

***It's like if* constructions and stance off-loading in multimodal artifacts**

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This paper analyzes the structure and meaning of the construction *It's like if X*, and also investigates its behavior in the context of multimodal (and multimedia) artifacts. It shows how the composite nature of the Simulative Conditional Construction (relying on two stance expressions, the conditional *if* and the simulative *like*) constitutes an example of stance stacking (constructionally determined configuration of multiple stance expressions, Dancygier 2012), while also showing how the stance structure is preserved in the context when one aspect of stance continues to be expressed linguistically, while the other is off-loaded to a different (visual or video) modality. Such patterns of multimodal stance off-loading provide crucial evidence of, on the one hand, the interaction between communicative modalities, and, on the other, of the hierarchical nature of stance-stacking.

We investigate two sets of examples, one linguistic, the other multimodal. Our language examples come from a database of about 500 expressions (gathered from COCA-Spoken and NOW corpora), while video and visual examples (about 20 altogether) have been gathered manually from late-night talk shows. The linguistic examples, which appear primarily in spoken discourse (the examples in the journalistic corpus NOW all come from interviews and other speech events), comment on a target situation by presenting it as similar (*like*) to an imaginary situation with clear emotional consequences (*if*). For example, an interviewee explains her reluctance by saying: *I swear to God, this isn't self pity -- it's like if you have a broken bone and you don't want to touch it*. Depending on the nature of the imaginary scenario, the construction additionally uses verb markers of counterfactuality (as per typical patterns found in conditionals, see Dancygier 1998). The combination of simulative and conditional stance may be additionally complemented by further stance and hedging devices (e.g. *it's very much like if X*, *it's sort of like if X*, *it's just/almost like if X*) or by negation (*it's not like if X*).

Late-night talk shows typically comment on current events and their impact. Often the hosts use the construction in combination with images or videos. For example, John Oliver comments on the blatant act of collusion by Trump staffers by comparing it to a fictional incident during Watergate and adding fake images of an email chain. In playing a report on a Trump campaign supervisor saying, *"I would encourage you to pursue contacts with Russian... great work,"* Oliver responds, *"It's like if, during Watergate, we had an email chain of Howard Hunt, saying 'about to break in,' and Nixon replying, 'NOICE!'"* We refer to such cases as Multimodal Simulative Counterfactuals. We consider them in the context of earlier work on multimodal simile (Lou 2017), represented by so-called *when*-memes, which use a simulative construal without explicitly using the word *like*. We further show how the imaginary nature of the multimodal artifacts affects the ways in which linguistic signals of stance are put together in the linguistic construction. While there are instances where the image merely supplements the verbal statement, we also discuss examples where the image takes over the role of the counterfactual conditional, whose markers are then missing from the construction. We interpret it to mean that in multimodal contexts aspects of constructional meaning can be off-loaded onto the non-linguistic part of the artifact. Importantly, though, we argue further that simulative meaning lies at the core of such constructions. We show the role of simulative expressions in these stance-stacking constructions and we unpack the stance hierarchies simulative meanings participate in, clarifying the differences between text-only and multimodal usage.

References

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