The Roles and Structure of Comparisons, Similes, and Metaphors in Natural Language

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Talk Outline

Methodological and theoretical foundations
Different kinds of metaphor
How to identify a metaphor
How is a metaphor different from a literal meaning?
What is a simile, and are they important?
  a) definition, b) structure, c) typology
How do similes differ from:
  a) other comparisons? b) metaphors?
Function of similes in fiction and nonfiction
  - Distribution of similes in a text: where, why?
Logical and analogical

• A natural language consists of a puzzling mixture of logical and analogical procedures

• Neglect of the analogical aspect has led to serious errors
  – E.g. the quest for precise definition in ontologies currently being designed for the Semantic Web

• In ordinary language people make new meanings by comparing one thing with another and by creating ad-hoc sets
  – Not merely by asserting identity
  – Nor by conforming exactly to conventional phraseology
  – Vagueness is an important principle of natural language

• Danger of confusing language with mathematical logic
New methodological foundations

• Corpus-driven lexicography:
  – Corpus Pattern Analysis (CPA)

• Examines hundreds, sometimes thousands, of real uses of each word in a search for syntagmatic patterns
  – Every different pattern of use of a word is associated with a particular meaning

• Discovering figurative uses and other ‘exploitations’ of normal uses is a by-product of the search for literal meanings
  – but much more fun

• Such uses are recorded as ‘exploitations’ in the Pattern Dictionary of English Verbs: nlp.fi.muni.cz/projects/cpa/
We need to re-examine the relationship between language and logic

- The theory of norms and exploitations (TNE) argues that:
- Talk of an "underlying logical form" of an utterance is pernicious.
- What "underlies" linguistic behaviour is a set of behavioural regularities -- phraseological patterns.
- One of the many things that people do with these patterns is to make logics.
- They do other things too – notably, use language patterns for social interaction.
A usage-based, corpus-driven theory of language

• TNE research indicates that language is indeed a rule-governed system BUT:

• There are two sets of rules, not just one:
  1. Rules for using words normally, “correctly”, boringly
  2. Rules for exploiting normal patterns of word use. Exploitations include not only metaphors and similes, but ellipsis, anomalous arguments, irony, etc. etc.

• The two rule systems interact. Today’s exploitation may become tomorrow’s norm.
  – Compare Bowdle and Gentner: ‘the Career of Metaphor’.

• The rules are probabilistic, not deterministic.

Different kinds of metaphor

• Conceptual metaphors vs. linguistic metaphors
• Linguistic metaphors: conventional and novel
  – Conventional metaphors are nothing more than secondary convention of meaning: they belong in dictionaries
  – Novel metaphors do not belong in dictionaries
• Extended metaphors, e.g. Mr Panks as a tugboat in Dickens’ *Little Dorrit*
• There are many other kinds of tropes (figurative expressions)
• In this talk I will focus on metaphors and similes.
Lakoff and Johnson; Kövecses

• “Our ordinary conceptual system is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.”
• “We structure one experience in terms of another.”
  – Crudely: we structure much of our abstract thinking metaphorically by using terms that primarily have a concrete sense.
• Cognitive concepts are “experiential gestalts”.
• Zoltán Kövecses: Distinguish conceptual metaphors from metaphorical linguistic expressions.
  – Conceptual metaphors are systematic.
  – Many conventional metaphorical linguistic expressions fit into one or other of these large conceptual systems.
  – But some don’t. They don’t have to.
  – Some people are good at producing “novel linguistic metaphors based on conventional conceptual metaphors.”
Applying L&J’s insights to word meaning

• A word meaning is a linguistic gestalt – a cluster of attributes (not necessarily mutually compatible)

• Abstract meanings are often expressed in terms of conventional secondary senses of certain words that have equally conventional concrete primary senses

• In this case, the abstract meaning of the word(s) resonates with the concrete meaning.
How to tell a metaphor from a meaning

- Which of these sentences is literal, which is metaphorical?
  - A car backfired. [Now rare]
  - The gun backfired. [Rare]
  - His plan backfired. [Very frequent]
Criteria for literalness

• Is the most frequent sense necessarily literal?
  – No! consider *backfire*, *launch*.

• Historical priority?
  – No! consider *awful*, *ardent*, *literal*, *camera*.

• Concrete, not abstract?
  – Yes – if there *is* a concrete sense (but cf. *idea*).
  – A word can have two or more literal senses (with no resonance between them): cf. *subject*, *object*.

• Absence of resonance?
  – is a property of literalness, rather than a criterion for it
Metaphor is a contrastive notion

• There can be no metaphors if there are no literal meanings.
• There can be no literal meanings if there are no metaphors.
• Metaphors resonate.
  – For many polysemous words, sense 2 (conventional metaphor) resonates with sense 1 (literal, concrete)
Exploiting a secondary convention

*She fired an opening smile across Celia's desk.* (BNC)

- Does this just mean ‘She smiled at Celia’?
- Evidently, it’s more than that.
- It also exploits two conventional metaphors:
  
  *Fire the opening shot (in a conflict)*
  
  *Fire a shot across someone’s bows*

Be glad that you are not Celia!
Definitions of ‘simile’

  a figure of speech involving the comparison of one thing with another thing of a different kind, used to make a description more emphatic or vivid (e.g. *as brave as a lion*)

- **Merriam Webster’s 10th Collegiate (1993):**
  a figure of speech comparing two unlike things that is often introduced by *like* or *as* (as in *cheeks like roses*)

- **What the dictionaries don’t say:**
  What is the relation between simile and metaphor?
  How is a simile structured? And what’s it for?
  The vehicle is often fantastic or unreal (*a banshee, a zombie, a fairy tale, a princess, a demented lighthouse. a broiled frog*), not a real-world thing
A tentative hypothesis about comparisons

• **Comparisons are often used to associate the ‘new’ with the ‘given’**

• e.g. describing ‘Bridget’, a vehicle that was designed for robotic exploration on Mars:

  She looks *like* a cross between a remote-controlled tank and Johnny Five, the irritating star of 80s robot movie *Short Circuit*.

    – *Guardian* science correspondent, 2006
Main uses of *like*, preposition

- To compare: *John is like his father*
  - *Mr Pett had been like a father to him*
  - (An exclusive set: Mr Pett was not his father)
- To make an ad-hoc set: *people like doctors and lawyers*
  - An inclusive set, i.e. it includes doctors and lawyers
- To report perceptions: *looks like, tastes like, smells like, sounds like, feels like, seems like*
  - *His mouth tasted like the bottom of a parrot’s cage.*
  - *It felt like velvet*
- And to report feelings/emotions:
  - *I felt like a fool, I felt like hitting him*
Davidson’s error

• All metaphors are false (like lies)
  – The speaker deliberately says something false, to alert the hearer to some salient property.
  – So far, so good.

• All similes are trivially true
  – Everything is like everything else.
    • Donald Davidson (1978): *What Metaphors Mean*

Yes, but some things are more alike than others

Davidson seems to assume comparison with real, experienceable things. But the vehicles of many similes are not experiential realities at all.
Not an experiential Gestalt

- Lakoff & Johnson (1980) claim that cognitive metaphors are based on “an experiential Gestalt” – i.e. that we interpret the world in terms of everyday experience.
  - Probably not true of all metaphors; certainly not true of similes.
- EXAMPLE: in the home of Madonna and Guy Ritchie:
- Their carpets are ... so luxurious that it’s like walking on live sheep.
  —Zoe Williams in *The Guardian G2*, p. 3. 18.09.2007
  - It’s not an everyday experience to walk on live sheep
Texts studied for similes

- Comic fiction:
  - P. G. Wodehouse, *Piccadilly Jim* (1918)

- Other fiction:

- Non-fiction:
  - *The letters of Wilfred Owen* (written in 1917)
Structure of similes

• Through the rich interior of this mansion Mr Pett, its nominal proprietor, was wandering like a lost spirit. –P. G. Wodehouse, *Piccadilly Jim*, p. 7

• She is as thin as a stick insect. –Sue Townsend, *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole*, p. 105

• My grandma has got eyes like Superman’s, they bore right through you. --*SDAM*, p. 109
  – Red: topic
  – Blue: event or state
  – Green: shared property
  – Brown: comparator
  – Magenta: vehicle
Components of simile structure

- **Topic** (typically, noun phrase): obligatory
- **Event or state** (verb): obligatory
- **Property** (typically, adjective): can be either explicit or implicit
- **Comparator**: optional
- **Vehicle** (noun, verb, or adj.): obligatory
Similes and Logical Form

Similes licence logical mayhem, e.g.

- syntactic displacement:
  - He looked like a broiled frog, hunched over his desk, grinning and satisfied.
    = He looked broiled and hunched like a frog

- semantic anomaly:
  - The presence of a single woman in their midst acts like a demented lighthouse, enticing hapless men onto the rocks.
    = Common property: both send out visible signals. BUT this lighthouse is behaving wrongly – like a demented person. Real lighthouses warn sailors away; they do not entice them. Demented people also do strange things.
  - Such similes draw deeply on lexical semantic norms of belief
How people report perceptions

look like: “Any girl can look like an angel as long as she is surrounded by choice blooms.”

taste/smell/sound/feel like: “It must make you feel like a snipe, ebing shot at all the time.”

seem: It seemed to him sometimes that a curious paralysis of the will came over him out of business hours.

resemble: The place [the New York house of financier Peter Pett] resembles in almost equal proportions a cathedral, a suburban villa, a hotel and a Chinese pagoda.
The disgraceful ambiguity of \textit{feel like}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{It feels like velvet} (It may or may not be velvet): ASSIGNMENT OF SOMETHING TO A SET
  \item \textit{I feel like a fool} (= I perceive myself to be a fool. Objectively, I may or may not be a fool.)
  \item \textit{I feel like an ice cream} (= I feel as if I want an ice cream)
  \item NONE OF THESE HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH SIMILES OR COMPARISONS
  \item \textit{Like/}PREP has other uses, in addition to making similes
\end{itemize}
Some conventional vehicles

• People are conventionally compared in similes to things outside our everyday experience, e.g. a princess, a queen, a prisoner.

• Events and situations are often compared in similes to unreal things, e.g. a dream, a nightmare, a miracle, a fairy tale, a demented [N], the bottom of a parrot’s cage
  – invoking conventional linguistic properties
  – not real-world properties or real things
Similes vs. comparisons

- He is just like his father: COMPARISON
- He has eyes like his father: COMPARISON
- Close male relatives like fathers and brothers: AD-HOC SET
- Layton had been like a father to Leonard: SIMILE
  - Layton was not his father
Similes vs. metaphors (1)


- Opening paragraph, page 1:
  “This is rape!” His voice was reaching a pitch it had never reached before. …
  It was not rape. It was a robbery.

- Page 2:
  “Rape,” he said. “It feels like rape.”

The metaphor has weakened to a simile, as the speaker’s initial shock is replaced by querulous self-pity.
Similes vs. metaphors (2)

- Linguistic metaphors can usually be reformulated as similes
- Similes often can’t be re-formulated as metaphors
- Metaphors are semantically stronger than similes
- Constraints on metaphor creation are more severe
- Similes are used to report perceptions
- Similes licence certain kinds of logical mayhem.
- Similes are even more attention-grabbing
Distribution of similes in text (1)

• Not all documents contain similes.
• Where a document contains many similes, they are not evenly distributed, but tend to cluster. Why?
Distribution of similes in text (2)

  140 similes in 300 pages (~ 1 every 2 pages).
  But the distribution is very uneven, e.g.
  Pp. 7-15: 18 similes in 9 pages (av. 2 per page):
  introducing the location and main characters.
  Pp. 16-37: The incidence drops to less than 1
  simile every 3 pages as the narrative gets going.
  There are 6 times more similes per page in the
  opening 9 pages than in the next 20 pages.
Distribution of similes in text (3)

Simile cluster in *PJ*; associated plot developments:

- p. 51: Mr. Crocker quarrels with his wife;
- pp. 62-65: Mr. Pett is intimidated by his wife;
- pp. 84-86 (incl. some metaphors): Jimmy is refused admittance to Lord Percy Whipple;
- pp. 97-99: Paddington Station: departure of the boat train
- pp. 113-115: Jimmy arrives in New York
- pp. 143-149: Jerry Mitchell strikes Ogden and gets fired
- p. 276: Sudden uproar
Non-fiction: Jon Lee Anderson: *The Fall of Baghdad* (2005). Very factual style, few similes. The three main clusters are:

- pp. 1-21 (8 similes). Saddam’s Iraq. E.g.: *He simply appeared and vanished again -- like the visitation of a divinity.*

- pp. 229-231 (4 similes). Bombs start to fall. E.g.: *debris everywhere, which looked shorn, as if a giant rake had come along and torn off the top layer of earth.*

- p. 279. Battle comes to the city. E.g. *a rhythmic noise, like a great steel drum being pounded mechanically, ... a huge crackling roar, like metallic popcorn popping.*
Signalling the unusual

From the British National Corpus:

• howling like a demented banshee
• I look like a demented barber
• the idea of God pursuing a whole family like a demented genealogist
• My script looks like demented knitting
• A single woman in their midst acts like a demented lighthouse
• Thrashing plastic like a demented clock spring
• The paddle ... thrashing like a demented washing machine
• Rising and falling like a demented yo-yo
Conclusions (1: similes)

• **Typology:**
  – There are many ways of making a simile (not just *like* and *as*). The boundaries of the category are fuzzy.

• **Given and new:**
  – Similes and comparisons introduce the new rather than discussing the given – e.g. in setting a scene, assisting plot development, or reporting perceptions.

• **Vehicle:**
  – The *vehicle* of a simile is often semantically irrealis.
  – a linguistic construct rather than a representation of experience

• **Attention-grabbing function:**
  – similes aim to stir up readers’ imaginations – to grab their attention and make them do some cognitive work – rather than to convey a more explicit message.
Conclusions (2: the nature of language)

• A language is a conventional belief system
  – Similes appeal to beliefs in the language system, not to facts about the world. Not an ‘experiential Gestalt’.

• Language is rule-governed behaviour
  – 2 interacting rule systems:
    • Rules for using language normally
    • Rules for exploiting the norms

• Meaning in language is primarily analogical
  – Logics are secondary – i.e. artificial constructs
    • not an “underlying” semantic reality