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On Simile

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1 Distinguished Figures

The distinction between simile and metaphor is among the oldest and most widely recognized in rhetorical theory. It is also one of the most tenuous. For many analysts it is, in fact, a distinction almost without a difference—as Aristotle puts it, 'the simile also is a metaphor…the difference is but slight' (*Rhetoric* III, 4). Traditionally, what difference there is has been seen as a matter of form: a simile, so the story goes, simply makes explicit what a metaphor merely implies. Since the difference between the two is apparently so superficial, theorists have tended to define one figure in terms of the other. One venerable tradition, stretching from Quintilian to Miller (1979), sees metaphor as a sort of elliptical simile. Another tradition, uniting theorists as diverse as Aristotle, Lakoff and Johnson (1980), and Glucksberg and Keysar (1990), takes metaphor as the more basic of the two figures, and views simile as the explicit expression of a metaphorical mapping. The theorists on each side of this divide could hardly be more diverse, and yet they are united in their view of simile and metaphor as twin manifestations of a single basic phenomenon. Over the centuries, the relation between the two has consistently been seen as a matter of ontological prior-

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ity, the basic question being, as Glucksberg puts it, 'which comes first, the metaphorical egg or the chicken of similitude?' (2001: 29).

We suggest that the relation between metaphor and simile is not so much a matter of chickens and eggs as one of apples and oranges. Both figures are essentially analogical, involving processes of conceptual blending whereby one structure, the target, is somehow understood in terms of a second structure, the source. But analogical figures come in many shapes and sizes: in fact, both simile and metaphor should be distinguished not just from each other, but also from a third analogical figure—literal comparison. Although metaphor is itself often seen as a sort of elliptical comparison (e.g. Miller 1993), work in conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff 1993, Grady 1997) has largely undermined this view. Many basic metaphors—for example, HAPPINESS is UP and DIFFICULTY is HEAVINESS—do not reflect objective similarities between source and target domains, but rather arise from basic correlations in the everyday experience of these domains. While comparison involves an actual assessment of what two entities share, metaphors selectively project conceptual structure directly from one domain onto another. Metaphors, in other words, create similarities rather than reflecting them.

Similes, on the other hand, really are a kind of comparison. 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. Our goal in this paper is to consider simile as a figure in its own right, to illustrate some of its basic forms and functions, and to explore its basic differences both from ordinary metaphor and from literal comparison.

2 Simile as a Form of Comparison

While there has always been controversy concerning the nature of metaphor, a broad consensus seems to hold with respect to simile. This is partly perhaps because theorists tend not to devote much attention to the matter, but it may also be because standard conceptions of simile are in fact quite serviceable. The American Heritage College Dictionary, for example, defines simile as 'a figure of speech in which two essentially unlike things are explicitly compared, usually by means of *like* or *as*' (p. 1270). This definition, which is fairly typical of what one finds in dictionaries and rhetorical handbooks, captures at least three essential properties of similes: (i) that they involve some form of comparison, (ii) that this comparison is explicit,

and (iii) that the comparison involves entities which are not normally considered comparable—that it is, in some sense, figurative.

One weakness of this definition is its qualification 'usually by means of *like* or *as'*. The problem is not just that the formulation is specific to English, but also that it gives much too narrow a view of the forms which similes may take. We claim that similes really are just explicit, figurative comparisons, and therefore any construction which can express a literal comparison should in principle be available to form a simile. The examples below suggest that a fairly wide range of distinct constructions may in fact serve to express a simile: (1a,b) illustrate simple periphrastic equative and comparative constructions; (1c) gives an assertion of shared characteristics; and (1d) and (1e) use mental state predicates (*think* and *view)* to depict the way two very different entities are experienced as similar.

(1) a. 'The retirement of Yves Saint Laurent is the fashion equivalent of the breakup of the Beatles.' (heard on NPR)
b. 'The duchess — you've seen her portrait ... sir, it no more approached her than a weed comes up to a rose.' (Edith Wharton)
c. 'This publication had the heart of a music fanzine but the character of an underground comic.' (Online review)
d. 'You think of a womb as a kind of place for transients, but it's a whole other life in there.' (John Updike)
e. 'And my husband and I basically view skiing as an invitation to suicide.' (Natalie Wexler in the *Washington Post,* 9/22/02)

These last two examples may stretch the bounds of what traditionally is counted as simile; however, they do in effect require a reader to consider and compare two very different entities, and it is just this sort of figurative comparison which we see as the essence of simile. Comparison in general is a mental act in which two or more entities, the comparands, are evaluated along some parameter. While comparison is an inherently asymmetrical process—with a primary figure, the target, assessed against the ground of a secondary figure, the standard—both comparands must nonetheless be fully individuated as objects of conceptualization: one cannot make a comparison without thinking about both of the things one is comparing. Broadly speaking, any construction which prompts the conceptualization of two distinct figures and an assessment of the similarities and differences between them will count as a comparison.

What makes a comparison figurative—what makes it count as a simile—is that the compared entities must somehow be, or be construed as being, fundamentally unlike each other, and therefore unlikely to be compared

(cf. Miller 1993: 373). This, of course, begs the question of what makes two things like or unlike. Any two entities are likely to have something in common—people and plants, for example, share many important molecular and cellular biological features, yet if someone were to compare their sister to an orchid, it is unlikely that these would be the properties they had in mind. Similarity, it seems, is largely a matter of construal—it all depends what one is focusing on.

So what determines the construal of similarity and difference? Within Cognitive Grammar (Langacker 1987), concepts in general, and word meanings in particular, are characterized relative to cognitive domains, and any given concept may be associated with an open-ended set of domains—the concept's domain matrix. The concept 'flower', for example, is understood not just as a physical part of a plant, but also in terms of its role in sexual reproduction, as a food source for insects, as a source of olfactory pleasure, and as a decorative item featured in bouquets at weddings, funerals, and dinner parties, to name just a few of its many associated domains. Different domains may be more or less central to a concept (the domain of weddings, for example, is relatively peripheral in the domain matrix of flower), and different domains may be more or less salient on any given occasion of the concept's activation. Similarity in general can thus be thought of as the overlap between domain matrices: two concepts will count as similar to the degree that they highlight the same set of cognitive domains. Literal comparison involves entities which evoke similar domain matrices, but which may differ in their specifications within one or more domains. Figurative comparison, on the other hand, and to some extent figurativity in general (cf. Croft 1993), involves the alignment of concepts with very different domain matrices. What makes a simile figurative is that it prompts one to search for similarities where one would not expect to find them, and to make connections across concepts which seem otherwise unconnected.

As a figure of comparison, similes serve the basic rhetorical functions of description and evaluation. This is largely a consequence of their form, and the fact that a simile necessarily features a comparison construction predicated of an explicit target. Basically, a simile is just a way of describing a target by asserting its similarity to some unexpected entity. The figurative nature of similes, however, has consequences which set them apart from literal comparisons. Most obviously, similes may be evocative in a way that literal comparisons cannot, prompting associations which go beyond whatever property they explicitly highlight (cf. Section 4, below). Moreover, similes may be interpreted in ways which differ systematically from literal comparisons. Thus we find that equative and comparative similes, like those in (2-3), generally force a construal of their source concept as

a sort of paragon for the compared property. We call this the Superlative Source Constraint (SSC), since it effectively makes the simile into a sort of periphrastic superlative construction.

(2) a. Her argument was as clear as glass.
b. She's as sweet as sugar candy.
(3) a. 'Everybody knew he was slower than molasses in January.' (Harper's Weekly, 1889; cited by Barry Popik)
b. 'The man is meaner than a junkyard dog.' (Jim Croce)

Note that equative and comparative constructions in general—constructions of the form *X is as Y as Z* or *X is more Y than Z*—need not feature a Z element which instantiates the property Y to an extreme degree. A literal comparison such as *Max is as tall as Mortimer* does not imply that Mortimer is either particularly tall or short, merely that his height, whatever it is, is a salient reference point for gauging Max's height.

As an interpretive convention, the SSC is easiest to observe where it is flouted. Source concepts like those in (4), which are not construable as paragons of the relevant property, make for distinctly anomalous similes. In examples like those in (5), however, where the source concept is simply an unlikely instance, we typically get a kind of pragmatic accommodation: thus, although one might not think of an M-16 as the prototypical example of a wicked thing, the simile in (5a) effectively presupposes that they are in fact very, very wicked. Finally, the examples in (6) illustrate a type of ironic use in which the source concept functions as a sort of antiparagon, instantiating a property to an extremely low degree.

(4) a. #She was as sweet as a carrot.
b. #That boy is as fast as a squirrel.
(5) a. 'Your kisses are as wicked as an M-16.' (Liz Phair)
b. 'Nenzia was as mute as a fish.' (Edith Wharton)
(6) a. It's as clear as mud.
b. It's as much fun as a trip to the dentist's office.

Because of the SSC, it often makes little difference what source concept is used: whatever it is, the effect is the same—the target is understood as an extreme instance of the relevant sort. One consequence of this is that poetic considerations can sometimes motivate the use of source concepts which are not so well motivated on semantic grounds alone. This, in any case, seems to be the explanation for such conventional rhyming and alliterative expressions as *cool as a cucumber*, *dead as a doornail,* and *fine as wine*. Another consequence of the SSC is that the source concept can remain almost en-

tirely unspecified without compromising the semantic import of the simile as a whole. For instance, idioms like *as X as anything, as X as you want, as X as hell,* and *as X as all get out* are essentially conventional formulae for the expression of a superlative judgment by means of an otherwise vacuous comparison. Similarly, one may occasionally hear a speaker begin to form a simile, but fail to find a compelling source to complete it. We have thus heard ourselves and others say things like *it was as hot as a really hot thing* or *it was as hot as... I don't know what, but it was really hot*. Such examples present the SSC in epitome, often to humorous effect: they highlight a speaker's failure to come up with an appropriately evocative source, but play on the fact that the form of the simile itself effectively conveys the speaker's superlative evaluation of the target.

For our purposes, the important point is that while simile is, formally, a species of comparison, its figurativity has consequences for its use and interpretation that set it apart from other forms of comparison. At the same time, its status as a genuine form of comparison also sets simile apart from its figurative cousin, metaphor.

3 Comparing Simile and Metaphor

Similes and metaphors are not simply alternative ways of expressing the same idea. Occasionally, of course, the two figures may appear interchangeable: a nominal metaphor like *Odysseus is a weasel* is roughly (if not exactly) identical in meaning to its counterpart *Odysseus is like a weasel*. For some theorists (e.g. Miller 1979, Glucksberg 2001), this intertranslatability is a defining feature of the two figures. Such examples, however, may be misleading: many metaphors lack any clear counterpart simile (Levinson 1983); and many, perhaps most, similes resist any easy paraphrase as metaphors (Tirrell 1991).

The metaphors in (7), for example, are relatively commonplace and easily interpretable, yet the corresponding similes in (8) fail to reflect anything like the same basic sense.

(7) a. Her argument was somewhat murky.
    b. 'I found the argument to be flat-footed.' (personal conversation)
    c. 'The house had great bones.' (*Washington Post,* 9/29/02)

(8) a. Her argument was like something murky.
    b. I found the argument to be like a flat-footed runner.
    c. The structure of the house was as solid as great bones.

By the same token, the similes in (9-10), from Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood,* cannot easily be recast as metaphors. The (b) examples we give below, representing the best metaphorical versions we could devise, are at best peculiar, if not flatly uninterpretable.

(9) a. 'The windshield wipers made a great clatter like two idiots clapping in church.'
b. ≠ The clattering windshield wipers were idiots clapping in church.
(10) a. 'Two bears sat facing each other like two matrons having tea.'
b. ≠ 'The two bears were matrons having tea.'

In this light, it is striking that several recent empirical studies employ matched sets of metaphors and similes as stimuli (Todd and Clark 1999, Chiappe and Kennedy 2000, Gentner and Bowdle 2001). Not surprisingly, a consistent finding has been that the putative paraphrases are interpreted quite differently. But this technique may also obscure some of the differences between the two figures, which are perhaps best illustrated precisely by those cases which do not translate well.

One of the most striking differences between these figures is explicitness: while metaphors need not be overtly marked, similes, by their very nature, must be. Simile is fundamentally a figure of speech requiring overt reference to source and target entities, and an explicit construction connecting them. Metaphor, on the other hand, is ultimately a figure of thought. Many conceptual domains are essentially metaphorically structured, and this structuring is often evident not just in metaphorical uses of language, but also in social practices and conventions, in gesture, and in reasoning processes in general (Lakoff 1993, Gibbs 1994). Because metaphor is fundamentally a cognitive rather than a linguistic phenomenon metaphorical expressions need not be overtly signaled in any way: given the appropriate mappings, one can use source domain language metaphorically without even mentioning the target domain to which they apply.

This gives metaphor a grammatical flexibility which simile lacks. Not just nouns and verbs, but adjectives, adverbs, and prepositions may be used metaphorically, for example as in *sultry glances* or *around midnight*. And out of context, ordinary expressions—for example, *we're not getting anywhere, I'm struggling with this, we're just laying the foundation here*—are often ambiguous between literal and metaphorical readings. Such examples may in fact be compatible with several different target domains: a sentence like *we've come a long way* can be used in relation to a research program, a political movement, a love affair, or (of course) a journey.

Metaphorical expressions of this sort cannot easily be recast as similes, not least because specifying the implicit target domain would do violence to the sentence's information structure. Such examples show why metaphor is *not* a species of comparison. The metaphorical use of *we've built a solid foundation* does not require one to consider what a construction project has in common with, say, a love affair; rather, the metaphor allows one to apply the language of physical construction directly to the target domain. In fact, a speaker might not even notice that the words here are literally drawn from the domain of construction at all. Rather than being individuated and compared, the source domain is backgrounded and effectively transparent.

The explicit nature of similes does have its advantages, however. Analogical figures in general require one to figure out an intended relation between source and target concepts. Unlike metaphors, similes sometimes facilitate this process by specifying a *tertium*—a 'third element' in the comparison denoting the respect in which the source and target are being compared. In the examples below, the italicized tertium makes a significant difference in motivating the simile's interpretation.

(11) a. 'My kitchen is approximately *the size* of a postage stamp.' (Laurie Colwin)
b. '[Her] grin was as *curved and sharp* as the blade of a sickle.' (O'Connor)
c. 'Raindrops *glistened everywhere* like a coating of ice.' (Updike)

In (12a), for example, it might be difficult to figure out precisely how the kitchen is like a postage stamp if the tertium were not there to specify that the relevant parameter here is size. Because the motivation for a simile can always be fleshed out in this way, similes can feature very fanciful and unexpected juxtapositions which might not work in a simple metaphor.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that while simile and metaphor are conceptually and rhetorically distinct, they can and do operate in tandem. Similes involve the individuation of two inputs and the matching of shared properties across those inputs; however, the matched properties in a simile may themselves be metaphorically structured. The examples in (12) are fairly typical of this phenomenon: the similes here effectively presuppose the conceptual metaphors given in parentheses.

(12) a. Margaret Thatcher is like a bulldozer. (GOALS ARE LOCATIONS; OBSTACLES ARE IMPEDIMENTS TO MOVEMENT)
b. 'Delia's habitual meekness seemed to slip from her shoulders like a blown scarf.' (ATTRIBUTES ARE POSSESSIONS; Z. N. Hurston)
c. 'I will pour out my wrath like water.' (ANGER IS A HEATED LIQUID IN A CONTAINER; Hosea 5: 10)

The comparison of Thatcher to a bulldozer, for example, (from Tirrell 1991) depends on the metaphorical understanding of obstacles in terms of physical impediments, which is a prominent part of the event structure metaphor (Lakoff 1993). Given this metaphor, the simile here highlights an indelicate and unstoppable political will. The simile is, in effect, a comparison built on top of a metaphor. Since so much of conceptual structure is in fact metaphorical, this sort of scaffolding of similes on top of conceptual metaphors is quite common; but while the two figures often work together, they make distinct contributions to the process of meaning construction.

4 Highlighting and Emphasis

Aisenman (1999), building on Gentner's Structure-Mapping Model (Gentner 1983, Gentner and Bowdle 2001) suggests that similes and metaphors differ essentially in the types of properties they typically map—that metaphor and analogy typically map relations, while simile is the preferred figure for mapping attributes. Relations and attributes are defined by the number of arguments they take. An attribute is a predicate with a single argument; a relation is a predicate with two or more arguments. Attributes include most features of appearance: shape, size, color, and so on. Relations, on the other hand, include features of function or behavior: what something does and how it interacts with other things.

This hypothesis has a certain appeal. Many stock similes, for example, are basically just conventional adornments for attributive adjectives: *rare as hen's teeth, old as the hills, silent as the grave, black as night, blind as a bat, busy as a bee, bold as brass, good as gold, easy as pie*. But the tendency for similes to map attributes rather than relations is, at best, just a tendency. The similes in (13), for example, feature rich source domain images which map onto or match up with complex relations in the target—in (13a), the movements of a group of men, in (13b) the way a woman's hair lies on her head, in (13c) the way a heart feels pounding in one's chest.

(13) a. '…the young bucks (were) setting on the porch, swarming around Eula like bees around a honey pot.' (Faulkner)
b. 'Her hair was so thin it looked like ham gravy trickling over her skull.' (O'Connor)
c. 'His throat got drier and his heart began to grip him like a little ape clutching the bars of its cage.' (O'Connor)

Moreover, the criteria for distinguishing attributes from relations are less clear than they might seem. Many apparently 1-place predicates denote relations with one or more hidden arguments: for example, the easiness in *as easy as pie* involves at least a three-way relation between a recipe, a cook, and the act of baking the pie. Similar points hold for other apparently attributive adjectives in stock similes: *rare, bold, busy,* and *good,* for example, all denote complex (at least 2 place) relations, though each may appear as a simple attribute of a single individual.

We suggest that the difference between metaphor and simile may have less to do with the kinds of properties they map than with the mapping process itself. Conceptual metaphors give form to a target domain by projecting structure from a source: in fact, some very abstract targets, like time and causation, may be structured almost entirely metaphorically (Lakoff 1993). Similes, on the other hand, match structures construed as simultaneously present in both domains: similes do not add structure to a target, but highlight what's already there. In short, while metaphor may actually structure a domain, simile is essentially a mode of description: similes may not always map attributes, but they do tend to function attributively.

While a single conceptual metaphor may feature numerous cross-domain correspondences—as in LOVE IS A JOURNEY or UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING—similes tend to highlight a single salient property in two domains. In metaphorical expressions, any element of the source domain which is explicitly mentioned must somehow map onto the target: if, for example, one describes a theory as having a good foundation but too many gargoyles (cf. Grady 1997), the gargoyles must correspond to something in the theory. With similes, however, one sometimes finds rich structure in the source which does little more than accentuate a single property of the target: thus (14a) describes the motion of a horse by reference to a boarding house, and (14b) evokes a war scene to depict a man's startled response to the phone.

(14) a. 'The horse ran up the stairs like a boarder late for supper.' (Faulkner)
b. 'When the phone rang, he jumped like a jittery private in a foxhole.' (*Smithsonian Magazine*, September 2001)

The effect of such examples derives in part from details which do not map onto the target: in (14a) the facts of life in a boarding house do not contribute to our understanding of the horse's run; in (14b) knowledge of the military is largely irrelevant to the conveyed image of a man's nervous start. Interestingly, such irrelevant details can be heaped on almost indefinitely. Thus (14a) might be expanded: *the horse ran up the stairs like a boarder late for his favorite supper of chicken-fried steak and apple dumplings*. The only constraint on this kind of elaboration is that the accumulated details should at least highlight properties and suggest associations that are relevant to the target: in this case, primarily a sense of speed, urgency, and awkwardness.

Examples like these illustrate the power of simile as a figure of description and elaboration. In (14) the images of a hurrying boarder and a jittery soldier each evoke a complex cluster of properties, including both attributes like speed and suddenness, and relations like desire and fear. Yet despite this richness, the similes function much like simple attributions in providing a compact and coherent image to describe the features of a single event. As a form of comparison, similes typically, if not exclusively, serve a descriptive function: they elaborate properties of a primary figure, the target, by matching them with corresponding properties in a secondary figure, the source.

Of course, metaphorical expressions can be, and frequently are, used descriptively as well. But metaphors are not limited to such a function for the simple reason that metaphors are not limited to any particular grammatical form. Since similes require an explicit comparison construction of some kind, they can serve only the rhetorical and discourse functions which those constructions perform. Unlike similes, metaphorical expressions can appear as a subject noun phrase or a main verb, among other roles. So while similes necessarily elaborate a previously mentioned referent or relation, metaphors can introduce new referents or depict events as they unfold in a narrative. When Chesterton begins a story by writing, 'the thousand arms of the forest were grey, and its million fingers silver', the metaphoric uses of *arms* and *fingers* provide the first mention of the trees' branches and twigs; when he continues, 'the stars were bleak and brilliant like splintered ice', the simile merely adds descriptive detail to the already established referent *stars*.

A great deal more can, and should be said about the discourse functions of similes. Due to space limitations, we have concentrated here on single sentence examples, and so have ignored many basic uses of simile in extended discourse. Among others, similes may be used to highlight themes in a narrative, to add ironic shading, to inject humor, or to heighten the dramatic tension of a climactic scene. We would also predict that the basically descriptive nature of similes should bias them in narrative to occur more often as background information than to denote foregrounded events. In any

case, the formal connection between simile and description seems clear enough, at least within the sentence: for now, what consequences this connection has for extended discourse will have to be left for further research.

5 Conclusion

Simile seems like a simple figure, a minor variation on some other familiar figure. Our purpose in this paper has been to vindicate simile as a figure in its own right, and as an object of study distinct both from metaphorical expression and literal comparison. Analogical structuring is a pervasive feature of human thought, but analogical figures are not always and everywhere the same. Unlike metaphor, simile is essentially a figure of speech—in fact, an explicit form of comparison; but unlike literal comparison, simile is essentially figurative, making unexpected connections between literally unlike concepts. These observations are simple, but they have important consequences for the forms similes take, the meanings they convey, and ultimately for the rhetorical functions they serve. We hope we have provided an adequate glimpse of some of these consequences here—enough, in any case, to make simile seem a little less simple and a little more alluring.

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