

Similes in interaction: Beyond (metaphor and) compare

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The relationship between metaphor and simile has been a controversial topic in linguistics, philosophy, psychology or rhetoric. Some authors, from Aristotle to present times, adopt a classical view of metaphor (the comparison approach) and argue that they are variants of a unique (or very similar) conceptual process of analogy (e.g. many papers included in Ortony, 1979; Gentner, 1983; 1989; Gentner & Markman, 1997; Chiappe & Kennedy, 2000). In other words, metaphors are viewed as similes with an elliptic *like* and both 'tropes' are treated as equivalent analogy devices. Other authors give arguments and evidence in favor of a different conception of metaphor and simile (e.g. Black, 1979, Glucksberg & Keysar 1990, Addison 1993, Aisenman 1999, Israel et al. 2004, Glucksberg & Haught 2006, Utsumi 2007, Bernárdez 2009). In these lines, we assume that similes are cognitively and discursively different from metaphors, although they are obviously related. We also adhere to Israel et al.'s hypothesis 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" (2004: 132).

So far most contributions come from psychology or literary studies and are thus based on psychological experiments or literary analysis, mainly focusing on metaphor. Our research aims to show how similes work in real interaction, an aspect often neglected, since most contributions are based on sentence level analysis, without taking into account the context of use and the discourse functions that similes perform.

To this aim, examples from the media corresponding to the construction "A *is like* B" have been analyzed. More specifically, our data have been collected from English, Catalan and Spanish news, interviews and commentary sections, as well as from comments to news and blogs. The analysis shows that similes are very frequent in direct speech and interviews as a linguistic and communicative mechanism to express (relatively) complex conceptualizations and to highlight the speaker's stance. Similes are often followed by information that helps interpreting the analogy, as in (1), an example from a Catalan newspaper including the declarations by Marc Bartra, a football player:

(1) "*Muniesa és com un germà. Més que un amic. Li vull donar molta força. Es recuperarà*"
 'Muniesa *is like* a brother. More than a friend. I want to give him force. He will recover'

In short, this paper vindicates simile in its own right, related but distinct from metaphor. By analyzing simile in real interactive contexts, this study sheds light on key-questions such as: (i) why and when similes are used from a communicative point of view, that is, the conceptual and rhetorical functions they serve, (ii) how differences in structure affect the interpretation of similes, (iii) how genre influences the type and frequency of similes, and (iv) to what extent simile and metaphor are interchangeable in the contexts considered.