4-6-1979

The Wizardry of As

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Peterson, Jill E. (1979) "The Wizardry of As," Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 24. Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls/vol5/iss1/24

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The little word as is certainly not one of the English language's more ostentatious words. But what it lacks in stature, it makes up for in numbers. According to a word frequency test as is ranked near the top of the list along with the most common articles, pronouns, and prepositions. Consequently, a better understanding of the function of as could be a very useful thing indeed.

One of the most interesting debates in connection with this word is concerning the differences between it and like. In many environments they can be interchangeable, and yet strict grammarians would tell us otherwise. Probably we all remember a commercial popular years ago which received a good amount of grammatical criticism. The original line was:

Winston tastes good like a cigarette should.

A while later they followed it up with the quip:

What do you want? Good grammar or good taste?

because apparently people had been complaining to them that they should have used as instead of like in this case. But either seems to sound correct to most English speakers.

Winston tastes good like a cigarette should.

Winston tastes good as a cigarette should.

In fact, as, though technically the correct choice, tends to sound a bit stilted. What then is the difference here that the grammarians were so concerned about? Most speakers of English probably couldn't tell you. A grammar book would tell you that like is a preposition and as is a conjunction, and that consequently you cannot join two clauses with a preposition, as seems to have been done in this case. This explanation is not totally satisfying, however, when one explores the numerous other similarities and differences between these two words. Consequently, I have returned to raw data for much of my investigation and will use Junction Grammar as a language model in discussing my observations.

As a data base I have used a computerized corpus being developed by the Translation Sciences Institute. It consists of over half a million words of text taken from various Church publications. It easily provided a wealth of examples of all the common usages of these two interesting words.

First of all, let's consider what like is trying to tell us in the above sentence. The example makes the statement that 'Winston tastes good', followed by the assumption that a cigarette should be like that.
(Well, no accounting for taste.) In other words, the predicate 'tastes good' is an attribute that Winston does have and that a cigarette should have, and the words like and as can be used to bridge the gap. The corpus provides some other examples where either word sounds appropriate to most English speakers:

The poor would be aided as they had been before.
The poor would be aided like they had been before.
They conversed with him as one man talks with another.
They conversed with him like one man talks with another.
They looked as if they had lost a friend.
They looked like they had lost a friend.
He doesn't sing as he used to.
He doesn't sing like he used to.

The nuance of difference between like and as in these examples is subtle. In fact, many English speakers would probably perceive no difference at all.

There are cases, however, where one can be used and the other clearly cannot. For example, like has a clearly adjectival usage which cannot be replaced by as.

* in like manner
* with like certainty
* of like value.

The equivalents with as are definitely ungrammatical.

* in as manner
* with as certainty
* of as value

This would seem to indicate that like could, in this case at least, be given a JG representation of an adjective modifying a noun:
This then illustrates one significant difference. **Like** has a purely adjectival usage, while **as** does not.

As an adjective, **like** can be modified by a prepositional phrase. This is not common in modern English, but is often found in English of Biblical style.

He will preside over the whole church and be like unto Moses.

It is preferable in modern English to leave out the preposition.

He will be like Moses.

The question then arises: How is **Moses** associated with **like** if there is no intervening preposition? Does **like** become a preposition in this environment, or is some other structure involved? Evidence for its becoming a preposition is that a pronoun following it does take the oblique case.

He will be like him. *He will be like he.
However, this type of inflection following like does not occur with the equivalents of like in other languages such as Spanish, French, and German, so the inflection might just be an English specific phenomenon. In fact, like is decidedly not a preposition in these languages, and consequently may not be in English. Another possibility could be associative subjunction, which has been known to gobble up prepositions in noun phrases. Compare these:

a lecture about history

a history lecture

One version has a preposition, the other does not. The JG structures of these two reflect this difference, while maintaining the similarity of meaning.

A similar parallel could be drawn for like.

In passing, it is interesting to note that like also has a further structural reduction in which it becomes a suffix.

He was Moses-like.
Here the noun has been fully incorporated into the ad. [adjective]

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(onto) cases
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Another piece of evidence that like is always adjectival in nature rather than prepositional is that it can occur with many of the same quantifiers that ads can:

- kind of like / kind of happy
- somewhat like / somewhat happy
- more like / more happy
- most like / most happy
- so like / so happy

However, like should by no means be considered a normal, garden-variety adjective. It has two qualities in particular which set it apart from regular adjectives. First, it can modify other categories beside nouns and not change its inflection.

He is happy like us. (adjective)

He reads books like us. (predicate)

Second, it can occur with more quantifiers than just those which normally occur with ads, such as:

- very much like / *very much happy
- a lot like / *a lot happy

The point to be made by comparing it to other ads is that, notwithstanding these differences, it is similar enough to ads to warrant being given an ad node in the J-tree. And 95 percent of the examples from the corpus were followed by a noun phrase and could be consequently handled with this @ structure. These were the grammatically correct cases. But what of the other 5 percent? Every single one of them was followed by a sentence, rather than a noun phrase, and in every case like could be appropriately replaced with as or as if. Some examples:
They were standing like we had stood.

They were standing as we had stood.

It seemed like we lived on an airplane most of the time.

It seemed as if we lived on an airplane most of the time.

This then is part of what the grammarians were worried about in the advertisement. Like, technically, should be followed by a noun phrase, not a sentence. As such, it functions as a modifier of some part of the main sentence, rather than as a point of intersection between two sentences, as it does when it can be replaced by as.

Having proposed structure for the "grammatically correct" usages of like, the wizardry of as must be explored to see how it differs from the modificational function of like, and to see why it can be considered grammatically "incorrect" to use like in the same place as was used. The distinction pointed out so far is the difference between modification and point of intersection. Like is primarily a modifier. As marks a point of intersection. The true wizardry of as is found in the fact that as can mark the intersection of almost anything.

For example, it can mark an intersection on predicate level time and manner modifiers. Here, the two times or manners are compared and found to be equivalent.

They were touched by his presence as he shook hands with them. (time)

Do unto others as you would have others do unto you. (manner)

Note that in neither example is a specific time or manner indicated in either clause of the sentences. The time or manner must be calculated by finding the intersection between the two clauses. This type of calculation is a very special type of comparison operation and it would seem that as is an instance of this operation. Consequently, the above example could be given the following J-tree:
In this example the interjunction operation of normal modification has been replaced by the comparative operation, which is marked with as. There are many other places where standard interjunctions can be replaced with the comparative operation as. One very common structure where this occurs is with non-verbal participles. In JG, non-verbal participles are a very special kind of modifier whose logical subject must be calculated because it is different from the structural subject. A couple of examples will illustrate this:

Ed died a rich man.

The people elected John president.

Here, a rich man tells something about the way Ed died, but it also tells something about Ed. Consequently, as a modifier, the noun phrase a rich man feels both adjectival, because its logical subject is Ed, and adverbial because it is also a manner modifier. The JG structure for an example like this reflects both aspects.
In the second example above, president doesn't say anything about the manner of election, but rather describes what John was elected into being. Consequently, rather than being a predicate level manner modifier, it has the flavor of a verb level directional modifier. The J-tree reflects this difference.
Notice that the logical subject of the predicate level modifier is the subject of the sentence, while the logical subject of the verb modifier is the direct object of the sentence. This set of relationships will always hold true for non-verbal participle modifiers.

The same set of relationships often occurs with *as*.

Ed served as a bishop for four years.

They sustained Brigham Young as president of the Church.

Note that bishop tells something about how Ed served, as well as telling something about Ed, and that president of the Church was a position Brigham Young was sustained into, as well as something he became. Consequently, these examples could be given non-verbal participle structure, with the associative operation replaced by the comparison operation *as*. 
It is interesting to note that if like replaces as in such examples, the meaning changes significantly.

He served as a bishop.

He served like a bishop.

Like does not imply that he was a bishop, just that he served in a bishop-like manner. The reason for this is that like in this case would be a regular predicate level manner modifier, not a non-verbal participle. In other words, like would be purely adverbial in nature, and not adjectival at all.

A similar phenomenon occurs with appositives. Consider these:

We, the people involved, must decide.

We, as the people involved, must decide.

The only difference in structure here, again, is the replacement of the associative operation with the comparative as.
Another case where the comparative junction can replace an interjunction is with statements related to tags. Compare these three versions:

He says that an error has been made,

An error has been made, he says.

As he says, an error has been made.

In the first example, he says is the main clause, while in the other two, an error has been made is the main clause. The structure of the first example is quite straightforward. The quote is a regular direct object of say.
The change of rank for the tag statement is handled by a specialization of subjunction which interjoins the quote to the performative verb such that the quote becomes the main clause.

And this subjunction can easily be replaced by the comparative as.

Often these tag structures are thought of in terms of intersecting planes. In other words, the structure for the simple statement:

He says that an error has been made.

is all in one plane, while the tag statement is actually in two different planes, which is what causes the change in rank. The two planes intersect at the point marked by the specialized subjunction or as. There are other cases when the intersecting plane approach would solve some problems previously attributed to hiatus. Consider this:

They have not done it as I have.
If a comparison of manner is intended, then this is an instance of a structure already discussed, but there is another reading. The intersection may be on the predicate itself. If this is the case, the predicate must be shared by both subjects. A structure reflecting this would be:

There are yet other cases where as functions as an operation, but hopefully these are sufficient to illustrate the point.

These usages of as as a comparative operation are of fairly recent origin. Historians tell us that in Old English the usage was different.

The Old English counterpart of the ubiquitous modern as was so. In Old English this was common in expressions like "so cold so snow" (Modern "as cold as snow"). In the original construction the first so was felt as a demonstrative pronoun, and the second as a relative pronoun; that is, "It is so cold so snow" had the force of "It is [in] that [degree] cold [in] which snow is cold." In Old English the adverb all, with the meaning "quite, entirely," was often added to so to strengthen it: "It is all-so cold so snow." This all-so steadily weakened to alse, ase, and finally as.

This indicates that as was originally a relative construction like that/which or then/when, both of which use the operation of interjunction. Consider this example of interjunction on a noun referent.

I have that which I want.
As can be viewed as a homogenous interjunction in an ad referment.

He ran as fast as he could.

Notice that if no specific adjective is mentioned explicitly, as in:

He ran as he could.

the result is the comparison operation previously discussed because there is nothing explicit to interjoin on.

The same phenomenon occurs with quantifiers. If a full referment is used in the quantifier position, there is no trouble in giving this example a parallel representation.
These examples have illustrated that when two as's are present, a topic relative structure is indicated, while when only one is present, the comparison operation is being used. This is a completely different type of structure than the adjectival modifier function of like. It is much more versatile. While like is technically supposed to be followed by a noun phrase, as can be used to compare almost anything. Some examples have already been given and there are more:

We, as individuals,... (noun)
as many as you want (quantifier)
They viewed him as guilty. (adjective)
As never before,... (adverb)
It was cut as with a knife. (prepositional phrase)
as stated elsewhere... (passive participle)
It was accepted as coming from friends. (active participle)
It will happen as has been predicted. (predicate)
He came as he had promised to come. (sentence)
With all this versatility, it's no wonder that as is one of the most frequently used words in the English language, along with a, the, and, etc. However, like is slowly encroaching into the domain of as, but only in cases where as is a comparative operation, never when it is functioning as a relative. Returning to some previous examples, we can see this:

*like cold like snow

They conversed with him like/as one man talks with another.

They looked like/as if they had lost a friend.

And finally our first example:

Winston tastes good like a cigarette should.

is another example of when like can replace as because as is functioning as an operation.
This paper has only scratched the surface of the wizardry of as as a comparative operation. The little word as will probably remain a challenge to linguists for some time to come.

FOOTNOTES