

Peeking into the socio-historical background and current use of 'me (no) *likey*'¹

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Historical and online texts in focus

1. Introduction

The verb *to like* has fallen repeatedly under the gaze of scholars. One aspect which has stimulated vigorous discussion is its original use in impersonal constructions and its later change of argument structure along with the disappearance of impersonals from English. Nonetheless, evidence from current informal English shows that *like* is now used in constructions which bear a close resemblance to the older impersonals, although always displaying alternative spelling variants, especially *likey*. This paper seeks to further our understanding of the verb *to like*, focusing specifically on these new constructions. To this end I will use *likey* as a generic label to refer to such new uses and constructions, regardless of variations in spelling (unless otherwise stated). Using data from the *Corpus of Historical American English* and *iWeb Corpus*, the study will seek to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1. What are the morpho-syntactic features of the expression 'me (no) *likey*' in Present-Day English?
- RQ2. What is the origin of the sequence 'me (no) *likey*'?
- RQ3. Where do phrasal patterns with *likey* fall on the continuum of idiomaticity (Michaelis, 2017)?

The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 addresses the definition and historical development of impersonal constructions. Section 3 describes the databases used and the methodology followed. Section 4 looks back in time so as to try to identify

the origin of the sequence under analysis, before Section 5 turns to its use in current online material. Section 6 advances some deeper, qualitative explanations for the quantitative data extracted from the corpora, and Section 7 offers some concluding remarks.

2. Impersonal constructions in English

2.1. What is *impersonal*?

Despite having been firmly in the spotlight of linguistic studies for over a century (see van der Gaaf, 1904; Fischer & van der Leek, 1983; Allen, 1986, 1995; Denison, 1990; Ogura, 1990; López-Couso, 1996; Méndez-Naya & López-Couso, 1997; Trousdale, 2008; Loureiro-Porto, 2010; Möhlig-Falke, 2012; Miura, 2015 and



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Castro-Chao, 2021, among many others), there is little consensus as to what impersonal constructions are. The use of alternative labels in recent times, such as *impersonal*, *subjectless*, *quasi-impersonal*, *nominativeless* or *experiencer*, among others, has only served to ‘increase the already existing confusion’ (Méndez-Naya & López-Couso, 1997: 185; see also Loureiro-Porto, 2010: 675–676). Moreover, although some authors talk about *impersonal verbs*, ‘it is more suitable to speak of personal and impersonal uses of a given verb or of verbs used personally or impersonally, rather than of personal and impersonal verbs’ (Méndez-Naya & López-Couso, 1997: 191) given that some verbs can be used in both types of constructions. Broadly speaking, there are two types of verbs capable of impersonal usage: on the one hand, verbs denoting natural phenomena, such as *rain* or *snow*; on the other, constructions with verbs referring to events which escape the volition and control of an experiencer, such as *like*, *need* or *rue* (see López-Couso, 1996: 154 and Méndez-Naya & López-Couso, 1997: 186). It is the second group of verbs which is relevant to this study.

From a syntactic perspective, scholars tend to agree that impersonal constructions show the following two features: i) a lack of nominative argument; and ii) a verb invariably conjugated in the 3rd person singular (see Méndez-Naya & López-Couso, 1997, and references therein). Impersonal constructions expressing non-volitional events consist of two roles or arguments: the *experiencer* (i.e. ‘the animate and sentient entity which perceives or experiences a concrete state’, Castro-Chao, 2018: 177), and the *stimulus* (also known as *theme*, *source* or *cause*; i.e. ‘something from which the experience emanates or by which the experience is effected’, Fischer & van der Leek, 1983: 346). Example (1) below provides an instance of an impersonal construction with a dative experiencer (*him*) and an accusative stimulus (*hire beawas*).

- (1) *him* (DAT) *gelicade* (SING) *hire beawas* (ACC PLUR) (Fischer & van der Leek, 1983: 347)
to him pleasure was (because of) their virtues
(to him there was pleasure because of their virtues)

From a semantic perspective, impersonal constructions are characterised by a lack of intentionality or volition on the part of the experiencer: the experiencer, inflected for the objective case, is

the passive recipient of the state or process expressed by the verb, as opposed to personal constructions, in which it is encoded in the nominative case and is the initiator of the state or process (see Fischer & van der Leek, 1983: 351 and Miura, 2015: 10, among many others).

2.2. The demise of English impersonal constructions

Impersonal constructions were common in old Germanic languages (and also in other Indo-European languages, such as Latin, Russian and Celtic; see Möhlig-Falke, 2012: 14). However, over the course of time many English verbs have changed from impersonal to personal uses. This transition seems to have been largely completed in English by the 16th century (Fischer & van der Leek, 1983: 364 and Allen, 1986: 401), although occasional impersonal instances are attested until about two centuries later (Möhlig-Falke, 2012: 206–207 and Castro-Chao, 2018: 178). The verb *to like* (Old English *līcian*) has traditionally been used to exemplify the change from impersonal to personal (see Allen, 1986: 375, 1995: 254; Denison, 1990: 113; Méndez-Naya & López-Couso, 1997: 187 and Miura, 2015: 32).² When trying to account for this shift towards personal use, authors have put forward a multiplicity of theories. One of the most influential accounts is that of Jespersen (1894, 1927) and van der Gaaf (1904): after the collapse of the English morphological system in medieval times³, nominative, accusative and dative were no longer distinguishable due to case syncretism. Case was therefore no longer used to mark grammatical relations. As a side effect, word order became more rigid, and the new Subject-Verb-Object arrangement contributed to the reanalysis of the pre-verbal argument as a subject. In other words, the objective experiencer became the new subjective argument, since any form in pre-verbal position is typically interpreted as a subject (see Lightfoot, 1979: 231; Ogura, 1990: 31 and Miura, 2015: 9).⁴

3. Methodology

Given that the construction under analysis is low in frequency, large corpora were necessary in order to find a sufficient number of examples which supported a solid analysis. Therefore, two of the largest historical and Present-Day English corpora have been selected: the *Corpus of Historical American English* (Davies, 2010; henceforth COHA) and the *iWeb Corpus* (Davies, 2018; henceforth iWeb). COHA contains over 400 million

words of text from different text types (fiction, popular magazines, newspapers and non-fiction books). It covers from the 1810s to the 2000s, and the data are balanced by genre over the decades. By turn, iWeb contains some 14 billion words from the year 2017. Its texts are exclusively taken from web pages, and it is also useful for identifying the most common collocates of a word. Along with its size, iWeb has been selected for another reason: a previous study (Rodríguez–Abruñeiras, 2022) has shown that spoken and online material are the genres in which *likey* is most frequently used because these involve very informal linguistic productions. Whereas Rodríguez–Abruñeiras (2022) explores oral material, the present paper focuses on online written productions. As a means of making sure that all potential spellings are covered, I have checked the uses of the form *lik**, with a final asterisk, which returned only two spellings relevant to our analysis, namely *likey* and *likee*. Among the different variables taken into account in this study are the type of units functioning as experiencer, the person and number of the verb, the polarity of the sentence and the length of the sequences with *likey*.

4. Working out the origin of *likey*

4.1. Reactions to the use of *likey* in the Web

Although myriad studies have been devoted to the verb *to like* and its shift from impersonal to personal (a small number of these are mentioned in Section 2 above), no work has considered the recent uses of *likey*. In an attempt to identify the origin of these new uses (and given that no canonical work could be consulted to this end), a first step was to turn to the Internet in order to see what language users themselves have to say about *likey*. It transpires that in recent years the Web has witnessed fierce debate on the use of this form and its potential racist connotations.

The etymology of the expression is not entirely clear. In his popular crossword puzzle blog, Professor Michael Sharp (aka Rex Parker) points to the potential racist roots of *likey*: it may have originated as a phrase of ethnic mockery of African American creole speech or, more likely, of Chinese English (Parker, 2015). The latter theory is based on the propensity of Chinese speakers to add a long /i:/ <ee> to many English words. Exaggerated representations of Chinese speakers with this phonological feature were common in fiction and the mass media of the 19th century, where Chinese speakers ‘were ridiculed *ad absurdum*’

(Mieder, 1996: 7). The main target of such a slur were Chinese laundrymen, as working in laundries was common for this ethnic group of immigrants (according to Mieder, 1996: 11, by 1920 about 30% of the Chinese in work in the United States carried out duties related to laundry work). It is precisely in this context where the proverb ‘no tickee, no washee’ (which may have had a decisive influence on the emergence of ‘me [no] likey’) originated in the 19th century. In his play *Two Men of Sandy Bar* (1876), Hop Sing depicts an

impoverished Chinese laundryman being cheated out of his earned money by his white customers who would pick up their laundry without wanting to pay. They would ask for credit, then not return, and probably deploy the same trick at another Chinese laundry in the immediate vicinity. [...] Self-defense against such serious financial losses might have prompted a Chinese laundryman one day to express in utter frustration the ‘No payment, no wash’ which later became the more innocuous ‘No ticket, no wash’. Its Pidgin English form of ‘No tickee, no washee’ was picked up by the Caucasian customers who continued to enjoy ridiculing the ‘foreign’ laundrymen while at the same time venting their frustrations when they were denied their laundered clothes in the event of having forgotten their ticket receipts. (Mieder, 1996: 10)

Even though the proverb ‘no tickee, no washee’ seems to derive from the attempt to mock the Pidgin English of Chinese immigrants, not all speakers are aware of the racist history behind it. In all likelihood, the formula underwent semantic generalisation (Pfenninger, 2009: 14–15) and took on a wider figurative meaning, which allowed its use in new contexts to indicate that a certain prerequisite was required in order to obtain a given result (see Partridge, 1977: 157; Wilkinson, 1993: 378 and Mieder, 1996: 14). Accordingly, the formula may have been reanalysed as a partially fixed expression of the type ‘no X, no Y’ with no racist undertones, as in ‘no pain, no gain’ or ‘no ID, no entry’, implying a conditional relationship between the lack of X and the lack of Y. After the generalisation of meaning, ‘no tickee, no washee’ may have influenced the emergence of a new, somehow related expression, namely ‘X likey’, where the long final /i:/ is also present. As the historical data in Section 4.2 below will show, the spelling variant *likee* used to combine with the negative particle *no* more often than with any other linguistic element (especially in

the 19th and early 20th centuries), probably replicating the negative structure of ‘no tickee, no washee’.

However, other theories do not contemplate racism as the origin of *likey*. In his blog on linguistics, Professor Arnold Zwicky (2012) discusses the expression ‘me no likey’ and adds two more possibilities to the list which have nothing to do with ethnic mockery: it may just be an expression which echoes childish language (that is, the way a three-year-old child would speak) or may even have originated in the animated TV comedy *Family Guy*, where the sequence is used in several occasions (in one of the scenes, Lois Griffin shouts ‘me likey bouncy, me likey bouncy!’ while jumping on a trampoline; in another scene, she says ‘me likey breadsticks, me likey . . .’; Sheridan & Hogan 2001). This latter theory is the one also proposed in *Urban Dictionary* (2003) under the entry for ‘me no likey’. How can we reconcile these four theories on the origin of *likey*? There may be a certain degree of plausibility to all of them, as will be shown in the following section.

4.2. *Likey* in COHA

In this section, we turn to COHA in order to find historical evidence on the use of *likey*. First, the morpho-syntactic features of the sequences where *likey* is used are described, and then some examples are considered in greater detail so as to check the theories on its etymology described above.

All the examples in COHA (45) date from 1846 to 1934. As regards spelling, the corpus search returned two examples of *likey* and 43 of *likee*, thus showing that final <-ee> was the prevailing spelling in this database. In most of these examples, the verb takes a pronominal subject (21 examples, 47% of the total; see [2] below), but its use with no explicit subject (14 examples, 31% of the total; see [3]) is also rather common, followed by nominal subjects (10 examples, 22%; see [4]). Figure 1 compares the use of pronouns in the different persons.

- (2) *Me likee* Americanos. (COHA, 1912, Rolling Stones, by O. Henry)
- (3) Me cook-man in Melican army. No *likee* war. (COHA, 1921, *Grace Harlowe’s Overland Riders on the Great American Desert*, by Jessie Graham Flower)
- (4) *Mellican man* no *likee* Chinaman hab 2 wiffee. (COHA, 1885, *Ah Sin*, by Mark Twain)

As Figure 1 shows, *likey* exclusively takes singular pronouns in the historical data. It is also more frequently used with first-person pronouns, especially

in the objective case. In fact, in 11 instances the objective pronoun is *me* (see [2] above and [5] below), and only in two examples it is a different form, in this case *him* (see [6]):

- (5) But the white man was convulsed with fear, and said nothing in the making ready of the boat, not even ‘No, no’ when Salesa put her arms round him and kissed him again and again on the lips; and Billy Hindoo shook like a wet dog in the bow, whimpering, ‘Hi, yi! me British subject! *me* no *likey*!’ (COHA, 1921, *Wild Justice: Stories of the South Seas*, by Lloyd Osbourne)
- (6) I heap’ shamed. You fightee my China boy, you catchee me. My boy no mo’ hab me fo’ boss -savvy? I go back, *him* no *likee* me. Mebbe all same killee me. (COHA, 1898, *Moran of the Lady Letty*, by Frank Norris)

As for the type of sentence in which *likey* appears, it is more common in negative sentences (28 examples, 62% of the total), followed by declarative sentences (16 examples, 36%) and questions (just one token, 2%). Moreover, the only negative particle used in COHA is *no* rather than *not*. All this may be related to the conditional use of the formula ‘no tickee, no washee’ seen in Section 4.1: the earliest attestations of *likey* may be more common in negative sentences (always with ‘no’ as a negative particle and never accompanied by an auxiliary form) because of an influence of the formula ‘no tickee, no washee’, also a negative construction. Finally, *likey* is more common in shorter sequences, especially in those consisting of between two and four words (29 examples, 64% of the total).

Moving on to a more qualitative reading of the examples, we can see that *likey* is repeatedly used in excerpts which show a situation of contact between white and either Afro-American (see [5] above, where Billy Hindoo is described and referred to as ‘a nigger’) or especially Chinese (see [3], [4] and [6]) characters, which is in keeping with the idea of *likey* originating from the slur on racial stereotypes seen in Section 4.1 above. There is a third instance which deserves closer attention. Example (7) is an excerpt taken from Otto Jespersen’s well known 1928 work on language. Here he connects two of the aforementioned theories on the origin of *likey*, namely childish language and the caricaturisation of Chinese speakers of English. From his words we can derive a certain degree of disdain towards these two kinds of languages (i.e. childish and Pidgin) as, for him, they are two impoverished or corrupted linguistic forms:

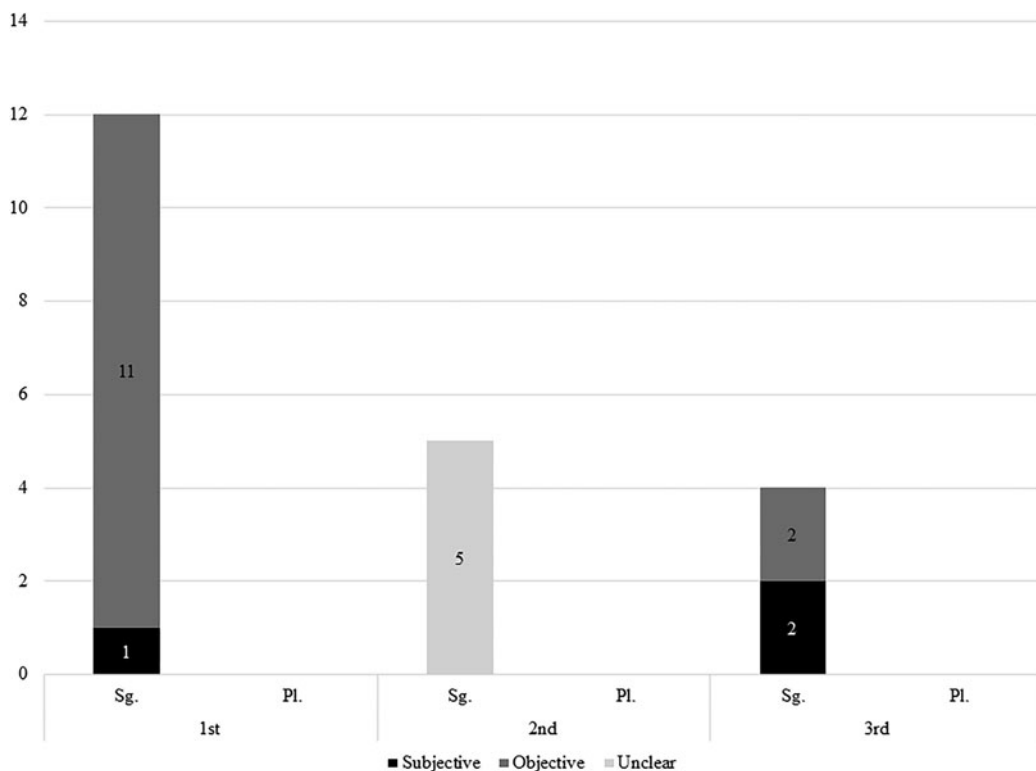


Figure 1. Pronominal forms used with *likey* in COHA⁵

(7) But many parents are not so wise; they will say *Btinged* themselves when once they have heard the child say so. And nurses and others have even developed a kind of artificial nursery language winch they imagine makes matters easier for the little ones, but which is in many respects due to erroneous ideas of how children ought to talk rather than to real observation of the way children do talk. [...] I give a connected specimen of this nursery language (from Egerton, // Keynotes, 85): '[...] Hitchy cum, bitchy cum, bitchy cum hi, Chinaman *no likey me*' This reminds one of pidgin-English, and in a later chapter we shall see that that and similar bastard languages are partly due to the same mistaken notion that it is necessary to corrupt one's language to be easily understood by children and inferior races. (COHA, 1928, *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin*, by Otto Jespersen)

In short, historical evidence from the corpus material shows that *likey* is attested since as early as the 19th century. Even though it is not possible to give an overview of the kind of narrative in which this

construction proliferates due to the low number of authors using it, it becomes patent that travelogues and novels concerning colonial activity feature this construction heavily. Given that in these examples it was mostly (if not always) used by non-native (especially Chinese but also Afro-American) characters, the origin of the expression seems in fact to be marked by ethnic connotations. Based on the corpus evidence, we can conclude that expressions with *likey* did not originate in the series *Family Guy*, although their use in the series may have put them into hyperdrive in recent times.

5. The use of *likey* in Present-Day English: iWeb as a source of evidence

In this section, we proceed with the analysis of more recent data extracted from iWeb. 574 examples of *likey* were retrieved from this database. Spelling conventions seem to have changed with respect to the old data: while *likey* was scarcely attested in COHA, it is now the most widespread spelling (528 examples vs. 46 instances of *likee*). The shift from <ee> to <ey> observed in recent

English might bear on the association <-ee> has with words which carry word-final stress (e.g. *addressee*, *attendee*, *disagree*, *employee*, etc.), which is certainly not the case with *likey*. As regards subjects, the distribution has remained the same overall: pronominal subjects are still the preferred option (447 examples, 78% of the total; see [8]), followed by no explicit subject (76 examples, 13% of the total; see [9]) and nominal forms (51 examples, 9%; see [10]).

- (8) Some pieces I ordered came today and *me likey*. (iWeb, Jewellery: Where Did U Get That)
- (9) I've been wanting a new pillow for a few weeks now and though I'd rather try em 1st, what the heck! If no *likey* I make a dog bed out em, and at least one of us will be happy. (iWeb, 350 Thread Count Down Alternative Pillows (Set of 4) – Meh)
- (10) *My hair* no *likey* coconut oil. (iWeb, Coconut Oil = Dry Brittle Hair for Some - Urban Bush Babes)

In a more itemised analysis of pronouns, we can see that differences persist as regards these forms: *likey* still shows a clear preference to combine with first-person singular pronouns as subjects, especially in the objective case (as in [8] above). In fact, the only objective pronoun which combines with *likey* in iWeb is *me*. It is possible that the prevalence of first-person pronouns is connected to some perspectival function *likey* has (or is acquiring), for instance as a means to express a more subjective perspective on the state of affairs. A perspectival account along these lines might explain the fact that the predominant variants are first-person pronouns (see Figure 2), as these allow to include the speaker in the state of affairs. Unlike older data, Figure 2 shows that in more recent data the verb is also used with plural subjects, although very rarely.

However, important differences between older and recent data arise in terms of other morpho-syntactic features. When it comes to the type of sentence in which *likey* is used, historical data evince the clear preference for negative sentences, whereas recent data prove that it is now more common in declarative sentences⁶ (424 examples, 74% of the total; see [8]). Negative sentences constitute 22% of the examples (124 examples; see [9] and [10] above), whereas questions are rarely found (4% of the total). In negative and interrogative sentences, auxiliary forms are now occasionally found (19% of the examples where an auxiliary verb is expected actually make use of it, as shown in

[11]). Interestingly, although *no* is still the preferred negative particle (it was the only one attested in COHA; see Section 4.2 above), *not* is now occasionally found (108 examples of *no* vs. 16 of *not*), and it mostly appears alongside an auxiliary form (14 instances of *don't/do not* and one of *didn't*).

- (11) I'm 32. I'm starting to look a bit wrinkled. And I *do not likey*! (iWeb, *Beauty Reviewer. NZ's Biggest Beauty Guide*, 'A Foundation for Ageing Skin! But does it WORK?!')

The prevalence of declarative sentences, alongside the fact that in recent English the <-ey> spelling becomes the predominant variant and *not* (the particle used in English to negate verbs) starts to be used as a negative particle in the negative constructions, may be related to speakers over time ceasing to perceive a connection with the original expression 'no tickee, no washee' seen in Section 4.1 above (which is why some speakers might no longer regard the structure as racist), hence ceasing to replicate the structure of the original proverb in terms of spelling and negative polarity.

Finally, sequences in which *likey* is used tend to be very short, in most cases consisting of just two words (247 examples, 43% of the total; see (12)), sometimes even just one (19 examples, 3% of the total; see (13)).

- (12) *Turtles* brand candy were developed by Johnson's Candy Company, DeMet's in 1923 in 1918, after a salesman came into the kitchen's dipping room and showed a candy to one of the dippers, who pointed out that the candy looked like a turtle. So, that explains that and history was made, and we have now have the most delicious gooey turtles in the world! Me *likee*! □ (iWeb, *The Baking ChocolaTess*, 'Salted Chocolate & Caramel Pecan Turtle Fudge')
- (13) [Review of Bare Escentuals Holiday 2011 Collection] I admit these surprised me . . . ! *Likey!* *Muse Approval* for these ones, they just prove to be a unique lip tint that needs to be tried! (iWeb, *Musings of a Muse*, 'Bare minerals a toast to tints review, swatches, photos')

In these instances, *likey* does not seem to behave as a regular verb. The sequence in fact seems to be an expression of approval, something closer to the interjection 'great!'. Instances like (14) below, where *likey* is invariable for number, contribute to this idea of *likey* used as a fixed expression rather than as a prototypical verb, and so does (15), where

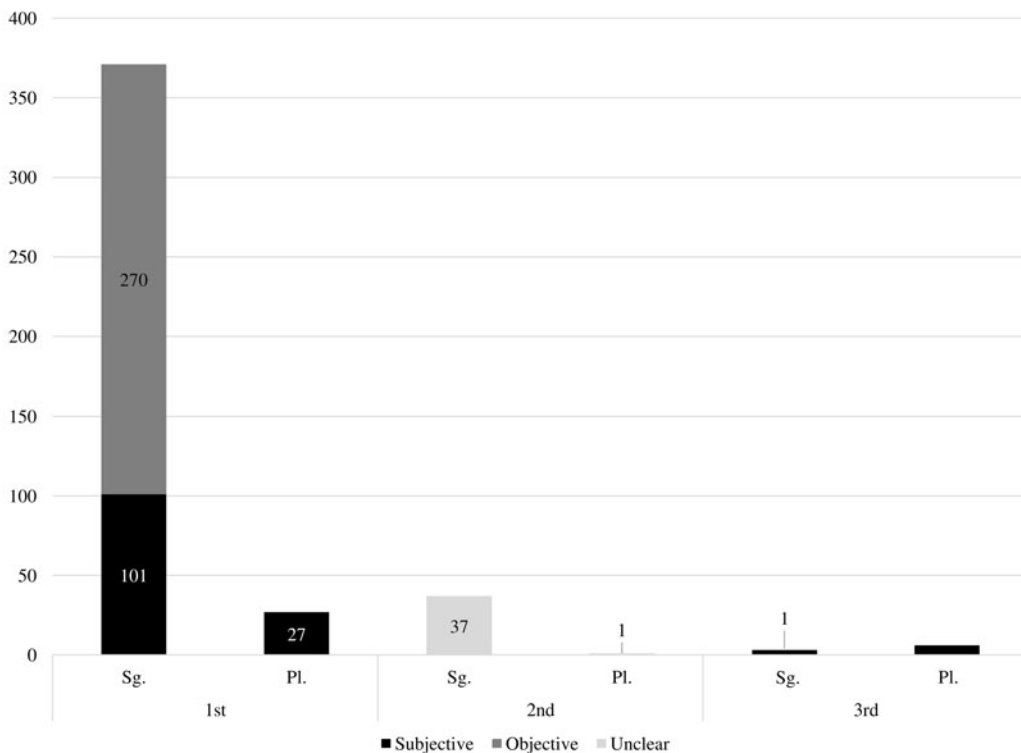


Figure 2. Pronominal forms used with *likey* in iWeb

it appears twice (we could easily replace it here by ‘great, great!’ or another similar exclamation).

- (14) Panda *no likey* duplicate content! (iWeb, *Outspoken Media*, ‘Pagination & Canonicalization for the Pros – SMX Advanced 2012’)
- (15) The unit [the interactive touch screen Alpine ICS-X8] gives you 7-inches of touch, drag and flick control direct from the LED-lit screen, so it works just like your smartphone, and of course comes topped up with the latest in Bluetooth know-how. Simple Secure Pairing, signal strength and phonebook synchronisation are all part and parcel of the Bluetooth package, and Favourite App Display let’s you see more of what you like, and less of what you don’t. **Likey likey!** (iWeb, *Fast Car*, ‘Alpine ICS-X8’)

6. Discussion of the data: *Likey* as the rebel of impersonal verbs?

The historical analysis in Section 4.2 above shows that *likey* is attested since at least the 19th century,

and is recurrently found in informal uses at present (as shown in Section 5). An analysis of the data has revealed that *likey* tends to take pronominal subjects (47% of the instances in COHA and 78% in iWeb), especially in the objective case. In COHA, both *me* and *him* were used as subjects, but in iWeb *likey* combines solely with *me*. This is in line with the results in Rodríguez–Abruñeiras (2022), as the only objective pronoun combining with *likey* in the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* and the *TV Corpus* is *me*, which is also the most common of all subjects. To some extent, the combination ‘*me likey*’ would not differ significantly from other impersonal sequences which have fossilised with idiomatic meanings, such as *methinks*⁷, *meseems* or *melists* (see Möhlig–Falke, 2012: 15). In light of the instances from the corpora, it would not be unreasonable to think that ‘*me (no) likey*’ may also be fossilising as a (semi-)fixed expression in both positive (‘*me likey*’) and, to a lesser extent, negative (‘*no likey*’) sequences. If we use the collocations tool in iWeb to check this, we can see that these are in fact the second and third most common words combining with *likey*⁸: 304

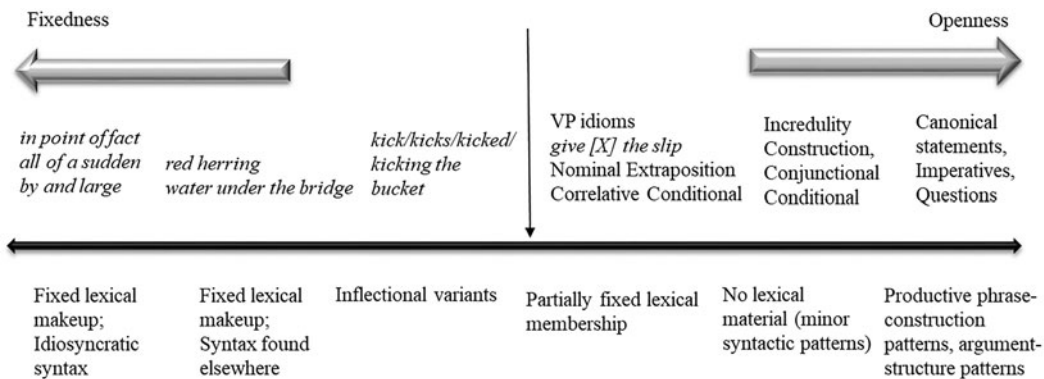


Figure 3. The idiomaticity continuum (taken from Michaelis, 2017)

examples of *me likey* and 190 of *no likey*. This fixation of the formula would be supported by various additional factors. On the one hand, the verb in this sequence is invariable in all the corpus examples: it never shows number concord nor is it inflected for the past tense. This invariability might be the result of a process of decategorialisation, that is, the loss of morphological and syntactic properties which characterise members of major syntactic classes, in this case a verb (see Hopper & Traugott, 2003: 106–109). Moreover, auxiliary verbs are hardly ever used in either questions or negations, and complements are mostly omitted, even in sequences in which they are naturally expected, as in example (9) above, for instance. On the idiomaticity continuum proposed by Michaelis (2017) (see Figure 3), these ‘X likey’ formulas would illustrate the ‘partially fixed lexical membership’: the formula is not as fully fixed as, for example, *methinks*, and it allows for a certain degree of openness, in that the first item in the sequence may vary.

We have also seen that ethnic issues may lie behind the emergence of this construction, although this only accounts for the spelling <-ey/-ee> and does not provide any additional insight as to the reasons why an objective case is used again with this verb once impersonal constructions have died out. Are we, then, looking at a ‘rebel’ verb which is moving in the opposite direction on the impersonal > personal cline? Unfortunately, we do not have enough information to provide a definite answer here, and all we can do is formulate hypotheses. A potential re-emergence of impersonal constructions, though, does not seem plausible (especially because the sequence is not productive: in recent data, only the objective form *me* is attested in combination with *likey*), which leads us to a second hypothesis: the use of

an objective case in subject position in ‘*me likey*’ could be a reflection of a phenomenon often found in emerging grammars (pidgin and creole languages but also early child productions) which consists precisely in displaying objective forms as subject pronouns (Syea, 2009: 65–66). This would align with my findings from COHA, where the construction appears to be a mimicking of stereotypical pidgin or creole usage. This is also consistent with the tendency identified for objective forms (in both English and other languages) to gradually take over the function of subjective pronouns, as in ‘you and *me*’ used as a subject or ‘it was *me*’, where *me* functions as a subject complement.⁹ Previous studies (see Erdmann, 1979: 79 and Quirk et al., 1985: 338, among many others) have argued that objective forms are now the unmarked set of pronouns, especially in informal speech. Some scholars (see Erdmann, 1979 and Harris, 1981) even venture to say that English might eventually follow languages such as French, where the subjective form *je* is used as a clitic immediately before a verb, whereas the objective *moi* is used elsewhere (e.g. ‘*Je ferme la porte*’ vs. ‘*C’est moi qui ferme la porte*’; examples taken from Maier, 2013). In iWeb, *me + likey* is almost three times as common as *I + likey* (101 examples of subjective *I* vs. 270 of objective *me*), which seems to support this idea of objective pronouns, especially *me*, being increasingly used beyond their original object domain. We can conclude by saying that all these features which characterise the use of *likey* are in line with the increasing informalisation of the English language, as identified in previous studies. *Informalisation* is the use of a rather spontaneous and direct style so as to diminish the distance between addresser and addressee (see Farrelly & Seoane, 2012: 395–

396; Hiltunen & Loureiro–Porto, 2020: 2; Loureiro–Porto & Hiltunen, 2020: 221 and Rodríguez–Abrunieras, 2022). In informalisation, ‘language practices more typically associated with everyday life are strategically deployed in public discourse’ (Pearce, 2005: 65). In other words, the boundaries between the public and the private spheres become rather fuzzy because of the ‘engineering of informality, friendship and [. . .] intimacy’ (Fairclough, 1996: 7). The morpho-syntactic characteristics of *likey* described in this paper unquestionably show traces of this process.

7. Conclusions

The aim of this paper was threefold: to identify the origin and earliest attestations of *likey*, to assess its current uses in Present-Day English using online written material as a source of data and to decide the degree of idiomaticity of the constructions in which *likey* is used. The study may have been wrong in suggesting that the verb has reverted to past uses of *like* in impersonal constructions (these constructions died out in the Early Modern English period), given that the modern spellings *likey* and *likee* tend to show the argument structure of impersonal constructions. Thus, for instance, over three quarters of the recent examples take a pronominal form as the experiencer, and in most cases that pronoun appears in the objective case (RQ1). It should be noted, however, that the only objective form found in my data is *me* (except for two examples with *him* which date back to 1898). This may bring to mind some comparable fossilised expressions in which a verb exclusively collocates with the first-person singular objective form *me*, such as *methinks*. We can hypothesise, albeit tentatively, that the non-canonical use of an objective pronoun in subject position with *likey* emerges in a situation of language contact between English (which is the lexifier language) and Chinese, and responds to a historical (and cross-linguistic) tendency to increasingly use such pronouns in subject position (a feature of linguistic informalisation), to the point that they have become the default or unmarked forms (RQ2). In this regard, the origin of *likey* may have some racist roots: the <-ey/-ee> ending of the verb represents the mispronunciation by Chinese speakers of some final English sounds. This was then mimicked in English literature by way of stereotype to characterise some characters in a story as having a certain social status (slaves, low workers, uneducated, etc.) and it may then have developed into a

colloquial form of speech, either with, or maybe by now often without, racist connotations. We have also seen that, although occasionally the stimulus is also included in the sequence, in most instances it is omitted. Moreover, the verb is also used as an invariable form, which was one of the tenets of impersonal constructions. However, there is an important difference: while in traditional impersonal constructions the verb takes a final <-s> irrespectively of the number of the arguments, in the sequence under analysis here *likey* is never inflected for the third-person singular present indicative. This might be the result of a process of decategorialisation, as it does not show the prototypical verbal traits. All these features seem to point in the same direction: in most of its occurrences, *likey* appears in partially fixed expressions, especially ‘me likey’ and ‘no likey’, in which *likey* remains stable but the first element in the sequence may vary (RQ3). Only time will tell whether or not this expression will continue to advance toward the fixedness pole in Michaelis’ (2017) idiomaticity continuum.

Notes

- 1 I would like to show my most sincere gratitude to the anonymous reviewers for their careful reading of my manuscript and their many insightful comments and suggestions, some of which are partially reproduced here.
- 2 Castro–Chao (2018: 183) illustrates the gradual character of this transition from 1500 to 1710 (cf. Figure 5 therein).
- 3 ‘In English, the frequency of the impersonal constructions is said to begin to decrease between 1400 and 1500 (Allen, 1995, among many others), although impersonal instances continue to be attested until about two centuries later’ (Castro–Chao, 2018: 178).
- 4 In this study, I do not aim to put forward any new hypothesis about the development of impersonal constructions, nor do I intend to address the issue of their demise in the theoretical discussion. For additional information, the reader may resort to Fischer & van der Leek (1983), Allen (1995), Trousdale (2008) or Loureiro–Porto (2010), among many others.
- 5 The label ‘unclear’ is used for the second-person pronoun *you* as it shows case syncretism.
- 6 Given that punctuation is not wholly reliable in online material, we have also included in this count exclamatory sentences, since sometimes the exact same sequence (e.g. *me too/me too!*) was followed by either a full stop or an exclamation mark with no significant emphatic difference.
- 7 See López–Couso (1996) and Palander–Collin (1997) for a detailed analysis of the grammaticalisation of *methinks*. In López–Couso’s (1996) work, *think* could also combine with other objective pronouns in

the earliest stages analysed (1350–1500), but it also restricted its use to collocations with *me* in more recent times.

8 The most common word is *most*, but this actually collocates with a misspelling of the adverb *likely*.

9 Due to space limitations, these constructions will not be discussed further here. See Rodríguez–Abruñeiras (2022) for a more detailed explanation.

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