

## Factors Relevant to the Use of Posture Verbs in English

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**Abstract:** The article presents the research into English posture verbs ‘sit’, ‘stand’ and ‘lie’ in simulative constructions with standard marker ‘like’. There is an opinion that the choice of a posture verb is mostly motivated by the properties of the Figure in a posture scene and its orientation in relation to the Ground. This article addresses questions of influence of the Figure properties in the choice of a posture verb, of other factors and what they say about the verb’s conceptual structure. It is shown that the posture verbs demonstrate different dependency on the Figure properties. Posture verbs differ in the complexity of their conceptual structure. It is coherent with the degree to which links to the Figure properties are retained.

**Key words:** Posture verb • Spatial language • Simulative construction • Spatial concepts • Cognitive linguistics • Figure • Ground

### INTRODUCTION

Posture verbs ‘sit’, ‘stand’, ‘lie’ are a notable object of research due to their paramount importance for any language, conceptual system and everyday life. The postures that they refer to are inherent and naturally characterize the position of the body in space. The concepts expressed by them are salient and of basic nature. The verbs per se stand out by their frequency and common cross-linguistic tendencies of use.

Many aspects of posture verbs have been described including their extensions, grammaticalization patterns, posture scenes they express, conceptualizations they reflect and underlying embodied experience, for example [1-4]. In a lot of previous research on the verbs there is a noticeable emphasis mostly on the Figure and sometimes on the Ground as the main concepts determining the choice of a posture verb for a particular spatial scene.

Analysing semantic field of location predicates from logics' point of view V.G. Gak shows that posture verbs can be regarded as dispositional predicates. In this respect they are in semantic agreement with the subject [5]. Semantic analysis by E.V. Rakhilina leads to conclusions about typical situations in which Russian posture verbs occur. According to this work the verbs in question are associated with particular states and positions of the Figure [6]. One of the works of J. Newman is focused on the Figure and the Ground in different

posture constructions [7]. In a corpus-based study of English, German and Russian posture verbs D. Schönefeld concentrates on the linguistic elements expressing the trajector of a posture scene and its location [8]. Describing the typological study of location verbs project M. Lemmens mentions hypothesis about a larger concern for the Figure in satellite-framed languages to which English belongs [9].

Much attention to the Figure is quite obvious. Postures are usually perceived and talked about in relation to the Figures described. Summing up the findings of the previous research we can draw the following conclusions. Our experience of being in different postures is central to understanding the verbs under consideration. Similarities people perceive in human postures and position of different objects motivate the use of posture verbs both with animate and inanimate Figures. The choice of a posture verb mostly depends on properties of the Figure in a posture scene and on its orientation in relation to the Ground.

But how strong is the influence of the Figure properties in the choice of a posture verb? Are there any other factors? What does it all say about conceptual structure of a posture verb? This article addresses these questions describing the results of the research into the use of the posture verbs in the specific construction, i.e. simulative construction with standard marker “like” of the following type: Figure 1 sits / stands / lies like Figure 2.

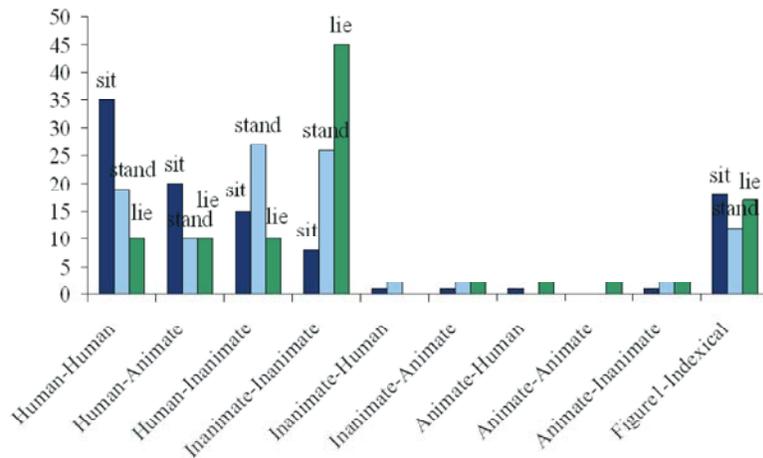


Fig. 1: Types of Figures combinations in similitive constructions with posture verbs

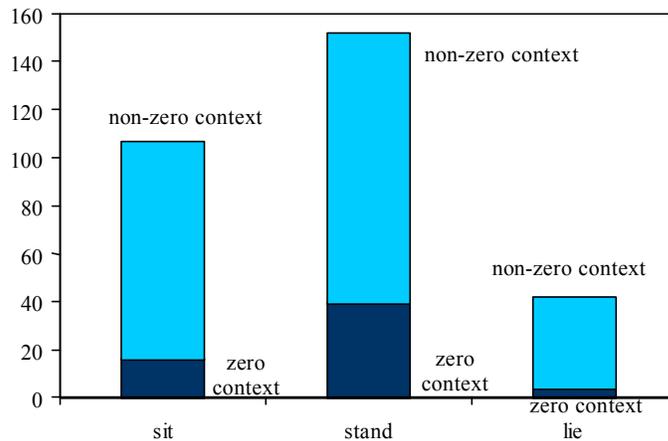


Fig. 2: Correlation between zero and non-zero context.

It is supposed here that similitives can provide further insights into the use of the posture verbs because spatial scenes they refer to involve two Figures and because similitives covertly present manner in which action is done / state is experienced by one entity by invoking manner typical of another. This idea is based on the interpretation of similitive construction elements. M. Haspelmath and O. Buchholz name five elements of any comparative construction: comparee, parameter marker, parameter, standard marker, standard [10]. In similitive constructions with the posture verbs these elements are presented in the following way. 'Everyone else sat on the floor like Buddhas': 'everyone else' is the comparee, 'like' is the standard marker, 'Buddhas' is the standard. The parameter is covert, it is the manner in which the Figure ('everyone else') is positioned.

As posture verbs also present manner (of body position), similitive constructions stand in specifying relation to the semantic content incorporated in the posture verb.

**Methods and Language Data:** The objectives of the research are achieved through the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods. The research is based on data extracted from the British National Corpus. We used the possibility of a joined query satisfied within the particular number of words specified which found occurrences of 'sit', 'stand' and 'lie' in different forms followed by 'like' within five words. This type of search prevented us from losing a relatively large number of cases with multi-word phrases especially prepositional phrases, for example: 'She can lie on her back like an inverted cockroach' or '... particles... lie against each other like sheets of glass'. On the other hand, the range specified increased the number of irrelevant cases which required further editing of the retrieved results. Irrelevant results fell into two main groups: with meaning irrelevancy and compositional irrelevancy. The first group included the verbs in question in non-posture meanings and 'like' used as a verb, for example: 'How can he lie like that?', 'No, I'm going to sit here. I like to sit here'. Within the

second group there were similitive constructions with words other than the posture verbs, as in the example: '... so I can sit back and solo like a horn player again'. On the whole, the number of irrelevant results was not high. Additional manual check resulted in the language database with 134 cases of 'sit', 170 occurrences of 'stand' and 51 examples of 'lie'.

## RESULTS

To reveal factors that can be relevant to the choice of a posture verb several kinds of analysis were performed. Analysis of the types of Figures gives a general idea of the Figure properties required by a posture verb. Semantically types of Figures encountered in similitive constructions fall into several categories: human Figures as they are prototypical for the posture verbs, animate Figures that include non-human objects, inanimate Figures. As similitives comprise two Figures analysis of their combination seems to be more informative. Figure 1 shows the frequency of such combinations.

As Figure 1 shows, human sphere is mostly associated with 'sit' and 'stand' though between the two 'stand' prevails with inanimate Figures. As for 'lie', almost half of its occurrences is with inanimate Figures. Figure 2 categories present the same preferences for 'sit' and 'lie'. With leading human category of Figure 1 'stand' has the highest indicator in inanimate category of Figure 2.

Rather high frequency of indexicals ('this') with all the posture verbs may be indicative of the fact that Figure properties are not always the determining factor. The choice of verbs solely influenced by the Figure properties is expected to be more or less context independent. So the second kind of analysis is context analysis.

Our research shows that posture verbs are context dependent. They require either extralinguistic or linguistically expressed context. Extralinguistic context may be physical or situational when verbal content is accompanied by gesture or the meaning is apparent from the situation, for example: 'You just stand like this'. It may also be cultural as in the example: 'The boy sat like King Canute'. Linguistically expressed context adds specific details to the posture scene: 'She can lie on her back like an inverted cockroach while wagging her legs in the air'. In this example additional information comes from the verbal elements 'on her back', 'inverted', 'wagging her legs in the air'.

The next stage of our research includes quantitative analysis that shows correlation between zero and non-zero context for each verb. Figure 2 presents the results of it.

It is clear that cases when posture verbs are used in similitive constructions with overtly expressed context elements prevail. Moreover, zero context examples only indicate that the construction has no overt verbal context but to be adequately understood it may require other types of context. For example, interpretation of the posture in the sentence 'He sat like a priest' is not quite clear except that he did not stand or did not lie.

Qualitative analysis reveals what linguistic items most frequently occur as context elements of the posture verbs in similitives. They are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 vividly shows that each verb has its own specific set of frequent elements except location which is found with all the three verbs. Common element to 'sit' and 'stand' is conjoined state / action while it is posture specification to 'sit' and 'lie'. The number of elements in the set for 'stand' is also noteworthy. Blank cells of the table indicate that the element is not found in the context or not frequent.

The last stage of the research presents closer look at Figure 2 component of similitive constructions with posture verbs. The verbs are found to be quite different from each other. The results of the analysis of 'sit' are in Table 2.

Interestingly, 'sit' reveals those salient elements which are not present in its semantic structure but are frequently found in its context, with metaphorical extensions based on them. Let us consider the sentence 'They sat like strangers'. In it the verb is strongly associated with a certain behaviour. However, this association is not part of the semantics of the verb; it is a frequent element of its context (conjoined state / action). Moreover, it can even be metaphorical as in 'She sat like a bird with a broken wing'.

Table 3 presents results of the same analysis for the verb 'stand'.

The use of 'stand' depends on different combinations of salient elements including those which are not usually expressed overtly. Thus, vertical orientation seems to be part of the verb's semantics. Duration element is metaphorically extended to the meaning of endurance.

The results of this type of the analysis for 'lie' are found in Table 4.

Table 1: Most frequently encountered context elements

	Location	Conjoined State/action	Posture Specifica	Tion Point of Contact	Shape/ Dimension	Duration	Motion Opposite
Sit	Here/ on the sofas	Talking/ staring		Cross-legged			
Stand	There/ here/ on a lawn	Waiting/ watching				Still/ all day	Still/ rigid
Lie	On the floor			On her back	Flat		

Table 2: Figure 2 component in similitive constructions with 'sit'

	Sit like
Conjoined state/ action	Strangers / civilised adults / a lord / a potentate / kings / sisters / an idiot / a fool / a bird with a broken wing
Posture specification or point of contact (→ fixed (metaphorical))	A Buddha / a frightened child / a rod / boulders / a load / a solid lead ball / tents / a dog chained to a stake fixed in the past / the sun at the nodal point of an array of beams of light

Table 3: Figure 2 component in similitive constructions with 'stand'.

	Stand like
Conjoined state + Duration (→ Endurance) + Vertical + Motion opposite	A statue / Lot's wife / a gazelle frozen by the cruel gaze of the lion / a man turned into a pillar of salt; A fool / an idiot / a goof; A stone / a rock; An Easter Island monolith/ a tree/ cut-out figures / a radiant strut; A guardsman / sentinels / a soldier

Table 4: Figure 2 component in similitive constructions with 'lie'.

	Lie like
Shape (→shapeless → out of function) + Dimension (Horizontal)	Flatfish / sheets of glass / a covering of snow; A dinosaur hulk / A maharani's scarf / A mummer's puppet; A fallen tree / a collapsed tent / a dead bird's feathers / one dead / A stranded whale

It is seen that 'lie' frequently occurs with Figures 2 perceived in horizontal plane. It concerns both dimension and shape. The latter forms basis for metaphorical meaning.

### DISCUSSION

The use of posture verbs in similitives differs from the use of other verbs from the point of view that they express manner of body position in space. Having the general meaning of manner similitives give additional information about semantic structure of the verbs and their use.

The results of the research show that the use of posture verbs in similitive constructions is rather frequent. As similitives are regarded “patterns of coinage” in English in the sense that they require new content elements each time, posture verbs should be considerably generalized in meaning to offer this opportunity to a creative language user.

The findings exhibit a difference in the frequencies with which verbs are encountered with the Figure categories rather than in types of categories. However,

closer look at the elements of constructions preferred by the verbs at issue reveals differences between the verbs.

Posture verbs are context dependent. So, their use cannot be only motivated by the properties of the Figure. The influence of the Figure properties is different on different verbs.

The verb 'sit' is the most frequent one in Human – Human combination. It correlates well with the evidence that it is the least dependent on the Figure properties. The speaker can use it to background the posture and to bring to the forefront action or state conjoined with the posture. 'Sit' also seems to be more general in meaning than the other verbs and to have more links to non-spatial domains.

The findings show that the choice of 'stand' is influenced by the whole set of factors though it is more dependent on spatial properties of the Figure than 'sit' due to verticality element in its meaning. Its conceptual structure is less complex as it has fewer links to other domains.

'Lie' tends to retain reference to spatial properties of the Figure and the Ground more than the others. It is more specific in meaning, hence, less frequent.

### CONCLUSIONS

- Relatively high productivity of posture verbs in simulative constructions is indicative of generality of their meaning and rich pragmatic content.
- The influence of the Figure properties in the choice of posture verbs fades in the order 'lie' – 'stand' – 'sit'.
- 'Lie' and 'stand' retain dependence on the Figure's spatial features more than 'sit'. However, choice of 'stand' is more multi-factorial.
- 'Sit' is the most "human" of all, hence the most generalised (the least dependent on the Figure properties). It has a network of conceptual links to non-spatial domains (conjoined actions and states).
- Posture verbs differ in the complexity of their conceptual structure. It is coherent with the degree to which links to the Figure properties are retained.

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