

Simile and Metaphor: Seemingly Similar

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the similarities and differences between simile and metaphor, the two most common figures of speech in English. Conceded that simile and metaphor are both a figure of comparison which may be extended over a number of sentences, it will be seen in this paper that they differ greatly in their analogical constitution. The metaphoric theme and vehicle are usually more covert than those of a simile. The analogical ground of a simile is normally more explicit than that of a metaphor. A simile always contains a comparison marker, which, by contrast, is invariably absent from a metaphoric expression. In addition, a metaphor is encoded via a segment of discourse, while a simile via a sentence/clause. The metaphoric predication identifies the theme with the vehicle, whereas the simile likens the two. Finally, literal though a simile is, a metaphoric expression always involves nonliteral use of language. In view of all the divergences, this paper suggests that simile and metaphor be treated as two distinct figures rather than being lumped together as one single type of figure of speech.

Key Words: simile, metaphor, theme, vehicle, comparison marker

明喻隱喻之差異性

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摘 要

明喻和隱喻是英語裡最常見的兩個修辭格，本文旨在探討此二修辭格之異同。雖然明喻和隱喻均屬譬喻辭，且皆可延伸達數句之長度，作者將提出並說明其二者間類推性質之相當差異。隱喻之喻體和喻依通常較明喻隱蔽。明喻喻體和喻依之類似點一般較隱喻明顯。明喻一定含有喻詞，而隱喻一定沒有喻詞。隱喻是一點或一段英語文，而明喻均由一個句子或子句表達之。隱喻語用上認定喻依即為喻體，而明喻將喻依比擬為喻體。明喻全為詞句本意之運用，而隱喻則不全是。由於上述明喻和隱喻之異質性，作者建議將英語的明喻和隱喻列為兩種修辭格，而不同於若干學者將其合為同一種修辭格。

關鍵詞：明喻，隱喻，喻體，喻依，喻詞



I. INTRODUCTION

Most modern-day dictionaries (e.g. Richards, Platt and Platt [24], Wales [29]) and introductory texts in literature (as in Arp [3], Tien et al. [28]) distinguish between simile and metaphor. And yet the only clear distinction they make is presence or absence of such function words as *like* or *as*. As Richards, Platt and Platt [24] put it, “a simile is an expression in which something is compared to something else by use of a function word such as *like* or *as*,” while in a metaphor no such function words are used. It seems that such a general description does not suffice to make the case for conceptualizing simile and metaphor as two distinct figures. Since simile and metaphor are both used as a means of comparing one thing to another, some writers have lumped them together, which could have made readers lose sight of some significant differences between the two figures, particularly in their linguistic behavior and analogical organization.

This paper explores the similarities as well as differences between English similes and metaphors in terms of their analogical structures and linguistic representations. The primary aim is to address the following question: whether one of these two figures of speech should be understood as a subclass of the other or whether these two figures had better be conceived as two distinct, independent figures.

Most of the literature on tropes focuses on dealing with metaphor. Very little space has been devoted to the figure simile, which, however, is no less prevailing than metaphor, whether in speech or in writing. Even if simile comes under consideration, it is mostly discussed in relation to metaphor. Thus simile is often described as an explicit comparison and metaphor as an implicit comparison (as in Jeffries [15], Kreuz & Roberts [18], Leech [19], Stillman [26], Thorne [27]). This is part of the important content of the comparison view of metaphor, as discussed, for example, in Levinson [20] and Miller [21]. But how implicit is the comparison in a metaphor? Why is a simile an explicit comparison? Few writers have thoroughly discussed these questions, which will be tackled in the present paper.

In addition, many authors (e.g., Baker [5], Glucksberg & Keysar [12], Kirwan [17]) consider simile to be a version of metaphor. Correspondingly, the difference between simile and metaphor is often said to be unimportant, as in Booth [6] and Wheelwright [30]. Again, few writers have given considerable elaboration on this point. Are the differences between the two figures really insignificant? This paper will seek to work out this question as well.

II. IDENTIFICATION OF METAPHORS

The first issue to be dealt with is the identification of English metaphors and similes. What do these two figures look like? What kind of English expressions are counted as metaphors or similes?

In a recent paper [25] I have proposed that a metaphoric expression should be conceived as a syntactically acceptable piece or stretch of language of which at least one constituent cannot be taken literally and of which the intended meaning as a whole is based on an analogy. Note that there are three main points in this working definition—syntactic acceptability, nonliterality, and analogy. By a piece of language is meant a word, a phrase, or a sentence, and by a stretch of language is meant a number of sentences (the extended metaphor). In short, it can be taken to be a segment of discourse. Nonliterality presupposes that the speaker/writer does not mean what he says/writes. And analogy refers to similarity between two unlike things or two unlike states of affairs, one of which is called the ‘theme’ and the other the ‘vehicle’.

As far as its underlying conceptual structure is concerned, a metaphor is a way of conceiving or presenting one thing or one state of affairs (the theme) in terms of another (the vehicle). Here are some examples:

- (1) the incredible spider-woman of the Alps.
[a compound word; theme = woman; vehicle = spider]
- (2) An encounter with tenderness. (ad for Mild Seven)
[a noun phrase; theme = tenderness; vehicle = a person]
- (3) He sat there, eating her up with his eyes.
[a nonfinite clause; theme = looking at her; vehicle = eating her up]
- (4) You are my sunshine.
[a sentence; theme = you; vehicle = my sunshine]
- (5) Religion is the opium of the people. (Karl Max)
[a sentence; theme = relation between opium and opium smokers; vehicle = relation between religion and believers]
- (6) For a good tree does not bear bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. (*Bible*, Luke 6: 43)
[a sentence; a possible theme in an appropriate situational context = a good father does not have bad children...; vehicle = a good tree does not bear bad fruit...]

III. IDENTIFICATION OF SIMILES

A simile is a sentence or clause that draws an analogy between the theme and the vehicle, which are linked by what might be called a ‘comparison marker’. In a simile the theme is presented in terms of the vehicle. And comparison markers are such expressions as *like*, *as*, *as...as*, *as if*, *as though*, and *more...than*. Occasionally, *resemble*, *analogous to*, *akin to*,



and *seem* can also serve as comparison markers. The explicit presence of a comparison marker makes a simile easier to identify than a metaphor. Consider the following examples:

- (7) My love is like a red, red rose.
[theme = my love; vehicle = a red rose]
- (8) I don't know what's wrong with me. It's like I've got rocks in my arms.
- (9) She began to shake like jelly.
- (10) A meal without wine is like a day without sunshine.
- (11) Going out on a rainy day with no umbrella is like taking a shower with no Wilson soap - you only get wet.
- (12) As fuel can power an engine, so can affection motivate cognition.
- (13) M'Bow runs the Secretariat as if it were a personal fief.
- (14) I wandered lonely as a cloud.
[theme = I wandered; vehicle = a cloud wandered]
- (15) You will be glad you're flying smooth as silk.
(Thai Airways International)
- (16) The other men in the car were scattered along the wall, their dusty faces as empty as their pockets.
- (17) He is slier than a fox.
- (18) She was beaten by unseeded Julie Harlard of France, 6-3, 2-3, 6-3, in a second-round match that had more ups and downs than a roller-coaster.
- (19) Long-term memory is practically limitless, resembling a huge library with millions of books on its shelves.
- (20) It was soul-destroying work, akin to digging a hole and then filling it in again.

More often than not, a simile is expressed via a whole sentence as exemplified by (7)-(14). A simile also tends to appear in a clause, as shown in (15), (16) and (18).

The theme of a simile generally precedes the vehicle. And yet the theme might also follow the vehicle, as in (11), in which the vehicle *going out on a rainy day with no umbrella* is moved into initial position to achieve end focus on the theme of the simile *having a shower with no Wilson soap*.

Between the theme and vehicle there are one or more similar features or aspects - traditionally called 'the ground' - that serve to modify the theme. The ground can be explicitly stated. For instance, in (14) the ground is *lonely* and in (11) the ground is *you only get wet*, both of which are put into words. When the comparison marker *like*, *as if*, or *as though* occurs in a simile, it is most likely that the ground is merely implied rather than verbalized, as in (7)-(10) and (12)-(13). Such a ground has to be inferred from the linguistic or situational context or both.

IV. SIMILARITIES BETWEEN SIMILES AND METAPHORS

Two classical views - both are variants of the comparison view of metaphor - emphasize the similarities between simile and metaphor. The first view is derived from Aristotle [2]: simile is a kind of metaphor since both of the two figures are based on comparison. With such a predication as *to be like*, a simile is said to develop from a metaphor. The view is still influential now. Some contemporary writers (e.g., Davis et al. [10], Hawkes [14]) treat simile as a subclass of metaphor.

The second view probably originated from Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria* (viii, vi, 8; cited in Burkhardt [7]). From then on it has often been claimed that metaphor is an elliptical simile, as in Miller [21]. Thus the relationship between simile and metaphor as conceived by Aristotle is reversed: metaphor is a subclass of simile instead. These two views imply that simile and metaphor have something in common in essence.

In the previous two sections I have tried to show that simile and metaphor are both figures of analogy. Each of the underlying analogical structures of the two figures contains a theme and a vehicle. The former is conceived or presented in terms of the latter. For the underlying structure to be analogical, the theme and vehicle must be two essentially unlike things or states of affairs. However unlike the two things are, there must be some similarity between them. The analogical similarity is the 'ground' of a simile or metaphor. But how unlike should the two things be to make a figurative analogy? The following examples can help to make this point clear:

- (21) John runs as fast as Peter.
(22) John runs as fast as a deer.
(23) John runs as fast as a strong wind.
(24) John runs as fast as redness.

Our intuitions tell us that (22) and (23) are similes but (21) and (24) are very hard to contextualize as similes. The subject *John* in (22) is a specific human being, while *a deer* in (22) refers to any representative member of the class *deer*, which are a sort of wildlife. It should be apparent that there is considerable semantic difference between these two expressions. Thus the proper noun *John* with unique denotation versus the noun phrase *a deer* with generic denotation satisfies the condition that the theme (e.g., *John runs* in (22)) and the vehicle (e.g., *a deer runs* in (22)) should be unlike in a figurative analogy. The same is also the case with (23).

But why should the theme and vehicle be two unlike things? My explanation is that, if the two things are too



similar, they will have too many features or aspects in common, so one or some similarities will have to be selected from among too many, thus hindering the analogical reasoning required for comprehension of the figure.

According to my data, if the vehicle of a figurative analogy is a count noun, then that noun tends to take the indefinite article *a/an* used generically. This is a feature of simile and metaphor alike. Generic reference is preferred simply because it is more general. It will not involve any idiosyncrasies, typical of a specific referent, in analogical reasoning.

Turning next to (21), the two things compared are *John runs* and *Peter runs*. Not only do *John* and *Peter* both refer to a specific member of the class *human beings*, but they are both proper nouns with unique denotation. In other words, the categorical as well as referential differences between the two things likened are insufficient. Without sufficient disparity for a figurative analogy, it is almost impossible to contextualize (21) as a simile.

As to (24), which is very hard to contextualize as a simile as well, the problem lies not in deficient difference but in deficient similarity so that the analogical reasoning is hindered. In (24) the subject *John* denotes a concrete entity, whereas *redness* is an abstract attribute, which normally cannot be conceived as something that can run. Thus (24) is by no means a simile unless it can be reasonably contextualized and thus made sense of in a metaphysical poem or a work of science fiction.

Like metaphor, simile can also be extended through a number of sentences and elaborated further:

(25) Betting on friendship is like betting on the roulette wheel at a Las Vegas casino. If you want to give it a spin, you've gotta take your chances. Win, and you win big. Lose, and you will find yourself feeling flat. If you get burned too many times, you'd better walk away before you go bankrupt. Nobody knows what number the little ball will land on, but you sure ain't gonna win if you just stand on the side gawking at the game. (*Bilingual Weekly*, Oct. 2000, No. 85, p. 4)

Both simile and metaphor are based on analogy. The analogical structure makes it possible to transfer one field of reference to another. Therefore, simile and metaphor can both be extended over a number of sentences. Sometimes, the two figures can be mingled with each other, as in:

(26) My life is but a short and precious seed.

Like three seasons of life in a leaf on a tree.

And when I cascade to the ground, I will not done.

I will mingle with the earth and give life to roots again.

(Pop song 'Amen', performed by Paula Cole in 2000)

V. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SIMILES AND METAPHORS

As has been explicated previously, simile and metaphor are both based on analogy. Nevertheless, the underlying analogical structures of these two figures still differ very much. Some researchers (e.g., Stillman [26]) have noted that a simile makes an explicit comparison, while in metaphor the comparison is implied. The pity is that such formal divergences, as far as I am aware, have not been further explored closely. At this point I propose a closer examination of the disparities between the two figures in question in point of figurative analogy and linguistic representation.

First of all, in Shie [25] I have demonstrated that the theme and/or the vehicle may be covert in a metaphor. A covert theme or vehicle is not directly stated in the metaphoric utterance but can be inferred from the linguistic or situational context or both, as exemplified by the theme in (6) and the vehicle in (2). When the metaphoric analogy is proportional - as is the case in (5), where the metaphoric analogy can be rendered into 'as opium is to opium smokers, so is religion to people' - the theme as well as the vehicle is a relation between two things. Never directly phrased in metaphoric expressions, such proportional relations act as covert rather than overt theme or vehicle. By contrast, in a simile both the theme and vehicle are overt, or directly phrased, without any exceptions, as can be seen from (7)-(20).

Secondly, the ground - similarity between the theme and the vehicle - is always implicit in a metaphor, while the ground is always explicit (i.e., verbalized) in a simile containing the comparison marker *as* or *more...than*, as is the case in (14)-(18). When it comes to a simile with the comparison marker *like* (such as (7)-(10)), the ground is always implicit unless it is particularly spotlighted by an appended clause (as in (11)). Broadly stated, a simile with an explicit ground is easier to process than its corresponding metaphor, if any, in that there is extra cognitive demand for inferring the implicit ground of a metaphor.

Thirdly, as noted in Section II, a metaphoric expression is a segment of discourse. That is, a metaphor can be expressed in a single word, a noun phrase, a clause, a sentence, or a number of sentences. On the other hand, the minimal textual stretch of a simile, unless extended, is a sentence or clause. Baker-Gonzalez and Blau [4] describe similes as "phrases beginning with *like* or *as*." As I have observed, the phrases they refer to contain a comparison marker, the vehicle, and sometimes the ground. But outside the phrase beginning



with a comparison marker, the theme must be present within the same sentence/clause. Thus it is more accurate to describe a simile as occurring in a sentence/clause than to describe it as occurring in a phrase.

I have also noticed many compound adjectives resembling similes semantically, as in *I'm dog-tired*, *her pencil-thin legs*, and *the shark's razor sharp teeth*. But the sentences/clauses where these compound adjectives occur do not contain a comparison marker. For that reason, they should not be counted as similes. Other borderline cases can be found in a noun phrase containing a compound adjective with *like* as its second element, as in *the animal-like behavior*, *an Eden-like world*, and *a dream-like house*. We might as well view these compounds as products of lexicalization of similes.

In short, a metaphor occurs in a segment of discourse and a simile in a sentence/clause. Owing to this difference in linguistic representation, as well as those in analogy discussed above, we sometimes cannot translate a metaphor into its corresponding simile. For instance, if one addresses another by such a nickname as *Rock*, the one-word utterance *Rock* is a metaphoric utterance, but cannot be translated into its corresponding simile, if any. It is probable that only a sentential/clausal metaphor with an overt theme and vehicle can be adequately rendered into a simile. Therefore, the traditional view of metaphor as elliptical simile seems untenable in this regard.

Another significant difference can be found if we compare the two figures in question from the angle of literality: The linguistic representation of simile is 'literal' use of language; metaphor, by contrast, always involves 'nonliteral' use of language.

In related literature, similes are sometimes described as literal (as in Chen [8], Hawkes [14]) and sometimes as nonliteral (as in Cooper [9], Richards, Platt and Platt [24]). I believe similes are produced through literal use of language for the simple reason that each word in a simile is used in a conventional way, defined syntactically and semantically in dictionaries. The use of the comparison marker (*like*, *as*, etc.) implies that the two things compared are not the same or identical, so it is reasonable to say that the comparison marker is still used literally. Besides, in a simile there is neither semantic anomaly in phrasing, nor patent falsehood in statement, nor pragmatic incongruity or irrelevance in utterance form, all of which signal figurative nonliterality (cf. Shie [25]). In other words, the speaker means what he says in uttering a simile.

Of the writers who characterized similes as nonliteral, few gave any support to or elaborated on their view of similes

as nonliteral statements. However, Ortony [23] drew a line between "similes" and "ordinary statements of comparison". To illustrate the difference he furnished the following examples:

(27) Encyclopedias are like dictionaries.

(28) Encyclopedias are like gold mines.

Ortony believed that (27) is true and that people are more likely to say that (28) is false. Thus he termed such statements as (27) "literal comparison" and such statements as (28) "nonliteral comparison". However, this argument does not seem to support the view that similes are nonliteral, for the truth value of a statement is not necessarily an evidence for literal or nonliteral use of language. Lying is a case in point. When one tells a lie, what he says is not true but is usually literal.

I think the terms 'literal comparison' and 'nonliteral comparison' are useful. But they are apt to cause the misunderstanding that what Ortony calls non-literal comparison entails non-literal use of language. In my opinion, such a comparison as (27) is OBJECTIVE in nature. It examines two things to see how they are alike or, if the comparison marker *more...than* is used instead, how they are different. By contrast, a simile is ASSIMILATIVE in nature, likening two basically unlike things. In fact, 'assimilative comparison' is equivalent to what we have been calling 'analogy' in this paper.

Simile and metaphor are both assimilative in terms of comparison. What is different between the two is that, while simile likens two unlike things, metaphor identifies one thing with another. Suppose an old woman, after finishing her first book, says, 'This book is my child.' The metaphoric statement would sound as if she does not have any children that are human beings. If she uses a simile instead: 'This book is like my child,' it will be also likely that the old woman has one or more children. For in the simile the theme and vehicle are treated as two separate things, but in the metaphor the two are spoken of as the same thing or treated as if they were the same thing. The metaphor identifies *the book* with *my child*, indicating that *the book* has ALL the properties of a mother's child as perceived by the mother. The simile likens *the book* to *my child*, meaning that *the book* has SOME properties of the mother's child. Thus Kennedy and Chiappe [16] hold that a metaphor allows us to pretend that X has all the properties of Y, but a simile does not allow the pretense.

The last difference is that a simile always contains a comparison marker (i.e., *like*, *as*, etc.) that demonstrates the presence of a theme and a vehicle compared, but no such markers can be found in a metaphor. The occurrence or absence of a comparison marker is significant here both



linguistically and functionally. Providing empirical evidence for a nonequivalence view of simile and metaphor, Aisenman [1] strongly suggests that “similes are the preferred linguistic representation for mapping attributive predicates, whereas metaphors are favored for mapping relational predicates.” According to Aisenman [1], attributive predicates are one-place predicates (e.g., X is straight), whereas relational predicates are n-place predicates (e.g., X is used to transfer Y to Z).

A metaphoric expression always involves nonliteral use of language. If we add an adequate comparison marker to a metaphoric statement in which both of the theme and vehicle are overt (e.g., *You are my sunshine*), the resulting statement will become literal (*You are like my sunshine*). It follows that the comparison marker is what causes the literality of a simile.

A comparison marker shows the presence of a comparison. But comparison can be objective or assimilative. When one sees a comparison marker in any other simile than such a cliché as *he works like a dog*, he/she has to determine whether the comparison is objective or assimilative in making sense of the simile. On the other hand, all metaphoric analogies are assimilative. Once a metaphor is recognized, there is no need to judge whether the analogy is objective or not. This is one of the reasons why similes (such as (16)) are sometimes harder to process than a plain metaphor in which the theme and vehicle are both overt (e.g. *His father is such a baby*).

Similes are trivially true, but most metaphors are patently false, as Davidson [11] noted. In consequence, “metaphor is much more dynamic than simile.” (Wales [29]). The patency of a living metaphor’s truth value - either patently true (as in *No man is an island*) or patently false (as in *That man is a dog*) - makes the reader/hearer go beyond the literal meaning and search for a figurative interpretation of the metaphoric expression. The triviality of the truth value of a simile lies in a comparison marker, such as *like* or *as*. As long as a writer/speaker can find a similitude between two different things, he/she can compare one to the other via a comparison

marker and means what he/she says.

VI. CONCLUSION

In the previous sections we have analyzed the linguistic and analogical structures of English similes and metaphors. What these two English figures have in common is an analogical constitution. However, in their analogical and linguistic representation, the two figures show remarkable distinctions, which are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 shows the extent to which the analogy (or assimilative comparison) is implicit in metaphor in contrast to simile. The analogical structure of metaphor diverges markedly from that of simile in constitution. As Hatch and Brown [13] remark, “when we use a simile we call attention to the fact that we are asking the listener or reader to consider X as similar to Y.... We make the comparison explicit by asking that there be a transfer of characteristics of Y to X.” In other words, the analogy displayed in a simile is more explicit than that in a metaphor. Furthermore, there is quite a contrast between the two figures with regard to linguistic stretch, predication, and pragmatic behavior. Accordingly, the differences between simile and metaphor are significant, which discredits the view of metaphor as a kind of simile or simile as a kind of metaphor. Morgan [22] mentioned that a metaphor can be asserted while the corresponding simile can be denied at the same time, as in: “John’s not just like a tree, he is a tree.” For all these reasons we can say that one of these two figures is not just an analogical or linguistic variant of the other. Simile and metaphor should be conceived as two distinct figures which differ more than just in the presence or absence of a comparison marker.

Simile and metaphor are ubiquitous in languages. It is hoped that the results of this study could more or less be applied to the language class. An effective lesson on these two figures can improve not only students’ language skills but their reasoning capabilities as well. If some nature and reality of these two figures have been reflected in this study, then

Table 1. Differences between Similes and Metaphors

<i>points of differences</i>	<i>similes</i>	<i>metaphors</i>
analogical theme	always overt	overt or covert
analogical vehicle	always overt	overt or covert
analogical ground	explicit or implicit	always implicit
comparison marker	present	absent
linguistic stretch	a sentence/clause	a segment of discourse
predication	likening	identification
pragmatic behavior	literal	nonliteral



Table 1 can be adopted or adapted for a language lesson on simile and metaphor.

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