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I feel like that one complementizer is not enough

Aidan Kaplan^{1*}

Abstract

This study presents a description and analysis of an instance of syntactic microvariation, which I call the *like that* construction. In this construction, an embedded CP is apparently introduced by two complementizers or complementizer-like elements, as in (1).

- (1) I feel **like that** we're going to win the game.

This construction is found to be acceptable to speakers from all over the US, with no apparent geographic constraints, while it is also unacceptable to many speakers. Using judgments from a consultant who accepts this construction as well as examples drawn from the Internet, I show that the syntactic properties of *like that* are similar to the properties of *like* alone, but not identical; for example, *like that* shows *that*-trace effects and is ungrammatical in quotatives. This microvariation presents an opportunity to investigate the structure of the CP. Building on the analysis in Rizzi (1997), I ultimately argue that *like* is not a complementizer but a preposition. We can explain the difference between speakers who allow and disallow the *like that* construction as a difference in the selectional property of this preposition—in most speakers it requires a CP headed by \emptyset , but for some speakers it may also allow a CP headed by *that*.

Keywords

microvariation — syntax — complementizers

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1. Introduction

One of the first phenomena in syntax that one encounters in an introductory linguistics course is embedding. Certain predicates, such as *think* and *say* are able to introduce full clauses, and this process can continue apparently unboundedly, as illustrated in (2).

- (2) a. I went to the store.
b. John thinks [that I went to the store].
c. Mary said [that John thinks [that I went to the store]].

Typically, declarative embedded clauses in English are introduced by the complementizer *that*, which is typically analyzed as the head of a complementizer phrase. However, there are other options. The complementizer may be silent, or, for certain predicates, there may be some other word or phrase, such as *like* or *as if*, as in (3).

- (3) a. I think \emptyset we're going to win the game.
- b. I feel **like** we're going to win the game.
- c. It looks **as if** we're going to win the game.

The phrase *feel like* has made appearances in public discourse on language, such as in the New York Times op-ed by Molly Worthen published in 2016, titled “Stop Saying ‘I feel like.’” Worthen laments the “growing tyranny of feelings in the way Americans talk,” and invokes George Orwell in her polemic, claiming that the phrase *I feel like* stands in the way of rational discourse and even democracy itself. In a post on *Language Log*, Mark Liberman (who Worthen actually quotes and then ignores), does an excellent job of taking apart Worthen’s prescriptivism, and demonstrates convincingly that *feel + CP*, in its actual usage, does not introduce evidence-less emotions, but is actually a quite usual way to state a claim or belief (Liberman 2016).

Leaving Orwellian prescriptivism to the side, we come to the topic at hand: the structure of the CP introduced by *feel*. This paper deals with an instance of syntactic microvariation. I will present an analysis for what I call the *like that* construction. This refers to sentences such as (4), which have a CP apparently introduced by two complementizer or complementizer-like elements:

- (4) I feel **like that** we're going to win the game.

I will propose an analysis in which *like* is a preposition that selects for a CP. Speakers who allow (4) differ from those who do not based on the selectional properties of this preposition.

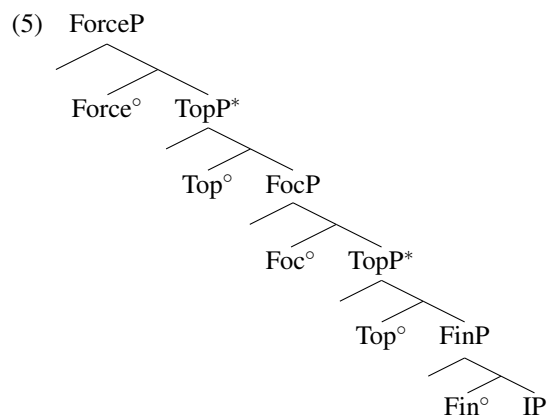
I will begin with an overview of the structure of the CP, in Section 2, drawing particularly on the account given by Rizzi (1997). In Section 3, I will describe the properties of the *like that* construction. Then, in Section 4, I will take a closer look at what elements can introduce embedded clauses, and the selectional properties of these elements, which will lead to my analysis of the structure, presented in Section 5.

2. Structure of the CP

Broadly speaking, syntactic theory posits three layers in the clause (Rizzi 1997). The first is the verb phrase (VP), which contains lexical material and theta role assignment. This is contained in the inflectional phrase or tense phrase (IP/TP), which has information about tense and aspect. The IP is in turn contained in the complementizer phrase (CP), which includes topics, focalized elements, and sentential force.

Each of these layers can be examined in depth, and syntacticians have found evidence for numerous projections in each. In this paper, I will adopt the structure of the CP proposed by Rizzi (1997), summarized in (5).¹

¹It should be noted that Rizzi later expands his analysis to include a projection for an interrogative phrase, which is lower than force, but higher than focus (Rizzi 2001). However, this does not bear on the analysis presented here.



In general, in an embedded clause, the matrix verb selects for a CP, and may select for different kinds of sentential force. For example, *ask* selects for an interrogative, while *believe* selects for a declarative.

The force and finiteness projections are combined into one if there is nothing in between them. For declarative embedded clauses, the realization of force/finiteness may be either *that* or \emptyset .

- (6) I think {that/ \emptyset } John will win the the prize.

However, when, for example, a topic is present, it can be shown that these projections are distinct. Rizzi (1997) shows this with the comparison between *that* and *for* in (7) and (8).

- (7) a. ...that John will leave tomorrow
 b. ...that, tomorrow, John will leave
- (8) a. ...for John to leave tomorrow
 b. *...for, tomorrow, John to leave

He concludes that *that* is the force head, in the highest position, while *for* is the finiteness head, in the lowest position. This explains why there cannot be intervening material between *for* and the IP.

He goes on to present evidence for the non-identity of *that* and \emptyset based on *that*-trace and anti-adjacency effects, summarized in the following example:

- (9) I think *(that) next year, (*that) John will win the prize.

The key finding for our purposes here is that *that* obligatorily expresses declarative force, while the null complementizer obligatorily expresses finiteness. If force and finiteness are combined, however, they may do double-duty.

2.1 Phenomena similar to the *like that* construction

Before moving onto the properties of the *like that* construction, it is worth mentioning some similar phenomena, which also have a *that* that seems extraneous to a speaker of Standard American English.

In a blog post, Zwicky (2011a) gives examples of *that* being used non-standardly with subordinators such as *because*, such as (10) and he notes that this usage actually used to be standard, and can be found in the King James Bible and Shakespeare.

- (10) I am mortified. Mostly **because that** I have now missed two doctors appointments in 48 hours.

Additionally, the *wh*-that construction has gotten attention from various authors, such as the following example from Belfast English:

- (11) I don't know which street **that** he lives in.

Radford (1997) proposes that in this sentence *that* marks the finiteness of the clause, since the embedded CP is clearly interrogative. This seems like an appropriate analysis for Belfast English; however, this will not ultimately be the analysis of the *that* in the *like that* construction.

3. Properties of the *like that* construction

The *like that* construction, while not part of the standard dialect, is fairly common. I am not the first person to notice it; Arnold Zwicky has a couple of blog posts that include examples from written and spoken language (Zwicky 2011a,b), including the following.

- (12) But it sounds **like that** I'll have to resort to the first method that katie1 proposed.
- (13) If a reader **feels as if that** you are getting deceitful in any way, there is certainly a fantastic possibility that they may leave your internet site and under no circumstances return.

While I refer to this as the *like that* construction, it is important to note that it is also possible with *as if*, as shown in the second example above.

I am not a native speaker for this construction, but interestingly, my younger brother (who presumably received roughly the same linguistic input as I did) does have this construction, and is quite confident about it. I relied on his judgments, as well as data from the Internet, in order to determine the properties of the construction.

The *like that* construction does not create an island; it is possible to extract past it, as demonstrated in this sentence, taken from Google:

- (14) γ It's a game I feel like that we should win.

It is also permitted with copy-raising constructions, where the matrix subject is the thematic external argument of the embedded verb, and is repeated in the embedded clause by a pronoun:

- (15) The kids look like that they saw a ghost.

As one might expect for complementizer *that*, this construction does show *that*-trace effects:

- (16) a. Who do you feel like should've won?
b. * Who do you feel like that should've won?

The *like that* construction does not need to be necessarily introduced by a verb such as *feel* or *seem*. It is also possible in sarcastic exclamatives, like the following:

- (17) a. Like that you would know!
b. As if that you would know!

However, *that* does not work in quotatives. (Examples like these have been reported for Scottish English. However, *that* in these cases is "clearly the demonstrative pronoun and not the complementizer" (Macaulay 2001:p. 9).)

- (18) * And I was like that, "What are you doing?"

3.1 Who says this?

As mentioned above, my informant was my younger brother, for whom *like that* is grammatical, whereas it is ungrammatical for me. Zwicky says the construction is “far from rare,” and provides many examples from Google, and a few from NPR.

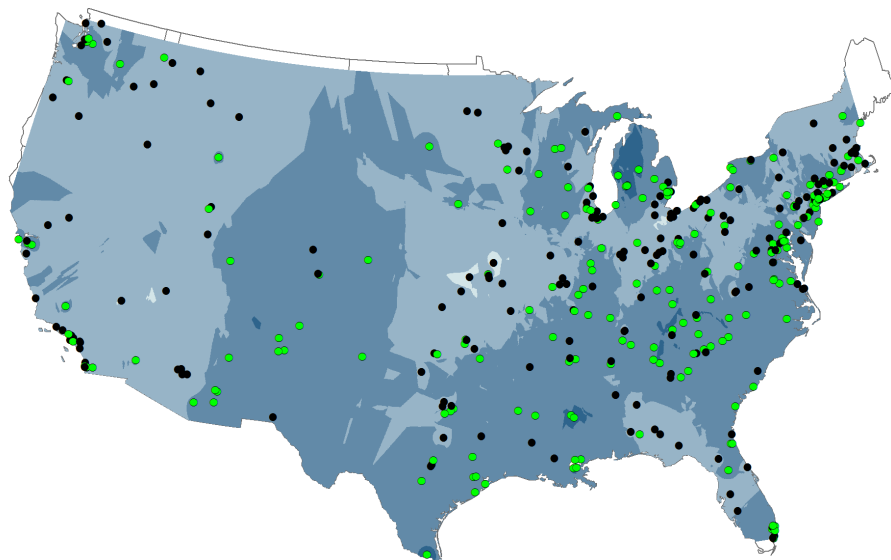


Figure 1. Survey responses to *I feel like that we're going to win this game*. Green dots indicate a response of 4 or 5, black dots indicate a response of 1 or 2. Responses of 3 are not shown. The darkest shade of blue indicates an average response in that area of above 4, and the lightest indicates an average response below 2.

A survey distributed by the Yale Grammatical Diversity Project found people who accepted (4) all over the country. Figure 1 contains a map of the responses. No clear geographic pattern emerged from these responses, and the optimized hot-spot analysis built into ArcMap did not find any statistically significant areas with more positive responses than the country as a whole. It is important to note that survey participants may have been reading quickly and missed the *that*, so more investigation is needed. Nonetheless, it is clear that this construction is out there.

4. The syntactic category of *like*

Now that we have observed some of the properties of the *like that* construction, we turn to the question: what kind of element is *like* or *as if* in these sentences?

There is evidence that *like* and *as if* may be complementizers. López-Couso and Méndez-Naya (2012) analyze three elements—*like*, *as if*, and *as though*—and come to the conclusion that they function as complementizers. The main evidence for this is that, like *that*, which they call the major complementizer, these elements introduce an embedded declarative clause.

They use a number of tests and pieces of evidence from their corpus study to support this analysis. For example, consider the sentence in (19).

- (19) ... and as time passed it seemed as if the strange little man had never been there

If *as if* introduced a comparison, we would expect it to be able to be elided, as in (20):

- (20) a. He ran as if someone were chasing him.
b. He ran.

However, removing the phrase introduced by *as if* results in (19) becoming ungrammatical:

- (21) * ... and as time passed it seemed.

Additionally, they point out semantic similarity between these comparative elements and *that*. The following examples, from their corpus study, show speakers apparently freely varying between the two. In the first sentence, the speaker interrupts themselves, using *that* when they resume the sentence. In the second, the speaker coordinates two CPs, one introduced by *like*, and the other by *that*.

- (22) “I tell you I can’t believe it. It’s—it’s not right. It looks **as though** you’ve, well, **that** you’ve forgotten Dad.”
(23) Do you feel **like** your neighbors care about you or **that** you have any sense of community that way?

4.1 Selectional properties

López-Couso and Méndez-Naya (2012) indicate that all the verbs that select for *like*, *as if*, and *as though* are Propositional Attitude Predicates: *appear*, *look*, *sound*, *feel*, *seem*. They also mention the use of the copula, as in (24).

- (24) It was as if we had never met.

The selectional properties of the different predicates are summarized in this chart:

	<i>feel</i>	<i>seem</i>	<i>appear</i>	<i>look</i>	<i>sound</i>	<i>be</i>
∅	✓	✓	✓	*	*	*
<i>that</i>	✓	✓	✓	*	*	*
<i>like</i>	✓	✓	?	✓	✓	✓
<i>as if</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>as though</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

The *like that* construction shows downward selectional properties. If *like* is possible with a predicate, then *like that* is, and likewise for *as if*. Interestingly, my informant rejected *as though that*. This may be due to a register clash, since *as though* is perceived as fairly formal, whereas introducing the clause with *that* has a more informal feeling to it.

Despite the evidence that López-Couso and Méndez-Naya (2012) present in favor of the analysis that *like*, *as if*, and *as though* are acting as complementizers in this usage, they should not be taken as completely synonymous with *that*. Besides the fact that they can co-occur with *that* for some speakers, which is exactly what we are investigating here, even in Standard English, their behavior is not the same. Horn (1981) points out that while (25a) is felicitous, (25b) sounds

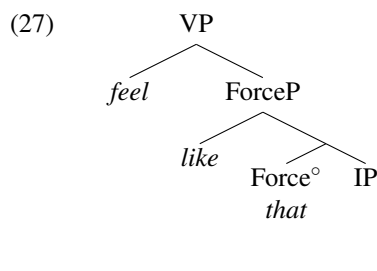
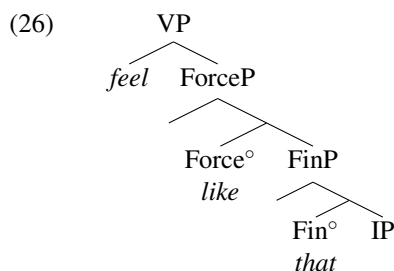
self-contradictory. This indicates that the *it* in the matrix clause in (25a) is the so-called ‘weather-*it*,’ while the *it* in (25b) is merely an expletive. It is not immediately clear why, structurally, these two structures have different interpretations, but the pair suffices to show that we cannot analyze *like* and *that* as playing exactly the same role.

- (25) a. It seems like it’s raining harder than it is.
 b. # It seems that it’s raining harder than it is.

5. Analysis

Given the properties of *like* and *that*, can we find a satisfactory analysis of the *like that* construction? There are two cases to consider: Either *like* is a complementizer, or it is some other part of speech, presumably a preposition. I will take each case in turn, and ultimately come down in favor of the analysis where it is a preposition.

If *like* and *that* are both complementizers, having both of them pronounced presents a problem. Given the structure of the CP presented above, there are two different possible analyses. I have limited the position of *that* to heading ForceP or FinP, since those are the roles that *that* plays in Rizzi (1997). In the first, I have put *like* in the head position so that it can be selected for by only a limited number of predicates. In the second, I have put *like* in the specifier, because otherwise there would be no more room in ForceP.



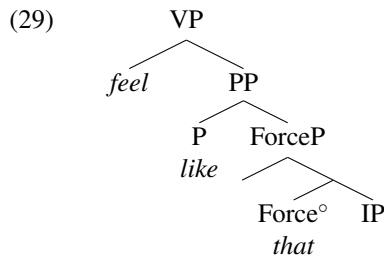
The structure in (26) runs into a problem with the following sentence:

- (28) I feel like that your book, you should give to Paul (not Bill)

In this sentence, *your book* is the topic, and yet it appears after *that*. Since FinP is the level of the CP layer closest to the IP, if *that* were the head of FinP, we would expect it to appear after the topic. Furthermore, in the absence of a topic, Force and Finiteness are not split (Rizzi 1997:p. 314), which indicates that we should not expect both to be realized. Therefore, *that* must not be the head of FinP.

We then come to the structure in (27). This is not satisfying either because it seems to be a violation of the generalized doubly filled Comp filter (Koopman 2003:p. 338), which derives from the Linear Correspondence Axiom of Kayne (1994). Furthermore, if *like* is in the specifier position, we cannot account for the selectional properties discussed above, since selectional relationships are generally taken to be with the heads of projections, not with their specifiers.

This brings us to the second case, that *like* is a preposition, not a complementizer. This structure is shown in (29).

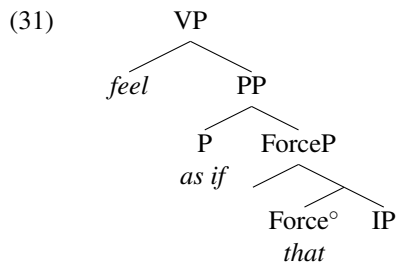


This has the advantage of allowing the matrix verb to select for *like*, and have *like* select for the complementizer of the embedded clause. We can explain the difference between speakers who allow and disallow the *like that* construction as a difference in the selectional property of this preposition—in most speakers it requires a CP headed by \emptyset , but for some speakers it may also allow a CP headed by *that*. We can account for the apparent coordination of a CP headed by *like* and a CP headed by *that* in (23) by saying that really *like* selected for coordinated CPs, the first of which was headed by \emptyset and the second of which was headed by *that*.

There are a few difficulties that this structure creates. First, how should we account for sarcastic exclamatives? It seems odd for a full sentence to be nothing more than a PP. One possible way to account for this is to posit a silent element that selects for the PP, something meaning roughly *I don't feel*, so that the sentence in (30a) is really underlyingly something like (30b).

- (30) a. Like that you would know!
 b. I don't feel like that you would know!

Secondly, this proposal still does not perfectly solve the problem of *as if*. If *as* and *if* belong in two different projections, we need yet another layer, since *as* would be the preposition and *that* would be the Force head, leaving no room for *if*. Alternatively, speakers may have reanalyzed *as if* as a single head, similar to complex prepositions like *into* or *upon*. In that case, we would have the following structure:



It will take further investigation to determine whether it is reasonable to combine *as if* into a single head. For now, this appears to be the most viable analysis, since it accounts for the selectional properties of this construction, the word order, where topics come after *that*, and the microvariation between speakers.

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