The Extremes of Insubordination: Exclamatory as if!

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Overview of paper

- *as if* in PDE
  - what the secondary sources say
  - presumed source
  - corpus examples

- monoclausal uses of *as if* in PDE (corpus study)

- postulated development of *as if* from monoclausal structures
  - semantic development: from comparative to negative
  - stages of development: from subordinate clause to “insubordinated” clause
  - early examples of monoclausal uses

- conclusion: development of *as if* structures and questions for further study
Exclamatory *as if!* in PDE

- Draft entry in OED-3, s.v. *as*, adv. *and* conj.
  
  *colloq. as if!* (expressing dismissive or incredulous contradiction) ‘I very much doubt that’, ‘some hope!’, ‘you must be joking’.

  Typically used as a sardonic response to a stated or reported suggestion.

- Also listed (online) in:
  
  - *Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*: an informal form which shows “that you do not believe something is possible”
  
  - *Wiktionary*: an idiomatic form “referring to something that the speaker deems highly unlikely”
  
  - *WordWeb Online*: “expression of incredulity”
  
  - *The Online Slang Dictionary*: “derisive assertion that whatever is being talked about is impossible or very unlikely”
  
  - *Urban Dictionary*: = ‘yeah right’; “used to display disbelief”
Presumed origin of *as if*!

- Most often attributed to the movie *Clueless* (released in 1995) and to “Valley Girl Talk”:
  
  (1) there’s little trace of Austen’s elegant style in the volleys of “y’ know” and “*as if!*” that pour from the film’s Valley Girl-type characters (COCA: NEWS1995)

  (2) Won’t audiences be disappointed if Paltrow doesn’t say, “As if”? McGrath [the screenwriter] has a ready reply: “She does say ‘as if.’ But it’s in the middle of a sentence. Things like, ‘It is not *as if* I am displeased with you, Mr. Knightly.’” (TIME 1996/10/29)

  (A 1997 biography of the main actress in *Clueless* is entitled *As if! The Not-so-Clueless Alicia Silverstone*)

- Also attributed to Wayne and Garth from “Wayne’s World” on “Saturday Night Live” (beginning perhaps in 1988; the first movie came out in 1992)

  (see postings on American Dialect Society list serve: June 2005)

*ISLE 2 – Boston – 21 June 2011*
Young adult novels
Corpus searches for *as if!* in PDE

- Searches of
  - TIME Corpus
  - COCA
  - COHA
  - ICAME corpora (FROWN, FLOB, ACE, WC)
  - OED
  - Strathy Corpus

- TIME, COCA, and COHA could be searched including punctuation in the search string:
  - As if.  As if!  as if) .  As if  as if,
  - Frown, Flob, Ace, WC, Strathy only sentence-initial “as if”
(3) I’ll let him go. Just as soon as we’re married. (Behind IRENKA’s back and to IVAN) As if. (COHA: FIC [play] 1990)

(4) the refurbished Bill Graham Civic Auditorium—which out-of-town journalists seem to believe is being referred to locally as “the Bill” (as if!) (COCA: NEWS 1996)

(5) Laurie peppered us with so many precautions about ... the dangers of hot-dogging (as if) that by the time we reached the summit, I was ready to stay in the van (COCA: NEWS 2000)

(6) then you can ditch me in the crowd of tourists.” She laughed. As if. He would probably need a fire hose to get her off of him. (COCA: FIC [book] 2006)

(7) The woman who was meant to make him complete. // As if, he silently snarled. (COCA: FIC [book] 2008)

### Distribution by genre (PDE)

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Earliest attested example

OED cites this 1904 example from Frank Norris, *The Pit: A Story of Chicago* (expanded context)

(9) “Better wait, hadn’t you, Laura,” said Aunt Wess’, “and see. Maybe he’ll come up and speak to us.”

“Oh, as if!” contradicted Laura. “He don’t know us,—just as Page says. And if he did, he wouldn’t. He wouldn’t think it polite.”

With a (fairly) exhaustive search I could not pre-date this example nor find any other early 20th century example. Cf.

(10) Because I’ve disgusted you so deeply? Just my luck—when I came over to ask you to marry me!”

She laughed, but he had become suddenly grave. “Upon my soul, I did.”

“Dear Streff! As if—now—”

“Oh, not now—I know. I’m aware that even with your accelerated divorce method—”

“It’s not that. I told you it was no use, Streff—I told you long ago, in Venice.”

(1922 Wharton, *The Glimpses of the Moon*)
Origin: monoclausal exclamatory *as if*

- *As if, as though,* and *like* clauses can stand alone as independent clauses:

  (11) Merriam Webster Dictionary says its official, google, the popular search engine is now part of the English language as a verb. *As if I’m going to google you.* (COCA:SPOK 2006)

- Evans (2007:367) discusses “insubordination”: “*conventionalized main clause use of what, on prima facie grounds, appear to be formally subordinate clauses*”

- Dancygier and Sweetser (2005:229) call this the “monoclausal use of *as if*” and note that it prefers negative stance verbs

- Huddleston and Pullum (2002:1152) call an *as if* phrase standing on its own as an “exclamatory clause”

- Fowler (1965:37) notes the “still more elliptical” use of *as if* and *as though* in exclamations

- cf. also López-Cuoso & Méndez-Naya (2010: §3.2.1)
Monoclausal exclamatory as if in PDE

- The clauses can be quite formulaic:
  (12) He’ll go with us to the hospital. Okay?” **As if** I had a choice. (Strathy: FIC)
  (13) Mother said, “**As if** I were the one at fault”. (COCA:FIC 2000)

- Constructions with (negative) **enough** are common:
  (14) **As if** pregnancy wasn’t uncomfortable **enough**. (Strathy: SPOK)

- They can be long, complex, and novel:
  (15) **As if** Notting Hill’s ladies who lunch were not already spoilt for choice when it comes to exclusive shopping experiences. (1999 *Sunday Times* 18 Nov. ii. 4/2; OED)
  (16) **As if** a state spending hundreds of millions of dollars to make millionaires even more millionaire-ish is ‘noble’. (1995 *Sun* [Baltimore] 8 Nov. 1b; OED)
Monoclausal *as if* in the Strathy Corpus

- Sentence-initial monoclausal *as if* clauses by genre

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Subordinate *as if* clauses

*As if*/*though* combine an element of similarity (*as*) with an element of hypotheticality (*if, though*) to form a complex coordinator signaling comparison (Kortmann 1997:318)

Quirk et al. (1985:1110): *as if/as though* serve as adjunct clauses of comparison; when the verb is dynamic, they may express manner; they may be factual or hypothetical

Huddleston and Pullum (2002:1151): *as if/as though* express either manner or comparison; *as if/as though* are “compound” forms
Monoclausal *as if*

- Monoclausal *as if* presents the content clause as false; used to express “indignant rejection” (e.g., *As if I would try to cheat you!* (Huddleston and Pullum 2002:1151)
- “Irregular sentences” generally have the illocutionary force of exclamations, “the omission of the matrix clause being mimetic of speechless amazement” (Quirk et al. 1985:841).
- Two of the functions of insubordinated clauses (Evans 2007):
  - modality, e.g. exclamation and evaluation (403–5)
    - *{That I should/to think that I should} live to see such a day!*
  - discourse context/highly presupposed material, e.g. negation (410)
    - corresponding affirmative has been mentioned and deemed unlikely, or
    - speaker assumes hearer erroneously holds belief in the affirmative
From comparison to truth-value

Huddleston and Pullum (2002:1151–52): the comparison meaning can become “much attenuated”

1) She acts as if she hates me: “shift from comparison to the issue of whether the content clause is true”
   (leads to It looks/seems as if …/that)

2) As if this news wasn’t bad enough, I found that the printer wasn’t working either.
   - as if always has a negative complement
   - “again it is less a matter of comparison than of the status of the content clause” (as if clause indicates that the content clause is true)
Stages in the development of insubordinated clauses


(1) subordinate construction with overt main clause

(2) ellipsis of main clause

   the clause can be treated as underlyingly subordinate, with the possibility of restoring a grammatically compatible main clause

(3) conventionalized ellipsis

   the clause has achieved greater semantic specificity and only a subset of ellipsed main clauses can be “restored”

(4) reanalysis as main clause

   the clause is fully nativized as a main clause, and restoration of ellipsed material is not possible
From pragmaticization to constructionalization

When the subordinate clause becomes independent, it is “available for pragmatic interpretation” and is less grammatical (pragmaticization).

When the (formerly) subordinate clause is conventionalized as a whole (and independent) construction, it acquires “a more specific constructional meaning” (constructionalization) (Evans 2007:374-5).

There is an opening up and then closing of the role of pragmatics (374).

grammaticalization/analogy: “it is clear that insubordination goes against the usual direction of change” (376)
“Bridging contexts”

- **unambiguous comparison:** ≠ **As if!**

(17) They both look at Lesje as she walks by, not smiling but not hostile either. **As if** they are sightseers and she is a sight. (Strathy:FIC)

= ‘They are looking at her as if …’

- **indeterminate comparison/negative exclamatory**

(18) “John and I have really stabilized.” **As if** stability can be bought like a pair of slippers. (Strathy:FIC)

= ‘She is speaking as if stability can be bought like a pair of slippers’

= ‘Stability cannot be bought like a pair of slippers’. = **As if!**

(19) Elizabeth fills him in on the children—their marks, their latest interests—as **if** he hasn’t talked to them for a year. **As if** he’s an uncle, a new school principal. I’m their father! (Strathy: FIC)

- **unambiguous exclamatory** = **As if!**

(20) “Over ten pounds,” he sounded as proud as a natural father. **As if** he could have done the job himself. (Strathy:FIC)
Earliest examples of monoclausal exclamatory *as if*

(21) **As if**, for example, the right of the kings of England did depend on the goodness of the cause of William the Conqueror, and upon their lineal and directest descent from him; (1551 Hobbes, *Leviathan, or, The matter, forme*; U of V)

(22) **As if** a Commonwealth could consist where the force were in any hand which justice had not the authority to command and govern. (1551 Hobbes, *Leviathan, or, The matter, forme*; U of V)

(23) **As if** one should phantasy to praise a Gose before any other beast (1553 T. Wilson, *Arte of Rhetorique*; OED)

(24) **as if** I went aboute to saue my Lyfe: no, I despise it # and am at peace w=th= god and have forgott the world (1691 *Trial of the Earl of Essex*; HC)

(25) **As if** a theefe should be proud of his halter: a beggar of his cloutes: a childe of his gay. (1601 Dent, *Path-way to Heaven*; OED)
Further examples of monoclausal exclamatory *as if*—17th century

(26)  (Ma.) **As if** I haue not a good dish of Oysters, and a cold pye at home to hold you tacke. (1615 Hoby, *A Cvrre-combe for a coxe-combe*; CED)

(27)  **Frank. As if** you knew not that, fie, fie, leaue your dissembling now (1622 May, *The Heir*; ED)

(28)  **As if** I did not know them to bee as arrant Cowards, as a Justices Clerke or Gentleman Vsher can be; (1638 Nabbes, *Covent Garden*; ED)

(29)  **As if** there were no joy/But these Chimera’s in a Lovers head, /Of strange Eliziums, by his feaver bred! (1647 Fanshawe, *Il Pastor Fido*; ED)

(30)  **As if** the newest Stamp were to be deemed alwaies the tru_est metal (1682 Pitts, *An Old Way*; Lamp)

(31)  **As if** he were not also a part of the commonwealth, and the head of the whole people! (1689 Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*; U of V)
18th century examples

(32) To see his Face, they’d never after Care, As if his very Looks Infectious were: (1700 Ward, Labour in Vain; Lamp)

(33) As if Treaties could be made like Acts of Parliament, (1730 Hervey, Observations; Lamp)

(34) As if Ostend was of no more consequence to us, than Mons or Namur! (1735–48 Walpole, Letters; CLMETEV)

(35) As if Heaven was a Region of Enthusiasm, Error, Bigotry, and Uncharitableness; and the Elect a parcel of proud, self-conceited Separatists (1736 CED)

(36) As if these were of less importance to the happiness of Mankind than the making of Lords, or the importation of Slaves! (1786–88 Letters of Delegates to Congress; U of V)
Development of *as if* clauses
Questions for further study

- Can Evans’ historical stages be more clearly teased out?
  - in earliest instances monoclausal *as if* already seems highly conventionalized (main clause cannot be restored)
  - monoclausal *as if* need not develop pragmatic meanings (may continue to have comparison meaning)
  - even in later uses, exclamatory *as if* clauses can be treated as subordinate (or at least adjoined to the main clause)

- Why does *as if* undergo this development but not *as though*, which can be shown to have early monoclausal uses:

  (37) **As though** all the crookedness of our disposition were not accidental. (1578 T. Timme tr. J. Calvin, *Comm. Gen.* 84; OED)

  No instances of *As though!* found in corpora
References

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