

The Semiotic Structure and Semantic Composition of English Frozen Similes

JIAN-SHIUNG SHIE

*Department of the English Language, DaYeh University
No. 112, Shanjiao Rd., Dacun, Changhua, Taiwan 51591, R.O.C.*

ABSTRACT

In traditional rhetoric, similes form an independent category of tropes. And English frozen similes are frequently treated as a subset of idioms. This article explores English frozen similes on the basis of all the similes (221 altogether) in *Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms* (1998). Addressed in terms of the semiotic topic-vehicle approach are the semiotic structure of English frozen similes and their semantic compositionality. Two conclusions are drawn from this study. First, the iconic structure of English frozen similes generally involves attribution of feature(s) from the semiotic vehicle to the theme. One interesting finding in this regard is that more than half of English frozen similes attribute nonhuman features to human beings, whereas personifying similes are few and far between. Second, English frozen similes, by virtue of the interaction between the semiotic theme and vehicle, show a high degree of semantic compositionality, and their linguistic constituents display a low degree of fixedness. Thus it is questionable to subsume English frozen similes within the general category of idioms.

Key Words: English frozen similes, idioms, semiotic structure, semantic composition, theme, vehicle, analogy

英語習用明喻之符號結構與語意合成

謝健雄

大葉大學英美語文學系
彰化縣大村鄉山腳路 112 號

摘要

明喻在傳統修辭學中自成一類辭格，而學者常將英語習用明喻歸類為一種慣用語。本文探討 *Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms* (1998) 中之所有英語習用明喻，共二百二十一例，運用符號本喻體之取徑來析論英語習用明喻之象似符號結構、語意合成性。結果獲得兩項結論。第一，英語習用明喻之象似類比結構大多有從喻體到本體之特色移用現象，這方面之重要發現是：約過半的英語習用明喻有擬物之情形，而擬人之例子極為少見。第二，英語習用明喻由於其象似符號成份之互動，展現相當高度之語意組合性，且其概念、語言成份顯示相當低度之固定性，因此把英語習用明喻歸類為一種慣用語是有問題的。



關鍵詞：英語習用明喻，慣用語，符號結構，語意合成，象似本體，象似喻體，類比

I. INTRODUCTION

Similes form an independent category of tropes in traditional rhetoric (cf. 黃慶萱, 2002; 黃麗貞, 2004; Leech, 1969; Miller, 1979). A simile explicitly compares two essentially unlike things by using such constructional elements as *like* and *as*. Paradoxically, a simile asserts likeness between two unlike things, or denies likeness if the proposition of the comparison is a negative one. Typical idioms are multi-word expressions whose meanings cannot be predicted from knowledge of the meanings of their component parts. Semantic opacity or non-compositionality is the feature most often ascribed to idioms (as in 何永清, 2005; 馬學良, 1985; Aitchison, 1987; Chomsky, 1965; Fillmore, Kay, & O'Connor, 1988; Gramley & Patzold, 1992; Grant & Bauer, 2004; Jackendoff, 1975; O'Grady, 1998). Quite a few authors treat or identify similes as a type of idiom (e.g., Cooper, 1998; Fernando, 1996; Gibbs, 1994; Kovecses & Szabo, 1996; McCarthy, 1998; McCarthy & Walter, 1998b; Smith, 1925; Sonomura, 1996). In a similar vein, Coulmas (2001) describes similes as a type of formulaic expression.

As a matter of fact, the similes supposed to be idioms are frozen similes although they are not always clearly defined as frozen in the literature pertaining to idioms. A frozen simile, as in *He is busy as a bee*, has been used so frequently with a particular meaning that it has been absorbed into everyday language usage and its novelty (i.e., new coupling of two unlike things for comparison) and characteristic flavor have diminished. Since frozen similes have everyday usages, they are included in dictionaries. Thus by the term 'frozen similes' here is meant similes that can be found in ordinary English dictionaries, including dictionaries of idioms.

This article investigates English frozen similes on the basis of corpus data, taking a semiotic topic-vehicle approach to the analysis of similes. The focus of investigation is on the semiotic structure of English frozen similes and their semantic composition. The data for this study is a corpus of 221 frozen similes drawn from *Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms* (1998). They are all the similes in the dictionary. The dictionary has been used as the source of data for two reasons. First, the dictionary covers current British, American, and Australian idioms, including frozen similes. Second, it contains thousands of example sentences based on The Cambridge International Corpus. Thus the frozen similes taken from the dictionary can be viewed as a reliable, albeit relatively small, corpus of naturally occurring data. A simile compares two essentially unlike things, with one expressed in

the subject position and the other in the predicate. Given that a simile is a kind of proposition, the minimal piece of language that represents a simile should be a sentence or clause (Bredin, 1998; Shie, 2004). Therefore, the frozen similes in the corpus for this study have to be complete sentences or clauses.

The 221 similes for this study were drawn by the author of the present paper in person, who searched the whole dictionary by hand to identify English frozen similes according to the characterization of similes presented in the following section.

The structure of the present paper is as follows. In section II, we shall have an overview of the semiotic topic-vehicle approach to simile and metaphor. Section III explores the semiotic structure of English frozen similes in terms of the semiotic topic-vehicle approach. And in section IV, we try to elucidate the semantic composition of English frozen similes by examining the fixedness and semantic compositionality of both linguistic constituents and semiotic elements of English frozen similes. Section V is the conclusion.

II. THE SEMIOTIC TOPIC-VEHICLE APPROACH TO SIMILE AND METAPHOR

The semiotic topic-vehicle approach is constructed by the author of the present paper to account for English tropes, drawing on relevant views and insights that come from semiotics (古添洪, 1999; 吳曉, 1995; 謝健雄, 2005, 2006; de Saussure, 1974; Eco, 1984; Peirce, 1955) and the interaction theory (Black, 1962; Richards, 1936). Our perception and representation of the world are built upon signs, which constitute systems of verbal and nonverbal communication. A sign is composed of two inseparable parts: the signifier and the signified (de Saussure, 1974). The signifier is a semiotic vehicle expressing the sign, such as a picture and a piece of language, while the signified is the concept that signifier evokes in our mind. Three types of signs can be distinguished: symbols, indexes, and icons (Peirce, 1955). A symbol represents its signified by convention. For instance, the word *smoke* is a symbolic sign of smoke resulting from the burning of organic material. The word is associated with the concept arbitrarily. An index points out or stands for something in existential relation to its signified. Thus smoke is an index of fire. And an icon resembles its signified, as is the case in which a picture of a gust of smoke represents the image of that gust of smoke.

The major tropes in English include simile, metaphor,



and metonymy. Within the semiotic topic-vehicle approach, personification is taken as a type of metaphor, and synecdoche as a subset of metonymy. All these tropes can be treated as a sign on the ground that they have the underlying dualistic structure of a sign. They all have a signifying vehicle (viz. the figurative signifier) that represents the figurative topic (viz. the figurative signified). Where simile and metaphor are concerned, both of them are iconic signs built on an analogy between a semiotic theme and its vehicle.

Peirce (1958) was the first semiotician who treated metaphor as a sign. He identified three types of iconic signs: images (e.g., a portrait), diagrams (e.g., a floor plan), and metaphors. Peirce did not further elaborate on the concept of metaphor as an iconic sign. Neither did he mention simile in his writing on icons. And yet we can conceptualize simile as an iconic sign. In accordance with the semiotic topic-vehicle approach, the dualistic conceptual structure of simile or metaphor comprises a semiotic theme and a vehicle. This is in line with Richards' (1936, p. 93) statement that "when we use a metaphor we have two thoughts of different things active together and supported by a single word, or phrase, whose meaning is a resultant of their interaction." Specifically, the semiotic theme is the purport or concept representing the figurative topic, and the vehicle is (i) an image that signifies the theme or (ii) a qualifying concept or entity for the theme. Between the theme and the vehicle there exists an analogy. In virtue of the analogy, the vehicle highlights certain features of the theme while the theme depresses or downplays less contextually pertinent features of the vehicle. Meaning is thus extended from the vehicle to the theme on the part of language. The theme and the vehicle may be (but need not be) a whole conceptual domain, a general field, or a complex system, as is the case in which one metaphorizes human beings as plants. The theme and vehicle may also be something specific, as in *My girlfriend is a red rose*. As dyadic elements of a metaphorical sign, the theme and the vehicle are not always put into words in a verbal metaphor. Both of them may be overt (i.e., directly expressed in language) or covert (i.e., unexpressed in language but inferable from the textual or situational context). Take as an example the metaphorical icon expressed in the following sentence:

- (1) The losing team walked off with their tails between their legs.

The situational context in which (1) is uttered makes it clear that the metaphorical theme is 'the losing team' and that the vehicle is 'animals having legs and a tail,' such as dogs. In the context, the vehicle highlights some features of the theme, such as 'being ashamed' and 'being embarrassed.' On the

other hand, since the theme of the metaphor is limited in the signifying context, it depresses or downplays less contextually pertinent features of the vehicle, such as 'having fur.' It is noticeable that the theme here is overt, while the vehicle is covert.

In respect of conceptual representation, simile does not differ much from metaphor. They are both iconic signs. What have been said about the semiotic structure of metaphor so far in this section is applicable to simile as well. But three major differences can be discerned in their linguistic signification. First, the theme and the vehicle of a simile are always linked by a comparison marker such as *like*, *as*, and *more than*, but no comparison marker occurs in a metaphor. Second, metaphorical signification results in semantic extension of some words or phrases, as is the case with (1), where the iconic sign allows the speaker to carry over the word *team* from where it normally occurs to a context in which it is not usually found. Thus the range of the sense of the word *team* is extended to cover, at least temporarily, the sense of 'a group whose members have a tail.' On the other hand, every word in a simile is used in its normal or literal sense. The comparison marker (such as *like* and *as*) suggests that the theme and the vehicle are not identical but similar in certain respects. Finally, of the two semiotic elements of a metaphor (viz. the theme and the vehicle), one may be overt and the other may be covert. But this is impossible when it comes to simile. In most cases, the two semiotic elements of a simile are both overt. Occasionally, they are both covert, as in:

- (2) Here comes the bride, like a lamb to the slaughter.

The covert theme of the simile expressed in (2) is 'the relationship between the bride and the groom,' and the covert vehicle 'the relationship between a lamb and a lamb slaughter.'

In the forgoing we have presented relevant main points of the semiotic topic-vehicle approach. Taking this approach we shall explore the semiotic structure of English frozen similes in the following section.

III. THE SEMIOTIC STRUCTURE OF ENGLISH FROZEN SIMILES

In the light of the semiotic topic-vehicle approach, a simile is an iconic sign built on an analogy between the theme and the vehicle. The theme and the vehicle have one or more features in common – known as 'the ground' – that function to qualify the theme. The term 'features' is used after Ortony (1993), referring to parts of the knowledge representations of what are being compared. The ground is viewed as the highlighted feature(s) on the part of the theme and the functioning feature(s) on the part of the vehicle. These



features, as noted in the previous section, come to the fore through the interaction of the theme and the vehicle in the textual and situational context. Thus in the simile *Your hands are as cold as ice*, *your hands* is the theme, *ice* the vehicle, and ‘coldness’ the ground. The ground of a simile, especially one with the comparison marker *like*, may also be covert, without being verbalized in the simile, as in *Your hands are like ice*. In the following discussion, we shall have an overview of aspects of themes and then examine various signifying vehicles of English frozen similes.

Of the 221 similes in the corpus for this study, thirty-one represent special formal features of entities, namely features relating to the outward forms or structures of the themes, such as the following:

- (3) These cars are built like tanks.
- (4) I had to cycle home in the rain and came in looking like a drowned rat.
- (5) You can tell they’re brothers at a glance. They are like two peas in a pod.
- (6) She used to be as thin as a stick.
- (7) You can’t possibly go to school like that. You look like something the cat dragged in.

Represented in each of these similes is the special appearance of the theme. For example, the word *tanks* in (3) represents the marked features of the theme *these cars*: They are big and strong. And by saying (4), the speaker characterizes his/her own outward aspect in terms of the vehicle *a drowned rat*, suggesting that his/her clothes are soaking wet. The point to be noted in this connection is that only the feature(s) of the vehicle relevant to the theme in the context are used to portray the theme. Thus, as a feature of a drowned rat, ‘having been suffocated’ does not characterize the theme in (4). By the same token, ‘having the function of combat,’ granted that it is a feature of the signifying vehicle *tank* in (3), does not qualify the theme *these cars* either.

Eighty-one similes in the corpus for this study attribute special features to participants of a single or recurrent dynamic state of affairs (e.g., an event, activity, and the like). In each of these similes, the participants are treated as the theme. And the features highlighted are of the ways in which the participants act or behave, as in:

- (8) We get on very well as adults but as kids we fought like cat and dog.
- (9) That new stain remover worked like magic.
- (10) I’ve tried to discuss my feelings with her, but it’s like talking to a brick wall.

- (11) Beating them was the easiest thing in the world. It was as easy as taking candy from a baby.
- (12) Quick as a flash, he snatched the book and ran out of the room.

In each of these examples, the semiotic theme and the vehicle are different participants of the same type of event/activity (as in (8)-(10)) or participants of two different kinds of events/activities (as in (11)-(12)). Features of the theme in the context of the dynamic state of affairs are highlighted. For example, a fight between a dog and a cat is supposed to be violent. In the simile in (8), this feature is attributed to the kids in quarrels.

Forty-six similes in the corpus portray properties and sixty-three similes represent states of the themes. Here are some examples:

- (13) The supervisor has eyes like a hawk, so be careful she doesn’t catch you eating at your desk.
- (14) So much furniture these days is so flimsy. This table here was made a hundred years ago and it’s solid as a rock.
- (15) She was as bright as a button, always asking questions and quick to help.
- (16) Give him a room full of old books and he’s like a child in a sweetshop.
- (17) He lived like a king for six months, drinking champagne and driving a Porsche, until the money finally ran out.
- (18) Don’t just sit there like a bump on a log. Come and help us!

In (13)-(15), a property of the theme is highlighted. Thus brought to the fore is one property of the theme in (13): the supervisor’s property of being keen-eyed. And in (16)-(18), the theme is pictured as being in a certain state. Thus the vehicle *a child in a sweetshop* in (16) represents the happy and excited state of the person referred to.

Table 1 sums up aspects of themes highlighted in the 221 frozen similes for this study.

A formal feature might as well be thought of either as an inherent property or as an interim state of an entity. And yet a

Table 1. Aspects of themes highlighted in English frozen similes

aspects of themes highlighted	no. of similes	percentage of the similes (total = 221)
formal features	31	14.0%
action/behavior	81	36.7%
properties	46	20.8%
states	63	28.5%



sizable group of English frozen similes are used to present formal features, which accordingly deserve to form a category apart in Table 1. Generally speaking, frozen simile are used to express a particular feeling or attitude, such as annoyance, disapproval, admiration, humor, and exaggeration. For example, *to fight like cat and dog* has more affective emphasis than *to argue violently*. Actions, behavior, formal features, properties, and states are aspects of communicative themes that are affectively highlighted via the use of English frozen similes.

Having briefly surveyed the themes of English frozen similes, let us turn to their signifying vehicles now. The vehicle of a simile is an icon through which the theme is represented or understood. English frozen similes take a wide range of vehicles, which can be grouped into eight conceptual classes: humans, nonhuman animals, plants, objects, substances or materials, abstractions, states of affairs (e.g., events, activities, etc), and a miscellany. Examples of the eight kinds of vehicles can be seen in the following similes, in which vehicle terms are underlined:

- (19) He came in drunk and swearing like a trooper. (a human)
- (20) Christine is one of those lucky people who can eat like a pig and still stay thin. (a nonhuman animal)
- (21) It's been a long drive but give me a cup of tea and I'll soon feel fresh as a daisy. (a plant)
- (22) She's 89 and as deaf as a post. (an object)
- (23) You can tell from the way she talks. She's as common as muck. (a substance or material)
- (24) That dog of his is as ugly as sin. (an abstraction)
- (25) She said writing stories was as easy as falling off a log for her. (a state of affair)
- (26) You won't have any problems assembling your new bed. It's as easy as abc. (a miscellaneous vehicle)

The occurrence frequency of the eight types of vehicles in the corpus for this study is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Occurrence frequency of eight types of vehicles in English frozen similes

vehicle type	no. of similes with this type of vehicle	percentage of the similes (total = 221)
humans	19	8.6%
nonhuman animals	60	27.1%
plants	8	3.6%
objects	68	30.8%
substances/materials	20	9.1%
abstractions	4	1.8%
states of affairs	31	14.0%
miscellany	11	5.0%

It is arguable that many English tropes form a figure or project an image. As one of the major tropes in English, similes are no exception. In particular, English frozen similes represent formal features, behavior, properties, or states of a theme with a concrete vehicle, something tangible or perceptible. This strong tendency can be seen from the occurrence frequency of various vehicles in Table 2. Only four instances (1.8%) of frozen similes in the corpus use something abstract as their vehicles. An immense majority of the vehicles in the corpus are something concrete, congruous with producing a specific image.

As we have already seen in Section II, signs, on which our perception and representation of the world are grounded, constitute systems of verbal communications. The semiotic theme of an English frozen simile is the purport or concept representing the figurative topic, and the vehicle is an image or concept that signifies the theme. For the purpose of signification and communication, it is more accessible for a concrete vehicle to signify an abstract theme than for an abstract vehicle to signify an abstract theme. This provides a motivation for the fact that an immense majority of English frozen similes use a concrete vehicle to signify their themes.

It can also be observed that as many as sixty similes in the corpus make use of an animal image to qualify the theme. A further examination shows that all but four of the sixty similes' themes are human beings, as is the case with (20). In other words, these fifty-six similes with an animal vehicle are instances of depersonification – the attribution of nonhuman features to human beings. Such similes are most frequently humorous and derogatory expressions, mirroring the conceptualization of nonhuman animals as being inferior to humans from time immemorial. The likening of humans to nonhuman animals, which may be ascribed to perceptions of parallels between particular types of human and animal behavior, have ancient, religious, or literary origins (cf. Spence, 2001).

Furthermore, as shown in Table 2, as many as sixty-eight similes in the corpus contain an object vehicle. A further survey has found that, of the sixty-eight similes, forty-five are used to present a human theme, as is the case with (22). Therefore, the forty-five similes are instances of depersonification as well. It is also noticeable that in the corpus there are twenty similes that take a vehicle term referring to a substance or material. And among these twenty similes, twelve portray a human theme, as is the case with (23). Taken together, at least 113, or more than half of the similes in the corpus are instances of depersonification.

We can use 'the Great Chain of Being,' a folk theory or



cultural model advanced by Lakoff and Turner (1989), to account for instances of depersonification in English frozen similes. As mentioned earlier, one of the major functions of English frozen similes is to suggest a particular feeling or attitude of the simile user toward the theme, including in particular ridicule, disapproval, and annoyance. According to the theory of the Great Chain of Being, we think of humans as higher beings than animals, animals as higher than plants, and plants as higher than inanimate substances. The position of a being depends on its highest property. In other words, the scale of beings embodies a scale of properties. An inanimate substance may have a part-whole functional structure. A plant has a part-whole functional structure and life. An animal has instinctual behavior, in addition to a part-whole functional structure and life. And humans have all these properties plus highest capabilities for abstract reasoning, aesthetics, morality, and the like. At any level in the Great Chain of Being, the highest properties of beings characterize those beings at that level. For instance, animals are characterized by their instinct. This folk theory further links properties to behavior. Thus higher-order properties lead to higher-order behavior; instinctual properties lead to instinctual behavior; and so on. Depersonification involves signification of humans in terms of nonhuman beings by attributing lower-order features to humans. Accordingly, the position of the humans in question is downgraded in the scale of beings. Such a disparaging process reflects the common demands for expressing our negative attitudes towards others.

On the other hand, only nineteen similes in the corpus for the present study take a vehicle term denoting a human. And yet all but four of the nineteen similes present a human theme, as is the case with (19). Putting it another way, only four similes in the whole corpus involves personification – the attribution of human features to what is not a human being. For example:

(27) Both books have been selling like gangbusters.

The foregoing discussion indicates that, only rarely does personification occur in English frozen similes, while depersonification is very common in them. This finding runs counter to cognitive linguists' observations of the frequent occurrences of personification in everyday discourse (as in Kovecses, 2002, p.35; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p.34; Turner, 1987, p.15). In fact, the anthropomorphous process of the human mind is neither unidirectional nor irreversible (Shie, 2004, Chap. 5). The many cases of depersonification in English frozen similes have demonstrated the reverse feature attribution from the nonhuman onto the human.

Another noteworthy point is that the vehicles of English

frozen similes are generally expressed in a noun or noun phrase with generic reference, as can be seen from most of the example similes we have cited so far. Since generic reference is used to denote the class or species generally, the vehicle term with generic reference involves only the common or prototypical features of the class members. If the vehicle term has specific denotation, then idiosyncratic features would complicate the signification process via the highlighting and downplaying of features. This is the reason why only sixteen similes in the corpus contain a vehicle that does not have generic denotation. The similes with a non-generic vehicle include examples such as the following:

(28) Of course Mark got a glowing report so he was sitting there grinning like the cat that got the cream.

(29) I've got a list as long as my arm of jobs to do.

(30) Our house is like Fort Knox with all these extra security locks.

(31) I was a young boy at the time so to me he looked as old as Methuselah but he was probably only in his sixties.

The vehicles of such similes have salient features in their respective contexts. Thus they are still suitable for triggering the feature attribution. In particular, the vehicles in (30) and (31) are proper names with unique denotation. Both of them have a salient feature. Methuselah was a very old character from the Bible who lived to be 969. And Fort Knox, known for its absolute security, is a military fort in Kentucky where the United States keeps its supplies of gold. Thus the functioning features of these vehicles are readily accessible.

The meaning of a frozen simile is built upon its dual semiotic structure. In the semiotic topic-vehicle approach, the feature attribution process is viewed as arising from the interaction between the theme and the vehicle in the context and leading to the iconicity of the trope. This suggests that the meanings of English frozen similes are not as opaque as non-compositional idioms. We shall address this issue in the following section.

IV. THE SEMANTIC COMPOSITION OF ENGLISH FROZEN SIMILES

This section focuses on the semantic composition of English frozen similes. We will argue that major linguistic constituents of an English frozen simile are largely compositional. As Heng (2003, p. 297) puts it:

...[A]n idiom is a succession of words whose meaning is not deducible from the individual meanings of the constituent words, but must be learnt as a whole. An idiom is a relatively fixed and institutionalized



expression functioning as a unit of meaning and characterized by strong collocational restriction.

Thus the semantic compositionality of an idiom is relative to the fixedness of its linguistic constituents. The comparison marker, the theme term, and the vehicle term are three linguistic constituents that bear an important part in the semantic composition of an English frozen simile. In the discussion that follows, we shall explore in turn the degree to which these three linguistic constituents are fixed in English frozen similes and then examine the linguistic constituents' semantic compositionality.

Every simile involves a comparison, which explicitly signals itself in the text with a comparison marker such as *like* and *as*. The occurrence of a comparison marker is a necessary condition of simile. This is in keeping with not only the semiotic topic-vehicle approach but also other accounts of simile (e.g., Arp, 1998, p.620; Leech, 1969, p.153; Nate, 2001; Richards & Schmidt, 2002, p.201; Thornborrow & Wareing 1998, p.99; Wales, 2001, p.358). There is a large number of expressions that can function as a comparison marker (cf. Fishelov, 1993). Comparison markers that appear in English similes in naturally occurring data include *like*, *as*, *more...than*, *as if*, *as though*, *resemble*, *akin to*, *seem*, and the like. And yet, only the first four comparison markers mentioned above can be found in the 221 English frozen similes for this study. Table 3 presents the occurrence frequency of the four comparison markers in the corpus for the present study.

As the data in Table 3 indicate, only five of the 221 frozen similes do not take the comparison marker *like* or *as*. It is interesting to note that the comparison markers in four of the five similes (i.e., *more...than* or *as if*) can be replaced by *like* or *as* without affecting the conventionality of the similes at all. For each of these four similes, juxtaposed in the entry of *Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms* are two frozen similes with different comparison markers, one of which is *like* or *as* and the other is *more...than* or *as if*. For instance, *as if there was/were no tomorrow* and *like there's no tomorrow* are juxtaposed in the dictionary as one entry. This means that comparison markers used in English frozen similes are

Table 3. Occurrence frequency of comparison markers in English frozen similes

comparison marker	no. of similes where the marker occurs	percentage of the similes(total = 221)
<i>like</i>	111	50.2%
<i>as</i>	105	47.5%
<i>more...than</i>	4	1.8%
<i>as if</i>	1	0.5%

primarily *like* and *as*. All the other simile markers are very marginal. This phenomenon tallies with characterizations of English similes in general in the literature: Simile is a comparison mostly by the use of *like* or *as* (as in Leech, 1969; Thornborrow & Wareing, 1998; Wales, 2001). Therefore, *like* and *as* are the most highly conventionalized comparison markers in English similes.

As noted earlier, the semantic compositionality of idioms is related to the fixedness of their linguistic constituents. Typical idioms show unitary meaning and are highly inflexible as far as their component words are concerned. Their lexical variations are out of the common run. Thus the idiomaticity of *kick the bucket* cannot survive if the article *the* in the idiom is substituted by *a* to form *kick a bucket*. On the other hand, frozen similes, frequently thought of as a subset of idioms, do not exhibit such a high degree of fixedness in that, among other things, their comparison markers are not frozen. To say that *Mary is gentle as a lamb* is to say that *Mary is like a lamb* in the same context.¹ And *Mary is gentle as a lamb* does not differ essentially from *Mary is gentler than a lamb* although the latter is more exaggerated than the former. Other things being equal, the paradigmatic replacement of one comparison marker by another does not change the semantic composition of a simile, be it fresh or frozen.

Neither is the theme term of a frozen simile fixed. A simile compares its theme to a signifying vehicle. The comparison takes one of the following propositional forms (adapted from Bredin, 1998): 'A is like B,' 'A is like B in respect of C,' 'A has as much of C as B has,' and 'A has a different quantity of C than B has,' where, in terms of the semiotic topic-vehicle approach, A stands for the theme, B for the vehicle, and C for the highlighted or functioning feature(s). Given that an English simile expresses a proposition that asserts an analogical relation between the theme and the vehicle, we cannot confine our discussion of simile to its predicate (e.g., *easy as taking candy from a baby*). The theme (e.g., *beating them*) is also an integral part of a simile. The main point to make here is that the theme term of what is often called a frozen simile is not frozen at all. The frozen predicate of a simile can modify or be affirmed concerning a range of themes rather than one single theme. Thus *easy as taking*

¹ As noted in the beginning of Section III, the common feature between the theme and the vehicle of a simile is known as 'the ground.' When the comparison marker *as* is used in a simile, the ground is overt (directly expressed in language, as in *He's as slippery as an eel*, and when *like* is used, the ground is usually covert (unexpressed in language but inferable from the textual or situational context, as in *He is like an eel*). Therefore, here in the main text we say *Mary is like a lamb* rather than *Mary is gentle like a lamb*.



candy from a baby can be used to qualify *beating someone*, *stealing someone's heart*, *taking advantage of someone*, and many more. Since the theme of a frozen simile is not fixed, it is unlikely that a whole frozen simile is drawn directly from memory. Analogical reasoning is still needed to consider whether a frozen predicate is applicable to a given theme. And normal grammatical processes have to apply to link up the subject and the predicate. In other words, the meaning of a whole frozen simile, unless it is proverbial, is compositional to a considerable degree.

The vehicle term is the most inflexible constituent in a frozen simile in the sense that the functioning feature of the vehicle, which activates the meaning of the simile, is usually fixed. For example, the fixed feature of the vehicle 'Methuselah' in (31) is oldness, which is invariably ascribed to the variable theme. And yet it is also possible, albeit relatively uncommon, that the vehicle of a frozen simile has a couple of features that can be ascribed to the theme. When this happens, the meaning of the vehicle term in relation to the theme term is still compositional. The simile in (20) is a case in point. According to *Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms* (1998), *eat like a dog* means 'eat a lot' or 'eat noisily and unpleasantly.' Each of these two features can be ascribed to the theme. But the context of the simile in (20), concerned with a woman's weight, makes it clear that the functioning feature of the vehicle *pig* is 'eating a lot' rather than 'eating noisily and unpleasantly.'

How do we verify that a linguistic constituent has a meaning to contribute to the global meaning of the complex expression to which it belongs? Such semantic contribution can be verified by "the recurrent contrast test" (Cruse, 2004, pp. 68-70): If one linguistic constituent of a complex expression can be substituted by another constituent that belongs to the same grammatical class and result in a different global meaning, then that constituent can be said to contribute an identifiable component of the global meaning of the complex expression. The rationale is that an expression cannot have meaning unless it was chosen from possible alternatives. From our previous discussions on the fixedness of the theme term in an English frozen simile, we can see that the theme term can pass the recurrent contrast test. And it is also possible for the vehicle term to pass the test. For example, the vehicle term *pig* in *John eats like a pig* can be substituted by *horse*, *bird*, and *tiger* and result in a different global meaning. *John eats like a pig*, *John eats like a horse*, and *John eats like a bird* are all frozen similes, which can be found in dictionaries. Granted that *John eats like a tiger* or *eat like a tiger* is not included in English dictionaries and hence

is not a frozen simile, it is still grammatical and acceptable if contextualized appropriately.

As to the comparison marker, it seems that the recurrent contrast test is not applicable. We have earlier noted that many English expressions can function as a comparison marker. And yet almost all English frozen similes contain *as* or *like* as its comparison marker (see Table 3). It is very difficult to find a substitute belonging to the same grammatical class for the comparison marker of a given frozen simile. For example, the comparison markers *like*, *as*, *as if*, *resemble*, and *akin to* do not belong to the same grammatical class in a strict sense. The only test for compositionality of the comparison marker that I can propose is one that applies to idioms: An idiom does not survive the substitution of its constituent elements by a synonym or near-synonym (Cruse, 2004, p.72). This feature of idioms is a consequence of the fact that idiom constituents have no meaning or that their meanings are not active independently. Thus the idiom *kick the bucket* does not survive the substitution of the word *pail* for *bucket*. On the other hand, the simile *It's like looking for a needle in a haystack* does survive the substitution of the comparison marker *akin to* for *like*. This suggests that, unlike a non-compositional constituent of an idiom, the comparison marker of a frozen simile has its own meaning, can be active independently, and, accordingly, makes a semantic contribution to the global meaning of the simile.

Taken together, the major linguistic constituents of an English frozen simile are largely compositional in the sense that they contribute significantly to the global meaning of the simile. They are not so inflexible as typical idioms. And analogical reasoning can play an important role in their comprehension. If we take semantic compositionality as a matter of degree, then English frozen similes lie far closer to the pole of compositionality than that of non-compositionality.

Having examined the compositionality of an English frozen simile's major linguistic constituents, let us now turn to the compositionality of its semiotic or conceptual elements. The intended propositional content of a simile, like that of a metaphor, is determined by the construction of analogy, namely the construction of selective similarity between unlike things that are otherwise dissimilar. Such analogy, arising between the semiotic theme and the vehicle, is compositional. More precisely, an English frozen simile is compositional by virtue of the analogical reasoning through which the meaning of the simile is derived from the interaction of its dual semiotic elements. The vehicle has a set of features, but only one or one subset of these features can be predicated of the theme. To reiterate, the vehicle signifies the theme by highlighting



certain features of the theme, while the theme, in combination with the context, depresses or downplays less contextually pertinent features of the vehicle. Consequently, the common feature or features that come to the fore (i.e. the ground of the simile) are ascribed to the theme. The highlighted feature may be put into words in a simile, especially when the comparison marker *as* is used. For example:

(32) It's so cold out there. The washing was as stiff as a board when I brought it in off the line.

In the above simile, the highlighted feature is stiffness, projected from the vehicle *a board* onto the theme *the washing*. The theme depresses or pushes into the background such features of the vehicle (*a board*) as 'woodiness' and 'rectangularity' because they are irrelevant to the theme in the context, while the contextually relevant feature of 'stiffness' of a board functions to highlight the special feature of the washing the speaker wants to represent. As such, this simile suggests that the washing is like a board only in respect of stiffness. The meaning of the simile is compositional in the sense that it is a function of all the semiotic elements and linguistic constituents. As we have already noted, the highlighted feature(s) may also be covert, especially when the comparison marker *like* is used and the vehicle appears in the position of a subject complement or object complement, as in:

(33) I don't know how you find anything in your desk, Polly.
It's like looking for a needle in a haystack.

In this example the highlighted feature is 'being extremely difficult or impossible to find.' Shadowed in the background are other features of the vehicle, such as 'needing to mind you do not prick your hands.' Granted that in the simile the highlighted feature is left unspecified, it can still be inferred from the context through analogical reasoning. More inference indicates that the meaning involved is more compositional.

The production or comprehension of the analogy of a simile involves the use of common knowledge or knowledge of the world associated with the vehicle. Such knowledge also contributes to the semantic composition of the whole frozen simile. Knowledge of this kind fleshes out the semiotic structure of an English frozen simile and makes the meaning of the simile predictable. For one thing, successful communication of the simile in (32) entails that the interlocutors know that a board is very stiff. For another, the fact that a needle is very small and a haystack is a large stack of hay contributes to effective acquisition or use of the simile in (33). Sometimes the common knowledge at work is derived from human culture or folklore belief, evidenced in such similes as:

(34) This woman was dancing in the road and singing very loudly. I thought she was mad as a March hare.

(35) I just presumed he'd got the job because he walked in here with a grin like a Cheshire cat.

(36) 'How does Stella feel about becoming a granny?' 'She's as pleased as a Punch.'

(37) With unemployment at record levels, plans for better advertising of job vacancies are a bit like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

(38) You've got a memory like an elephant.

(39) I found him wandering aimlessly around the hall like a lost soul.

The vehicles in (34) and (35) are allusions to Lewis Carroll's (1992) famous book *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. In the book, the March Hare is a character, a mad hare who talks nonsense (Summers et al., 1992, p. 811), and the Cheshire Cat is another character, who disappeared slowly until only its smile remained (ibid, p. 206). Representing the vehicle of a simile, these two proper names have been reclassified as a common noun. And the madness of the March Hare and the very wide simile of the Cheshire Cat are highlighted and form the analogical bases of the similes in (34) and (35) respectively. As to (36), the proper name *Punch* refers to a character in a traditional children's entertainment who is always happy and excited. Thus the analogy is quite obvious. And *the Titanic* in (37) is the name of a well-known gigantic passenger ship in both human history and literary works. In 1912 the Titanic hit an iceberg and sank. Therefore, 'rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic' can serve as an iconic sign of an activity or effort that will have no effect. Turning next to (38) and (39), the two similes have something to do with folklore belief. Elephants are considered to have good memories. Thus they can function as a vehicle to highlight a person's good memory. And a lost soul is believed to walk slowly without direction or purpose. Therefore a person wandering aimlessly can be analogized as a lost soul. All these cultural knowledge and folklore belief bear a part in the semantic composition of the frozen similes involved.

It is also worth pointing out that, in the corpus for this study, twenty-seven similes have an analogical ground overtly expressed by a polysemous word, which is used in two different but closely related senses simultaneously – one sense represents the functioning feature of the vehicle and the other signifies the highlighted feature of the theme. The following similes instantiate such two-sided analogy:

(40) When I asked him about his trip to Korea, he shut up like a clam.



(41) Winning the prize gave my self-confidence a tremendous boost; I felt as high as a kite for several days afterwards.

(42) As soon as I saw her, I knew it was bad news. She had a face as long as a wet week.

(43) 'Isn't she slightly strange, your aunt?' 'Oh, she's as nutty as a fruitcake.'

The ground of the simile in (40) is represented by the phrasal verb *shut up*. Modifying the subject, *shut up* means 'stop speaking,' but when associated with a clam, it means 'close up.' The two different but metaphorically related meanings contribute to the two-sided iconicity between the theme and the vehicle: The manner in which the person stopped speaking is similar to the way in which a clam closes its own shell for security. In a similar vein, the vehicle in (41) predicates the happiness of the speaker. Two metaphorically related meanings of the adjective *high* are at work simultaneously. On the one hand, it indicates the person's euphoria or excitement; on the other, it means a kite's being a great distance above the ground. Much the same can be said of (42) and (43). In a word, the two-sided iconicity exhibits subtle semantic composition of the frozen similes in question.

The semiotic structure of a simile sets a general pattern for the encoding or decoding of its meaning. Each element of the pattern – namely the comparison marker, the theme, the vehicle, and the functioning and highlighted features – makes an isolable contribution to the meaning of the simile. Therefore, the meaning of a simile is compositional. Broadly stated, such is also the case with frozen similes. As many as 202 similes in the corpus for this study, including (32)-(43), are compositional, given the analogical reasoning via the theme and the vehicle. Those who have not acquired or internalized these similes, when hearing or reading them for the first time, can attempt to process them compositionally and manage to decode their meanings. In contrast, only nineteen similes in the corpus for this study appear to be non-compositional in that there is no conceivable iconicity between the two things compared. Thus for average speakers these similes are relatively opaque. They were not excluded from the corpus on the ground that they all contain a comparison marker and involve a comparison between two unlike things. Relevant diachronic information about the origins or earliest uses of these nontypical similes might be able to reveal their iconic bases. Some examples of opaque similes without conceivable analogy or iconicity are given below:

(44) My Dad's nearly eighty, but he's as fit as a fiddle.

(45) I'll be as right as rain as soon as I take my pills.

(46) He hasn't got a criminal record. He's clean as a whistle.

(47) I don't know if it had anything to do with the wine we drank but I slept like a top.

The vehicles in (44) and (45) could have been motivated phonologically. The vehicle terms seem to have been chosen to form alliteration. Although *fit as a fiddle* and *right as rain* are pleasantly alliterative, their meanings are not compositional. The simile in (46) presupposes that a whistle is inherently clean, which, however, can hardly be verified by our experience or common knowledge. As to (47), a top, whether spinning or not, can be thought of as being analogous to a sleeping person in no imaginable situation. Despite the obscured analogy of such non-compositional similes, their vehicles could become, through frequent use, a well-established symbol of the feature they are associated with in their respective similes. Thus according to *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery* (de Vries, 1974, p.182), a fiddle has become a symbol of fitness due to the idiom *as fit as a fiddle*.

V. CONCLUSION

In this paper, an attempt has been made to elucidate the semiotic structure of English frozen similes and their semiotic composition. The major findings or conclusions can be stated as follows.

First, the dualistic semiotic structure of a frozen simile comprises the theme and the vehicle. By definition, the theme and the vehicle are essentially unlike things or states or affairs linked at the linguistic level by a comparison marker. The comparison marker signals an iconic relation between the theme and the vehicle. The theme is represented via the functioning feature(s) of the vehicle, brought forth as a result of the theme's suppression of the other features of the vehicle in the context. The functioning feature(s) of the vehicle in turn point to the iconic analogy – or the selective similarity – that is predicated of the theme. One interesting finding is that more than half of the frozen similes in the corpus for the present study are instances of depersonification, in which the vehicle attributes nonhuman feature(s) to human beings, whereas personifying similes are few and far between. Depersonification attributes lower-order features to humans. Thus the positions of humans in question are downgraded, reflecting the common demands for expressing our negative attitudes toward others.

Second, the aforementioned iconic nature of a simile suggests that the meaning of a simile is compositional. The 221 frozen similes we have examined show that they do not differ greatly from non-frozen similes in respect of semantic compositionality. The connection between the semiotic theme and vehicle is not an arbitrary one. There is conceivable



analogy between the theme and the vehicle in as many as 202 frozen smiles in the corpus. And the meanings of linguistic constituents of the frozen similes are active and make a semantic contribution to the global meanings. In addition, we have seen that the comparison marker of a frozen simile is not invariable, and neither is the theme term. Even the functioning feature(s) of the vehicle – the most inflexible element of a frozen simile – is not always fixed. Given the high degree of semantic compositionality and the low degree of fixedness, it is questionable to include frozen similes in the categories of idioms.

A pedagogical implication of the views proposed herein is that English frozen similes should not be presented in the English class as a type of fixed phrase which are drawn directly from memory. In fact, English frozen similes are compositional on the ground that their linguistic and conceptual constituents contribute their meanings to the whole. For this reason English learners should not be required to process frozen similes as if they were long words without meaningful components. Neither should they memorize frozen similes as a whole and unanalyzable piece of language. Rather, English learners should be taught to exploit pertinent knowledge of the world, grammar, lexical meanings, and analogical reasoning ability to reconstruct the meaning of an English frozen simile in its textual and situational context. Language teachers can adopt the semiotic topic-vehicle approach to introduce and analyze similes and conduct learning activities in class. For pedagogical application of the approach, we may refer to 謝健雄 (2005; 2006).

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Received: Jan. 9, 2006 Revised: Aug. 3, 2006

Accepted: Aug. 21, 2006

