



## Similes in interaction: beyond (metaphor and) compare

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# Introduction

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- **Aim:** to describe similes considering their structure and discourse functions in real texts
- **Corpus**
  - string: “*A is like B*”; search through WebCorp (<http://www.webcorp.org.uk/live/search.jsp>).
  - 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

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## *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.



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- Similes, Comparisons & Metaphors
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- Conclusions

# Similes

(1)

independence	is like	an elephant	– difficult to describe but instantly recognisable
A target		B source	tertium comparationis properties

A simile is “a way of describing a target by asserting its similarity to some unexpected entity” (Israel et 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)

# Similes & literal comparisons

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independence	is <b>like</b>	an elephant	– difficult to describe but instantly recognisable
<b>A</b> <b>target</b>		<b>B</b> <b>source</b>	<b>tertium comparationis</b> <b>properties</b>

independence	is <b>as</b>	important <b>as</b>	democracy
<b>A</b> <b>target</b>		<b>tertium comparationis</b> <b>property</b>	<b>B</b> <b>source</b>

- 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

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- The relationship between metaphor and simile **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)



# Similes & metaphors

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- 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

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“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

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- (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**)

# Core construction

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**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

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## **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

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- 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

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d) Used as **headline** if a text contains a simile

(11) England *is like* a giant prostitute (34)

(12) Sir Alex Ferguson: Football *is like* chess, lose your focus and you're dead (38)

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)

**Table 2**

# Similes in discourse

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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?

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- Researchers have shown that both structures reflect different *cognitive processes*, as well as different *discursive functions*:



	<b>Similes</b>	<b>Metaphors</b>
<b>process</b>	do not add structure to a target, but <b>highlight what is already there</b> , they are <b>descriptive</b> (Israel et al., 2004)	<b>structure</b> target domains in terms of source domains
<b>mappings</b>	tend to <b>highlight a single salient property</b> in two domains (Israel et al., 2004)	may feature <b>numerous cross-domain correspondences</b>
<b>structure</b>	<b>carry explanations</b> ; readers/listeners require aid in understanding the analogy (Roncero et al. 2006)	<b>do not usually include an elaboration</b> ; speaker assumes relevant mutual knowledge with listener
<b>aptness</b>	target and source <b>share a relatively low number of properties</b> (Chiappe et al., 2003)	relation quite <b>apt</b>
<b>conventionality</b>	more <b>unfamiliar, creative comparisons</b> (Genter & Bowdle, 2001; Bernárdez, 2009)	<b>more conventional</b> or familiar comparisons
<b>function</b>	<b>extensive textual element</b> (paradigmatic axis): <i>expansion</i> (Bernárdez, 2009)	basically at the <b>level of the lexis</b> (syntagmatic axis): <i>substitution, transformation, recategorization</i>

# Are metaphors & similes interchangeable?

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- **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?

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- 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?

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- **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?

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- 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 *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 *is (like)* golf (53)



# Conclusions

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- **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

# Conclusions

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- 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

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- 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.





# Conclusions

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- 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

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- 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

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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?

