Similes in interaction: beyond (metaphor and) compare

Maria Josep Cuenca
Univ. de València (maria.j.cuenca@uv.es)

Manuela Romano
Univ. Autónoma de Madrid (manuela.romano@uam.es)
Introduction

- **Aim**: to describe similes considering their structure and discourse functions in real texts

- **Corpus**
  - 3 languages (*English*, Catalan and Spanish), 100 examples each
  - news, interviews and commentary sections, comments to news and individual and newspaper blogs
  - examples selected to avoid: repetitions, defective contexts, constructions not corresponding to similes (literal comparisons) or instantiating similar constructions
Introduction

Simile:

- Complex conceptual and discourse process of analogy
- Exhibits various structures from semantic and structural point of view
- Cognitively and discursively different from both (literal) comparisons and metaphors, though related to them
- Most studies are based on made up examples. Similes need to be analysed in real communicative settings.
Contents

- Similes, Comparisons & Metaphors
- Similes in Interaction
  - Constructions
  - Similes in discourse
- Are Metaphors and Similes Interchangeable?
- Conclusions
A simile is “a way of describing a target by asserting its similarity to some unexpected entity” (Israel at al. 2004: 126). It elaborates “properties of a primary figure, the target, by matching them with corresponding properties in a secondary figure, the source (2004: 133)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>independence</th>
<th>is like</th>
<th>an elephant</th>
<th>difficult to describe but instantly recognisable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>target</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>source</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>tertium comparationis properties</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Similes & literal comparisons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>independence</th>
<th>is <strong>like</strong></th>
<th>an elephant</th>
<th>– difficult to describe but instantly recognisable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A</strong> target</td>
<td><strong>B</strong> source</td>
<td><strong>tertium comparisonis properties</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>independence</th>
<th>is <strong>as</strong></th>
<th>important <strong>as</strong></th>
<th>democracy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A</strong> target</td>
<td><strong>tertium comparisonis property</strong></td>
<td><strong>B</strong> source</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

• A simile is an **explicit form of comparison**. However, the two entities compared belong to **different domains** (figurative). “the compared entities must somehow be, or be construed as being, fundamentally unlike each other, and therefore unlikely to be compared.” (Israel et al. 2004: 125)

• A simile asserts **similarity** but presupposes **dissimilarity**.
Similes & metaphors

The relationship between metaphor and simile is a controversial topic in linguistics, philosophy, psychology and rhetoric. Two views:

- **equivalence approach**
  - a *metaphor* is a *simile* with an elliptic *like* that makes claims about a category (Gentner & Bowdle, 2001; Glucksberg, 2001; Roncero et al., 2006)

- **nonequivalence view**
  - a *metaphor* is a categorization assertion
  - a *simile* is an assertion of similitude (Glucksberg & Keysar, 1990)
Our analysis supports the second view: 

“the difference between metaphor and simile may have less to do with the kinds of properties they map than with the mapping process itself” (Israel et al. 2004: 132)
Constructions

“A is like B + elaboration”

Core construction: “A is like B”

(2) Faith is like fire (95)

(3) Independence is like starting a new computer install (15)

Full construction:

(4) Scottish independence is like Marmite; Love it or hate it (24)

(NP + NP, E = independent sentence, consecutive)
Constructions

(5) Killing Google Reader is like killing the bees: we'll all be worse off (77) (Clause + Clause, E = apposition, consecutive)

(6) Cooking to me is like yoga. Sharing a Sunday roast with the people I care for has now become one of my number one priorities (80) (Clause + NP, E = non-consecutive)

(7) Gay marriage is like slavery, Catholic leader says Britain’s most senior Catholic, Cardinal Keith O'Brien, has condemned gay marriage as an “aberration”, likening it to slavery and abortion (94) (NP + NP, E = non-consecutive, indirect)

Table 1
Core construction

A and B can correspond to:

**Stable discreet entities:** people, objects, places, social entities (e.g. woman, writer, train, sun, hospital, Spain, Madrid, Red Bull, EU, football team)

**Dynamic entities:** relationships, activities, ideologies and values, processes and states or sensations (marriage, father, slavery; writing, law, prostitution; independentism, Catholicism, democracy; cancer, independence, being blind; terror, sexual enthusiasm)

**Predications,** i.e., complex constructions including (or implying) a verb and generally also one or more arguments (e.g., Imagine sth, speak a language, plant a bomb, talk to sb., run a business, tell sb. sth., wear sth.)
Similes in discourse

a) Frequent in informative and opinion texts
   - Interviews, news, opinion (journalists)
   - Blogs, news commentary (individuals)

b) Related to opinions: they put forward the speaker’s stance boldly
   - “similes serve the basic rhetorical functions of description and evaluation.” (Israel et al. 2004: 126)
Similes in discourse

c) Generally attributed to a specific speaker in interviews and news

(8) **Depardieu**: Football *is like* cinema (39)
(9) Exclusive Interview: Creativity *is like* water from a pipe – **Okyeame Kwame** (67)
(10) Gove’s department *is like* ‘Upstairs, Downstairs’, says ex-Children’s Minister (78)

- In other genres, similes express the speaker’s or writer’s point of view
Similes in discourse

d) Used as headline if a text contains a simile

(11) England is like a giant prostitute
(12) Sir Alex Ferguson: Football is like chess, lose your focus and you're dead

The relationship between similes and headlines clearly indicates the evocative power of a simile: it opens up the reader expectations so that he or she may want to read the text to discover or to specify the relationship between A and B (i.e., E)
Similes in discourse

e) Prominent text location.

- beginning of the text —headline, a subtitle, text initial—
- final sentence—functioning as a coda.

(13) The Tea Party Is Like the OWS, Really Mr. President?

The Tea Party *is like* the OWS as President Obama said, if you take away the bathing, criminal activity, bongos, drugging, free love, anti-American, anti-military, anti-government, anti-semitic rants, and vile signs, there is hardly a difference (97)
Are metaphors & similes interchangeable?

Researchers have shown that both structures reflect different *cognitive processes*, as well as different *discursive functions*: 
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>Similes</strong></th>
<th><strong>Metaphors</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>process</strong></td>
<td>do not add structure to a target, but highlight what is already there, they are descriptive</td>
<td><strong>structure</strong> target domains in terms of source domains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Israel et al., 2004)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>mappings</strong></td>
<td>tend to highlight a single salient property in two domains</td>
<td>may feature numerous cross-domain correspondences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Israel et al., 2004)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>structure</strong></td>
<td>carry explanations; readers/listeners require aid in understanding the analogy</td>
<td><strong>do not</strong> usually include an elaboration; speaker assumes relevant mutual knowledge with listener</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Roncero et al. 2006)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>aptness</strong></td>
<td>target and source share a relatively low number of properties</td>
<td>relation quite apt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Chiappe et al., 2003)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>conventionality</strong></td>
<td>more unfamiliar, creative comparisons</td>
<td>more conventional or familiar comparisons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Genter &amp; Bowdle, 2001; Bernárdez, 2009)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>function</strong></td>
<td>extensive textual element (paradigmatic axis): expansion</td>
<td>basically at the level of the lexis (syntagmatic axis): substitution, transformation, recategorization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Bernárdez, 2009)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Are metaphors & similes interchangeable?

- **Test 1**: only 10% of similes were found in metaphor form in Webcorp & Google
- **Test 2**: transformation of similes ("A is like B") into metaphors ("A is B")
- **Test 3**: native speakers’ intuitions on similes vs metaphors effects
Are metaphors & similes interchangeable?

- When target and source domains are highly conventional, metaphor and simile are interchangeable but the mappings can be quite different:

(14) Faith *is like* fire. It warms; but it can also burn. (95) vs. Faith *is* fire
Are metaphors & similes interchangeable?

- **Non-conventional** metaphors clearly need a context to be properly understood.

(15) *Every US city is (like) a Brazilian nightclub
(E: inferno with no exits for the masses) (99)

- When metaphor and simile are highly **non-conventional**, metaphor can be allowed for pragmatic reasons –showing commitment, involvement.

(16) Voting for Independence is (like) buying Scotland's children a one-way ticket to uncertainty (1)
Are metaphors & similes interchangeable?

- Metaphors are (generally) discarded for formal reasons:
  - when the expressions compared are too long, complex or non-parallel
  - when A and B are clauses

(17) Expecting the Scots to support England \textit{is (like)} the English being asked to cheer on France or the Germans (27)

- when B (source) is as definite than A (target) or indefinite

(18) Four Reasons cancer \textit{is (like)} golf (53)
Similes are different from both literal comparisons and metaphors (nonequivalence view)

- Similes express complex analogical conceptualizations between entities of two different domains / comparisons:
  - same domain
- Similes describe a target (A) by comparing it with a source (B) / metaphors: categorize, structure
Similes are evaluative

- They explicitly encode a point of view attributed to a specific person who selects one feature from $B$ and maps it onto $A$
- They are frequent and significant in opinion related genres

Unlike metaphors, they require *individuation* of both source and target concepts, and an *evaluation* of what they have in common, but unlike literal comparisons, they are *figurative*—comparing things normally felt to be incomparable, typically using vivid or startling images to suggest *unexpected connections* between source and target (Israel et al 2004: 124)
Conclusions

- A simile generally creates the expectative of an elaboration, which makes explicit or helps the addressee infer the property allowing the analogy between two unrelated entities.

- Many similes turn into headlines. The text includes –or is – an elaboration (or re-elaboration) of the property on which an unexpected analogy is based.
Similes are very prominent in discourse. Used to create specific rhetorical, attention calling effects:

- They are used to describe “entities in an appealing way to add interest”. (Pierini 2007)
- Similes have a capacity to illuminate and shock that is the equal of anything achieved by metaphor, or by any other figure. (Bredin 1998: 78)
Conclusions

- Similes and metaphors are not (generally) interchangeable

- Whereas ‘A is B’ metaphors can usually be transformed into similes, the opposite process seems to depend on their different conditions of structure, use and interpretation
Why MPs are like turkeys

I know that Westminster MPs voting for independence is like turkeys voting for Christmas, but come on, they don't have to act like turkeys as well do they?