learning a foreign language to resort to objective forms when a subjective pronoun is expected. Syea (2009) states that this drift towards objective cases (oblique forms in his terminology)

> may well be a characteristic feature of emerging grammatical systems. Where the system develops (i.e., whether in an L1, L2 or contact situation) seems almost irrelevant insofar as the development of subject pronouns is concerned, as both children (in early first and second language acquisition) and adults (in contact language acquisition) seem to select the same form (i.e., oblique) for the subjects of their independent clauses. (Syea 2009: 72; see Baker & Huber 2000)

As will be shown in Section 5.3 below, language contact will play a decisive role in the emergence of sequences with *likey*. Moreover, the increasing tendency to use objective forms in subject position may also be explained through the lens of informalisation. Informalisation involves a diminution of social distance as a result of the blurring of boundaries between the private and the public spheres. One of the first scholars to identify this process was Fairclough:

> The engineering of informality, friendship and even intimacy entails a crossing of borders between the public and the private, the commercial and the domestic, which is partly constituted by a simulation of the discursive practices of everyday life, conversational discourse. (Fairclough 1996: 7)

Informalisation is closely connected with the term *democratisation*, also coined by Fairclough in 1992 in his work on Critical Discourse Analysis. This term refers to "a discourse-pragmatic process present in the evolution of the English language as a response to social change" (Farrelly & Seoane 2012: 392). Farrelly & Seoane (2012: 393-395) distinguish three types of democratisation: *democratisation proper* (a rather narrow sense which refers to the avoidance of face-threatening acts), *colloquialisation* (the incorporation of speech features in writing, thus blurring the division between written and spoken styles) and *informalisation* (the tendency to diminish the distance between addresser and addressee by using a rather colloquial, causal, offhand and direct style) (see also Hiltunen & Loureiro-Porto 2020: 2 and Loureiro-Porto & Hiltunen 2020: 221). Although there exists a certain degree of overlap among the three subtypes (especially between colloquialisation and informalisation), they imply slightly different characteristics. These concepts will be considered again in Section 5.3 below.

3. Personal and impersonal constructions: The verb *to like* in focus

The introduction to this paper presented two main potential scenarios in which psych verbs such as *like* could be used: personal and impersonal constructions. Impersonal constructions have been well known since antiquity, having already existed in Indo-European (Barðdal & Eythórsson 2009: 179). As a result, an extensive bibliography has emerged on this question, although many of the works here have underlined how fuzzy or misleading this category may be. The first aspect to be addressed is whether we should talk about impersonal verbs or impersonal constructions. Following Méndez-Naya & López-Couso (1997), we will talk about verbs being used (im)personally, since one and the same verb may be used in the two types of constructions (either synchronically or at different points in time).

A second, more controversial aspect is what falls under the label *impersonal*. As Denison (1993: 62) notes, this term has been used in the literature to denote rather different constructions, such as:

> (i) clauses whose verbs have no personal argument, (ii) clauses whose verbs have personal arguments with a function other than that of subject, (iii) clauses whose subject is not personal, and finally (iv) any verb occurring in any of the previous contexts. These four contexts have in common the absence of the subject or of some property of the subject in a kind of construction or verb, but, otherwise, they differ in so many aspects that the meaning of impersonal is rather

blurred and may result in ambiguity. (Denison 1993: 62; as quoted in Loureiro-Porto 2010: 675; see also Fernández-Soriano & Táboas-Baylín 1999: 1725)

The use of alternative labels to try to adjust terminology to these different constructions, such as *impersonal*, *subjectless*, *quasi-impersonal*, *nominativeless* or *experiencer*, to list a few, has only contributed to the creation of a real terminological maze (Méndez-Naya & López-Couso 1997: 186; see also Loureiro-Porto 2010: 675-676 and Möhlig-Falke 2012: 12). In general terms, impersonal constructions may be classified into two main types, one representing weather verbs (e.g. *it rains*, *it snows*), the other with verbs which denote physical, mental or emotional experiences (Méndez-Naya & López-Couso 1997: 186). It is in this second group of verbs that scholars show greater disagreement and provide various, differing classifications (see, for example, Elmer 1981, Ogura 1986 and Denison 1990, among others). Let us consider this second group in greater detail.

From a syntactic point of view, verbs used in impersonal constructions usually take two arguments: an *experiencer* (the animated and prototypically human entity which goes through the state indicated by the verb) and a *stimulus* (also known as *theme*, *source*, *cause*, *target of emotion* or *subject matter*; i.e. something from which that state emanates; see Fischer & van der Leek 1983: 346, Levin 1993: 192 or Castro-Chao 2018: 177, among many others). As for the morphosyntactic features of the constructions, these usually are: i) a subjective form is missing; ii) the experiencer appears in the objective case; and iii) the verb is inflected for the 3rd person singular (see Fischer & van der Leek 1983: 351, Möhlig-Falke 2012: 6 and Miura 2019: 170, among others).

Defining impersonality from a semantic standpoint is no easier. Generally speaking, verbs used impersonally are characterised by the presence of a typically human experiencer who lacks volition or control over the state or experience expressed by the verb (therefore, the experiencer is passively affected by that state; Fischer & van der Leek 1983: 351, Denison 1990: 126, Allen 1995: 15, and Miura 2015: 10, among others). As Möhlig-Falke (2012: 211) states, the impersonal construction was "a productive syntactic device for foregrounding the endpoint of a mental experience by simultaneously backgrounding the initiator to present the SoA [state of affairs] from the perspective of the endpoint", which resulted in a conceptualisation of the state of affairs as unvolitional and spontaneous (2012: 213; also McCawley 1976: 201). However, this definition may be problematic or questionable if we take into account that some verbs which would actually fit into this description have always been used in personal constructions. For example, while *like* and *loathe* were attested in impersonal constructions in earlier stages of the language, *love* and *hate*, which are semantically so close to them, have always been used personally (Miura 2019: 171).

However, English impersonal constructions fell into disuse over the course of the Middle or Early Modern English periods. That was also the case for the verb *to like*. In Old English, *(ge)līcian* could occur both in personal and impersonal patterns with a nominative theme, and Middle English "*līken* (< OE *(ge)līcian*) developed a nominative Experiencer subject around 1200" (Möhlig-Falke 2012: 40; see Allen 1995: 144-149). In Early Middle English, examples were already found in which there was no concord between the post-verbal nominative subject and the verb *like*, and there were even instances of constructions in which the two arguments of this verb were dative, with no nominative argument in the sequence (Allen 1986: 396-397). In the 15th century, "dative subjects were definitely losing ground to nominative subjects in general in this period. At this same time, we find a swing towards the subject assignment for the experiencer role with *like*. For the first time, *like* began to appear as often with a preposed experiencer as with a postposed one" (Allen 1986: 400). In the Early Modern English period, personal constructions increased in frequency (Castro-Chao 2018: 183), and variation between subjective and objective cases as subject continued until at least the 17th century (Trousdale 2008: 310), but impersonal patterns were eventually lost.

4. Methodology

The use of *likey* is not widely spread (yet), or at least it is not extensively recorded in the available corpora, which is why it was difficult to obtain a sufficient number of examples to conduct the present study. This mirrors other works on the non-canonical use of subjective/objective pronouns, where authors like Quinn (2009: 41) and Maier (2013) note the difficulties involved in trying to gather enough data for a solid corpus-based study. Therefore, the choice of corpora has been influenced by the number of examples of *likey* retrieved from several corpora consulted.

We began with two large-scale corpora, the *British National Corpus* (BNC) and COCA. Surprisingly, no matches were found in the BNC, which is why we have restricted our search to COCA. COCA is probably the most widely-used corpus of English and also one of the largest available to date: it contains more than one billion words from 1990 up to 2020. This large-scale corpus includes different varieties of texts: spoken, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers, academic texts, and (since March 2020) TV and movies subtitles, blogs, and other web pages. The number of words per genre is relatively balanced (in between 120 and 130 million words per genre), which allows for easy cross-register analysis.

In view of the limited number of examples retrieved from COCA (see Section 5.1 below), we decided to use an additional corpus. Given that in COCA the highest frequency of *likey* is found in spoken texts (see Section 5.1.2 below), we decided to turn to a spoken language corpus exclusively for extra data. This posed an additional problem: most spoken corpora are rather small, since recording, transcribing and annotating the texts is extremely time-consuming. Therefore, we chose the TVC for the second part of our analysis as it is much larger than most

spoken corpora (325 million words) yet the content is equally informal. Its data come from 75,000 informal TV shows (e.g. comedies and dramas) from the period 1950-2018. Using scripted TV shows as a data source may be debatable as "the language of scripted, imagined media is somehow less authentic than either unscripted language in the media or real-life communication" (Queen 2015: 20). However, scripted language has been the focus of extensive literature in recent times (see, for example, Bednarek 2010, 2011, 2018; Piazza, Bednarek & Rossi 2011; Gregori-Signes 2020; or Chierichetti 2021, among many others), and its use as the focus of linguistic research is valid as long as we take the distinction *real* vs. *authentic* into account (see Marriott 1997: 183 or Coupland 2007: 161): even though this is not real language, it is authentic in that it represents "the linguistic values of a given cultural moment" (Queen 2015: 21).

So, our two sources of evidence will be COCA and TVC, both available free of charge at Mark Davies' website (https://www.english-corpora.org/). In order to make sure that we covered all the new spellings of *like*, we searched for the form *lik**, but only *likey*, *likee*, *likie* and *like-y* retrieved matches that concur with the construction under scrutiny. It should be noted that sequences such as *me like*, with the conventional spelling of the verb, have also been checked. However, only four out of 14,527 examples of *me like* in COCA correspond to the use of the verb in the sequence under analysis. This contrasts with the 77,346 instances of *I like* in COCA. Since we will analyse sequences with both subjective and objective experiencers in this paper, the inclusion of the conventional spelling *like* would hamper the quantitative analysis, and hence this spelling has not been included.

5. A corpus-based analysis of *likey*

In Section 2 above we saw a variety of instances of the non-canonical uses of subjective/objective cases in pronouns. In this section, we will add one scenario to that list, namely the use of *likey* in contemporary English. The sections that follow summarise the main quantitative findings from the corpus-based analysis (Sections 5.1 and 5.2) and then provide a more qualitative account of those results (Section 5.3).

5.1. *Likey* in COCA

The total number of examples retrieved from COCA is 87 (78 of the spelling *likey* and 9 of *likee*), a rather limited number if we take into account the dimensions of COCA (i.e. over one billion words, as seen in Section 4 above).

5.1.1. Syntactic aspects of *likey* in COCA

71 % of the examples analysed (62 examples) occur with a pronominal subject, whereas the rest take either a noun phrase (25 %, 22 examples) or no explicit subject at all (3 examples). Let us focus on pronominal experiencers. Figure 1 provides a fine-grained picture of the pronouns used with *likey* taking person, number and case into account:

Figure 1 shows that *likey* is mostly used with 1st person singular subjects. Indeed, there is just one instance with a 3rd person subject (singular subjective, *he*) and 12 with 2nd person forms (11 singular and one plural *you*; the label "unclear" is used in Figure 1 for the 2nd person pronoun *you* since subjective and objective forms present syncretism). The most remarkable results, then, are those for the 1st person set of forms. As can be seen, the majority of examples combine with a singular pronoun, with a clear tendency for this to appear in the objective (see (15)) rather than in the subjective (see (16)) case. In fact, the 1st person singular is the only person which attracts objective subjects, with the rest exclusively taking pronouns in the subjective case (see (17)).

(15) I never did it before. *Me **likey**!* (COCA, 2008, TV: *Californication*, "The Raw & the Cooked")
(16) KATHIE-LEE-GIFFORD: Yes. Something healthy you can do for yourself. Guess what it is? It's not on this table, but it's underneath. You can go commando. And I heard that this morning, so I said, (unintelligible) I'm going to go commando. […] I commando right in the very moment.
HODA-KOTB: No, you are not.
KATHIE-LEE-GIFFORD: I am too. And *I **likey***. […] *I **likey*** a lot. Wow. (COCA, 2017, Spoken, *Today Show*)
(17) KATHIE-LEE-GIFFORD: We've got a great summer spaghetti and clams from Lidia Bastianich.
HODA-KOTB: Oh, *we **likey***, right after this. (ANNOUNCEMENTS) (COCA, 2017, Spoken, NBC)
This is in line with Erdmann's work on conjoined pronouns: when discussing the use of objective forms in subject position as part of a coordinated noun phrase, Erdmann (1979: 70) also concludes that this use is rather common with the 1st person singular pronoun (i.e. *me*), but sporadic with other pronouns.

Figure 1. Pronouns used with *likey* in COCA
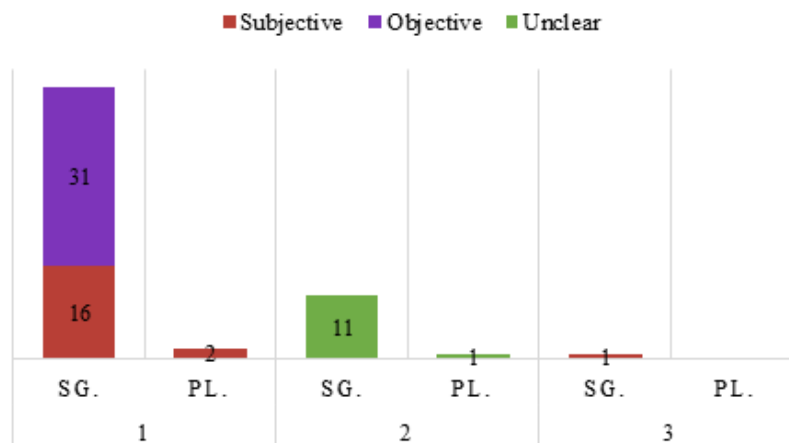
As examples (15)-(17) suggest, the use of *likey* with no complement is very common. Specifically, in 83 % of the corpus instances (72 examples), no direct object or stimulus is used after the verb. In the remaining 17 % (15 examples), the stimulus tends to be a short noun phrase consisting of just one word (see (18): *him*), although it may also be a longer type of unit such as a clause (see (19): *how you thinkey*).

(18) # Basic phone etiquette is no calls after 9pm and no calls before 8am. […]
      ur kinda rigght but my rule wouldd be like nothing after 11:30. I'm a bit nicer than u haha
      # haha if only i could do that withouut giving it away that i **likee** *him* this early in our relationship! (COCA, 2012, Web, "Is it right to text a guy back the next day who texted you at some")
(19) Me **likey** *how you thinkey*. (COCA, 1993, Fiction, *So I Married an Axe Murderer*)

In the corpus examples presented above, *likey* appears in positive declarative sentences (66 examples). Given that punctuation is not wholly reliable, we have included in this count exclamatory sentences too as sometimes the exact same sequence could be followed by either a full stop or an exclamation mark with no difference in emphasis (e.g. *me likey.* / *me likey!*). Although less frequently, it may also appear in negative (six instances), interrogative (12 instances) or even negative interrogative sentences (three instances). These are exemplified in (20) to (22) below, respectively. What is of interest here is that only five of the 21 examples that would require an auxiliary verb (to either negate, formulate a question or indicate a future/past/conditional reference) actually use it (as shown in (23)). In all these instances, the experiencer is either a proper name or a subjective pronoun.

(20) The tape clicks ON. From the speakers comes: BRIDGET (recorded) I told you, that makes me nervous. Me *no* **likey**. (COCA, 2003, Fiction, *The Battle of Shaker Heights*)
(21) A man motioned to a tall stack of black fedoras as I passed his table. "Seorita<sic>?" # I smiled but kept moving. He didn't call after me, and the woman at the next table didn't even look up from her weaving. Not like in China where they followed us. "You **likee**, you **likee**? Big daddy have money. Big daddy buy." (COCA, 2017, Fiction, *The Art of Holding on and Letting Go*)
(22) We need a Moriarty for your Holmes. A yin for your yang. Whatever. And of course, the yin to every lesbian's yang Is a crackhead, totally hard up for voyeuristic Lesbian activity. Tada! Yeah. Ew! *No* **likey**? (COCA, 2004, Movie, *Tales from the Crapper*)
(23) I really reall ylike<sic> this boy and I think that he likes me to. But the problem is he is popular and I'm not. I heard his friends talking and it could have been about me, and how he might like me. I can't be sure though, science he is popular. I always tell myself that he definitely *does not* **likee**, but then I will hear something to tell me other wise, I don't want to seem stupid in thinking that he likes me. (COCA, 2012, Blog, "Ask a Guy: Does He Like Me or Am I Bugging Him?")

One final consideration regarding syntax is in order before bringing this section to a close. There is a clear tendency for *likey* to appear in short sentences. In fact, 56 % of the cases (49 examples) display this verb in two-word sequences, as in (15) and (22) above. Three- or four-word sequences are also rather common (as in (20); 25 examples, 29 % of the total), whereas longer units, such as that in (18), are extremely rare, and they never include objective pronouns.

5.1.2. Textual distribution of *likey* in COCA

In this section, the focus moves to the different text types included in COCA, and how they make use of *likey* in the sequence under scrutiny. Figure 2 sets out this distribution in percentages. Although, as seen in Section 4 above, the number of words per text type in COCA is rather balanced, normalised frequencies per 1,000,000 words have been used for the sake of accuracy. Therefore, the percentages are calculated on normalised rather than raw frequencies.

Figure 2. Distribution of *likey* in the different text types of COCA
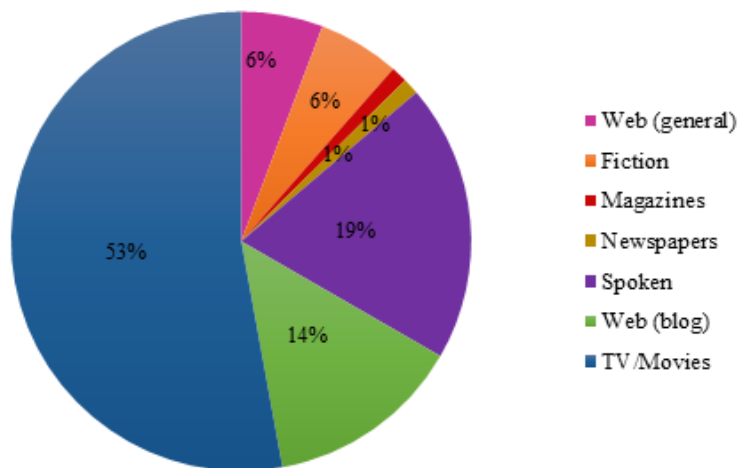
From the list of text types available in COCA, there is one which is not represented in our data, namely academic, whose texts are drawn from peer-reviewed journals. This comes as no surprise given that the construction under analysis is markedly informal and would not sit easily in a formal genre of this kind. On similar lines, the text types showing the lowest rate of *likey* are newspapers, magazines (with just one instance each, 1 % of the total), fiction and web sites (with five instances each, 6 %). In turn, blogs (12 examples, 14 %), spoken texts (17 examples, 19 %) and, especially, TV/movies (46 examples, 53 %) show the highest incidence of our construction. The latter are, in fact, the most informal text types included in COCA. These two sets of text types illustrate the two extreme poles on a scale of formality. Using Mair & Hundt's (1999) terminology, those genres which are open to innovations are *agile*, whereas text types which are more conservative are *uptight*. In their data, journalistic prose and academic writing represent the polarisation of formality in written texts, these being the least and the most formal genres, respectively. The text types analysed in this paper would go even further towards the informal pole, in that online material makes use of a more casual and relaxed style than journalistic prose, with features which bring it closer to spoken than to written discourse. Nonetheless, if online texts are considered rather agile when it comes to linguistic innovations, informal oral speech is even more open to change, which is why the new uses of *likey* are more common in our oral material than in any other genre. An additional reason might be that, as can be derived from many of the examples given in this paper (see, for example, example (22) above), the target sequence is frequently used in humorous contexts, which are more characteristic of spoken speech.

5.1.3. Some preliminary conclusions

From the analysis presented in Sections 5.1.1 and 5.1.2 above, we can infer that there is a positive correlation between informality and the use of *likey*. There are several factors pointing at the informal character of this expression. On the one hand, it favours the use of objective subjects (more specifically, *me*) in subject territory. As concluded in other studies (see Section 2 above), the use of objective forms in subject position is commonplace in informal speech. Secondly, it tends to be used with no direct object or stimulus, even in examples where one would be expected. Consequently, the data from COCA suggest that *likey* is an ambitransitive verb which may occur with or without a complement. Moreover, auxiliary forms are also omitted rather frequently in both questions and negations. Finally, the most informal text types under analysis (especially informal spoken texts) show the highest token numbers with *likey*.

5.2. *Likey* in TVC

As described in Section 4 above, the choice of TVC was motivated by the results obtained after the textual analysis of COCA: since *likey* is more common in spoken data (72 % of the examples were found in oral material from both the spoken and the TV sections of COCA), an additional spoken corpus was selected in order to reach more solid

conclusions with a larger sample. Although the results were still rather limited, we now obtained 195 instances of *likey* (176 spelled as *likey*, seven as *likie*, and six each as *likee* and *like-y*).

Overall, we can state that the data from TVC confirm the general trends identified in COCA. On the one hand, the use of this construction is more common with pronouns (126 examples, 65 % of the total) than with nouns (51 examples, 26 %), and also possible with null subjects (18 examples, 9 %). Focusing on the use of pronouns, 1st person forms are the ones that take the lead in combination with *likey*, especially in the objective case (65 instances vs. 15 instances of 1st person subjective forms), as shown in Figure 3. In fact, this is the only person attracting the objective case. Moreover, although the number of examples per corpus is too small to make any categorical assertions, the breakdown of the data into decades points to an increasing tendency to use the combination *me + likey* in my data: in COCA, just one example was attested in the 1990s, 14 in the 2000s, and 16 in the 2010s; in turn, this increase in TVC is a little more marked: 18 examples in the 2000s, and 47 in the 2010s. In line with the results obtained from COCA, the combination of *likey* with 2nd person pronouns is not uncommon either (34 instances). In turn, it is hardly attested with plural pronouns (just four instances, all persons considered together).

Figure 3. Pronouns used with *likey* in TVC
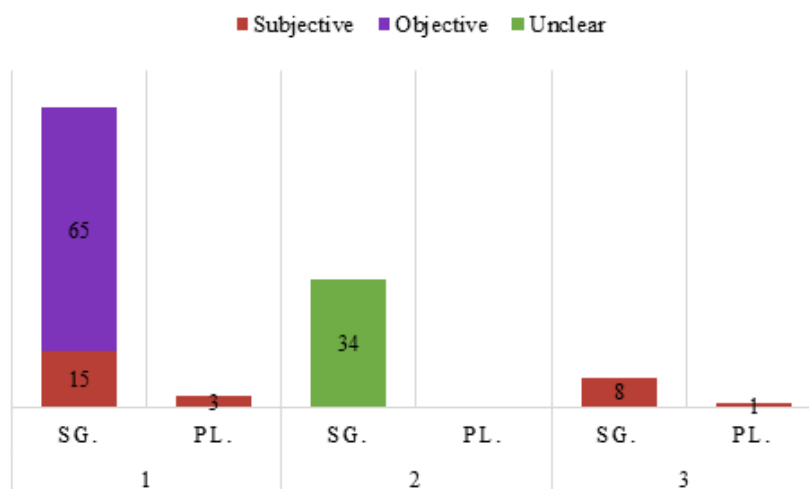
Interestingly enough, in one of the corpus examples *likey* takes the old 2nd person pronoun *thou* as subject (see (24) below. This is rather unexpected as *thou* is an old form which survives mostly in religious and archaic texts, and whose recent use "in ordinary speech has been largely restricted to regional English (now chiefly in the north of England)" (OED, s.v. *thou*, pron. and n.1, Etymology), yet this example was found in an American TV series. The explanation for this unexpected use has to do with the episode itself: the characters are rehearsing a school production of *Romeo and Juliet*, and they mix linguistic conventions from Shakespeare's time (*thou*) with features from their own time (*likey*). The use of *thou* here might also be related to the context, since religious words such as *pilgrim*, *holy* and *saint* are mentioned.

(24) Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much, for saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch. Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too? Ay, pilgrim... lips that they must use in prayer. O, then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do. What do they do? I mean... my, that was riveting. You have a raw heat. - You're like a young brando. - Yes, I am. *Thou **likey***? Yes, I do. Penny. (TVC, 2004, *Quintuplets,* "Shakespeare in Lust")

Let us consider nominal experiencers in greater detail. In many corpus instances, these nominal subjects consist of just one word (especially *mamy*, *daddy* or a proper name), and that word often refers to the person speaking. That is, speakers frequently refer to themselves in the 3rd person by using a noun. In all likelihood, this is also the case in COCA, but we did not have access to the original videos so as to check who was speaking when *likey* was used. With the examples obtained from TVC, we could actually watch some of the episodes and thus confirm this. The use of proper names by speakers to refer to themselves could be connected to the fact that the semantics of *me likey* does not entail volition. By referring to themselves in the 3rd person, they are actually conceptualising themselves as unintentionally involved in triggering the emotion (for a similar discussion see Castro Chao 2021: 153-155). In this regard, the *me likey* construction might resemble earlier English impersonal patterns (see McCawley 1976: 201; Möhlig-Falke 2012: 20). In other words, it does not seem unlikely that the *me likey* construction might be favoured in contexts where the Experiencer does not see himself or herself as responsible for bringing the emotion about, thus being used in situations which arise spontaneously, as can happen in other constructions with oblique Experiencers: *it looks good to me* (i.e. 'it is fine with me') or *it seems (to me) that*. The use of proper names with *likey* is exemplified

in (25) and (26) below (both examples from the series *How I Met your Mother*). In (25), Barney hires two actors to pretend to be his wife and son, respectively, in front of his mother. They are having lunch with Barney's mum, and Barney's friends join them. When Barney, his fake son, and his mother go into the kitchen to eat sundaes, they discover the fake wife, Betty (whose real name is Margaret), and his friend Ted kissing. At that point, the fake son, Tyler (whose actual name is Grant) shows his (simulated) discomfort with the situation by exclaiming "Tyler no likey". In (26), Robin is about to go for a ride with Nick on his motorcycle. They leave the bar and the first thing she sees is a large, impressive motorcycle, which she loves; she exclaims mischievously "Mama likey". Unfortunately, it was not Nick's bike.

(25) Barney: Just go eat your sundae.
       Grant/Tyler: I can't. I'm lactose-intolerant.
       Barney: Guess who's not lactose-intolerant? Tyler. Tyler is gonna go in there and enjoy every last bite.
       Barney's mum: Ice cream time, gang.
       Barney: Yummers!
       Barney's mum: My God!
       Grant/Tyler: *Tyler no **likey***. (TVC, 2009, *How I Met your Mother*, "The Stinsons")
(26) Nick: Finally ready for a ride on the bike?
       Robin: Who? Me? Let's ride, Big Daddy. Oh, yeah. *Mama **likey***.
       Nick: Robin, over here. (TVC, 2012, *How I Met your Mother*, "Who Wants to Be a Godparent")

Moving on to other syntactic criteria, the percentage of examples of *likey* with no direct object or stimulus equals that in COCA (161 examples, 83 % of the total). Moreover, auxiliary forms are only used three times (see (27) below for an example), but in most negative and interrogative sentences (56 to be precise) no auxiliary verb is used.

(27) *Doesn't* Doug ***likey***? (TVC, 1999, *The King of Queens*, "Get Away")

Finally, the tendency identified for *likey* to occur in short sequences in COCA is confirmed in TVC. Thus, in 59 % of the corpus examples (115 examples) the sequence consists of just two words, and in some cases (9 examples, 5 %) *likey* appears on its own (as shown in (28)).

(28) No baggage, love that. No baggage, no babies. ***Likey***. (LAUGHING) This is fun. (TVC, 2016, *Letterkenny*, "Relationships")

5.3. Discussion

As implied by the title of this paper (and also by RQ1 in the Introduction), the verb *like* (mostly in its modern spellings) is currently used with a new argument structure: it takes objective experiencers in preverbal position. The fact that *likey* is used with an objective pronoun as experiencer resembles the original argument structure of the verb *to like*, that is, impersonal constructions. Nonetheless, a closer look at the data reveals that the only objective form used with *likey* is *me* (31 examples, 50 % of pronominal subjects in COCA; 65 examples, 52 % of pronominal subjects in TVC), with an increasing tendency over time. But how can we explain that the only objective form which combines with *likey* in the material analysed is *me*? The answer to this question may have to do with some perspectival function *likey* has (or is acquiring), for instance as a strategy to show a more subjective perspective on the state of affairs. In this connection, Möhlig-Falke (2012: 72-74 and passim) points out that impersonal constructions in earlier English used to express a shift of perspective which bore on the notion of subjectivity (understood as a perspective which includes speaker and addressee as part of the state of affairs; Möhlig-Falke, 2012: 72). A perspectival account along these lines might explain the fact that the only objective form which combines with *likey* in my data is the 1st person singular pronoun *me*. That being the case, rather than the re-emergence of an impersonal use of this verb, there seems to be another reason lying behind the emergence of the sequence *me likey*. As explained in Rodríguez-Abruñeiras (2023), the earliest examples in which *me likey* was used in the literature from 19th century seem to indicate that the expression was used as a mockery of Chinese immigrants in the USA. On the one hand, the long final /iː/ (represented in our corpora by the spellings <-ee>, <-ey>, <-ie> or <-e-y>) is associated with the tendency identified for Chinese speakers to make vowels long at the end of a word (Mieder 1996: 7). The non-canonical spellings of *like* would therefore originally result in a ridiculing caricature of Pidgin English with clear racist connotations. On the other hand, as mentioned in Section 2 above, the use of an objective case in subject position could be triggered by a phenomenon often found in emerging grammars (like those of pidgin and creole languages, in this case that of Chinese immigrants speaking English) which consists precisely in displaying objective forms as subject pronouns (Syea 2009: 65-66; see Rodríguez-Abruñeiras 2023). Despite the fact that the origin of *me likey* may hide some racist colouring, most speakers do not currently regard this expression as a slur against any ethnic group. The increasing tendency to use *me likey* may be explained in light of the information provided in Section 2 above: since objective forms are becoming the default subjects in a variety of constructions (especially in informal discourse), this may also apply to the construction under analysis. This drift towards objective forms may be

the result of a process of informalisation that characterises English in recent times. In order to consider this hypothesis in detail, we need to recap some of the features of *likey* seen in the preceding sections that point out the informal character of *likey*: it tends to take an objective pronoun (*me*) in subject position; it hardly ever combines with an auxiliary form when standard use would require one; it is common in informal spoken speech and online texts (which are rather agile when it comes to linguistic innovation; see Rodríguez-Abruñeiras 2023 for a corpus-based analysis of online texts) and unattested in formal writings; it does not show the canonical spelling of the verb; and it does not show subject-verb agreement as it is used as an invariable form.

The fact that the form *likey* is more common in short sequences (as seen in Sections 5.1 and 5.2, almost 60 % of the examples in both corpora consist of just two words) may suggest that it is currently being used as a rather formulaic sequence to express approval or excitement on the part of the speaker (as seen, for example, in (15) above, where the sequence *me likey* appears as an independent exclamatory sentence). This would also explain why the verb is used invariably: *likey* might be undergoing a process of decategorialisation by means of which it loses the typical morphosyntactic verbal features, such as the ability to show subject agreement or to be inflected for a different tense (see Hopper & Traugott, 2003: 106-109). This would be in line with the development of other fixed expressions, such as *methinks*, *meseems* and *melists* (see Möhlig-Falke 2012: 15; see López-Couso 1996 for a detailed analysis of the grammaticalisation of *methinks*). That being said, there are other two-word sequences in which nouns are used with *likey* and which also seem to show a certain degree of fossilisation. These include the combinations *mamy* (seven examples in TVC, three in COCA; see (27) above), *daddy* (four examples in TVC) and a proper name (20 examples in TVC, 13 in COCA) followed by *likey*. Even the sequence "no likey" (see (23) above) would illustrate this. In light of this evidence, it seems more appropriate to talk about the potential emergence of the partially fixed expression *X likey*. Nonetheless, we should bear in mind that the development of *X likey* is rather recent (although, as shown in Rodríguez-Abruñeiras 2023, it is attested since the 19th century, its use was not initially widespread) and that the number of examples with this construction is rather limited, so we can only formulate tentative hypotheses to account for both its origin and its future development.

6. Conclusions

This paper has addressed the current use of the verb *to like* in a new sequence which forces us to look to the history of the verb's usage. In Old English times, *līcian* was used in impersonal constructions where the human experiencer was encoded as object and the stimulus as subject. In accordance with the loss of impersonal constructions in the Middle English period, *to like* started to gradually take subjective forms as subject, until objective subjects became obsolete in the Early Modern English period. Nevertheless, the argument structure of *likey* today actually resembles that of impersonal *līcian*, since the sentient entity which appears in pre-verbal position is frequently encoded in the objective case when it is a pronoun. We might therefore think that the new use of the verb *likey* implies a return to the original use of *like* in impersonal constructions. However, this does not seem possible, especially because the formula is not productive (the only objective form which combines with *likey* is *me*). Therefore, rather than an impersonal in the historical strict sense, the new uses of *likey* seem to respond to a regular recent contact phenomenon (Chinese immigrants in the USA speaking in English), which was then put into hyperdrive through (racist) imitation. Moreover, *me likey* fits the drift towards objective forms to the detriment of subjective pronouns identified for other constructions in informal English (e.g. *you and me* in subject position), a change that in fact illustrates the informalisation of English in recent times (RQ2). Other features of the morphosyntactic structure of *likey* which evince the informalisation of the language are that: it tends to be used with no auxiliary verb in either negative and interrogative sentences; it rarely takes a complement (in other words, the stimulus is mostly omitted); it does not show number agreement; and it typically appears in short sequences, especially in strings of just two words (RQ1). Moreover, from the perspective of register, this form is more common in highly informal texts, especially in spoken and online material, and unattested in formal writings (RQ4).

Finally, we have seen that *likey* is currently used in rather fossilised and formulaic sequences where the verb remains invariable but the (pro)nominal element which opens the sequence changes. The two most common forms occurring in this sequence are *me* and a proper name (RQ3). The idea that the sequence under analysis is becoming rather fossilised is supported by the fact that (as mentioned above) the verb is used invariably (i.e. it is never inflected for the 3rd person singular or the past), probably as a result of a process of decategorialisation. Additional evidence is that, semantically speaking, the sequence may indicate approval or excitement on the part of the speaker, similarly to an interjection like *great!* In this regard, it should be noted that, even when a proper name is used before *likey*, it refers to the person speaking. Therefore, the sequence *X likey* seems to be a good tool to express the speaker's subjective perspective on the state of affairs. The paper has thence shown how linguistic phenomena such as language contact, impersonalisation, idiomatisation and informalisation may work hand in hand in the emergence of linguistic structures.

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