

# The Structure, Typology, and Function of Similes

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# Talk Outline

- What is a simile?
  - a) definition, b) structure, c) typology
- How do similes differ from:
  - a) other comparisons? b) metaphors?
- Function of similes in fiction and nonfiction
  - Distribution of similes in a text: where, why?
  - **I argue that similes have different functions from comparisons and metaphors**

# Definitions of 'simile'

- *(New) Oxford Dictionary of English* (1998, 2003):  
a figure of speech involving the comparison of one thing with another thing of a different kind, used to make a description more emphatic or vivid (e.g. *as brave as a lion*)
- *Merriam Webster's 10th Collegiate* (1993):  
a figure of speech comparing two unlike things that is often introduced by *like* or *as* (as in *cheeks like roses*)
- **What the dictionaries don't say:**  
**What is the relation between simile and metaphor?**  
**How is a simile structured? And what's it for?**  
**The vehicle is often fantastic or unreal (*a banshee, a zombie, a fairy tale, a princess, a demented lighthouse. a broiled frog*), not a real-world thing**

# A first tentative hypothesis

- **Similes are used to associate the ‘new’ with the ‘given’**
- e.g. describing ‘Bridget’, the vehicle designed for robotic exploration on Mars:  
She looks **like** a cross between a remote-controlled tank and Johnny Five, the irritating star of 80s robot movie *Short Circuit*.  
– *Guardian* science correspondent, 2006

# Explaining the new in terms of the given

- When a leading Jordanian Brotherhood leader suggested that his party was capable of winning an election and governing—surely a tame statement for a politician in a democratic system—the regime reacted as if he had issued a revolutionary threat.

--Nathan Brown, 'Taming Radical Islam: Democracy Works, only Very Slowly' in *International Herald Tribune*, July 5, 2007, p. 6

We all know what a revolutionary threat is --- or do we?

# Donald Davidson

- All metaphors are false (like lies)
  - The speaker deliberately says something false, to alert the hearer to some salient property.
- All similes are trivially true
  - Everything is like everything else.
    - Donald Davidson (1978): *What Metaphors Mean*

Yes, but some things are more alike than others

Davidson seems to assume comparison with real, experienceable things. But the vehicles of many similes are not experiential realities at all.

# Not an experiential Gestalt

- Lakoff & Johnson (1980) claim that cognitive metaphors are based on “an experiential Gestalt” – i.e. that we interpret the world in terms of everyday experience.
  - Probably not true of all metaphors; certainly not true of similes.
- EXAMPLE: in the home of Madonna and Guy Ritchie:
- Their carpets are ... so luxurious that it’s like walking on live sheep.
  - Zoe Williams in *The Guardian G2*, p. 3. 18.09.2007
  - It’s not an everyday experience to walk on live sheep

# Texts studied for similes

- Comic fiction:
  - P. G. Wodehouse, *Piccadilly Jim* (1918)
  - Sue Townsend: *Adrian Mole* novels (1982, 2004)
- Non-fiction: Jon Lee Anderson, *The Fall of Baghdad* (2005)



# Structure of similes

- Through the rich interior of this mansion **Mr Pett**, its nominal proprietor, **was wandering like a lost spirit**. --*PJ*, p. 7
- **She is as thin as a stick insect**. --*SDAM*, p. 105
- My grandma has got **eyes like Superman's**, **they bore right through you**. --*SDAM*, p. 109
  - **Red: topic**
  - **Blue: event or state**
  - **Green: shared property**
  - **Brown: comparator**
  - **Magenta: vehicle**

# Typology (1)

- *Clear-cut cases:*
  - *like, prep.:* Through the rich interior of this mansion **Mr Pett**, its nominal proprietor, **was wandering like a lost spirit**. *PJ*, p. 7
  - *as ... as:* **She is as thin as a stick insect**. --*SDAM*, p. 105
  - *as:* A long time had passed since Mr Crocker had set eyes upon a biped so exhilaratingly American, and **rapture held him speechless, as one who after long exile beholds some landmark of his childhood**.
  - *as if:* My father chose **a trolley** [at a supermarket] that **squeaked as if** somebody was **torturing mice**. . --*SDAM*, p. 71

# Typology (2)

- *Less clear-cut cases:*

[14-year-old] **Ogden Ford** was round and blobby and **looked overweight**. He had the **plethoric habit** of **one to whom exercise is a stranger**.  
[NO EXPLICIT COMPARATOR]

“**Looks to me as if** you were in with these two.”  
[A classification, not a simile]

# Typology (3)

- *Other borderline cases:*

She had **come to regard Mr. Pett almost in the light of a father.**  
**Her progress**, in short, **was beginning to assume the aspect of a walk-over.**

Only **a wet cat in a strange back yard bears itself with less jauntiness** than **a man faced with such a prospect.**

“What’s the matter, Jerry? ... **You have the aspect of one whom Fate has smitten in the spiritual solar plexus, or of one who has been searching for the leak in life’s gaspipe with a lighted candle.**”

# Components of simile structure

- **Topic** (typically, noun phrase): obligatory
- **Event or state** (verb): obligatory
- **Property** (typically, adjective): can be either explicit or implicit
- **Comparator**: optional
- **Vehicle** (noun, verb, or adj.): obligatory

# Similes and Logical Form

Similes licence logical mayhem, e.g.

- syntactic displacement:
  - He looked **like** a broiled frog, **hunched** over his desk, grinning and satisfied.  
= He looked broiled and hunched like a frog
- semantic anomaly:
  - The presence of a single woman in their midst acts **like** a demented lighthouse, **enticing hapless men** onto the rocks.
    - = Common property: both send out visible signals. BUT this lighthouse is behaving wrongly – *like a demented person*. Real lighthouses warn sailors away; they do not entice them. Demented people also do strange things.
  - Such similes draw deeply on lexical semantic norms of belief

# Similes that report perceptions

**look like:** “Any girl can **look like** an angel as long as she is surrounded by choice blooms.”

**taste/smell/sound/feel like:** “It must make you **feel like** a snipe.”

**seem:** It **seemed** to him sometimes **that** a curious paralysis of the will came over him out of business hours.

**resemble:** The place [the New York house of financier Peter Pett] **resembles** in almost equal proportions a cathedral, a suburban villa, a hotel and a Chinese pagoda.

# The disgraceful ambiguity of *feel like*

- *It feels like velvet* (It may or may not be velvet):  
ASSIGNMENT OF SOMETHING TO A SET
- *I feel like a fool* (= I perceive myself to be a fool.  
Objectively, I may or may not be a fool.)
- *I feel like an ice cream* (= I feel as if I want an ice cream)
- NONE OF THESE HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH SIMILES OR  
COMPARISONS
- *Like*/PREP has other uses, in addition to making similes



# Some conventional vehicles

- People are conventionally compared in similes to things outside our everyday experience, e.g. *a princess, a queen, a prisoner*.
- Events and situations are often compared in similes to **unreal** things, e.g. *a dream, a nightmare, a miracle, a fairy tale, a demented [N], the bottom of a parrot's cage*
  - **invoking conventional linguistic properties**
  - **not real-world properties or real things**

# Similes vs. comparisons

- He is just like his father: COMPARISON
- He has eyes like his father: COMPARISON
- Close male relatives like fathers and brothers:  
AD-HOC SET
- Layton had been like a father to Leonard: SIMILE
  - Layton was not his father

# Similes vs. metaphors (1)

Muriel Spark (1990): *Symposium* (a novel).

- Opening paragraph, page 1:

“This is rape!” His voice was reaching a pitch it had never reached before. ...

It was not rape. It was a robbery.

- Page 2:

“Rape,” he said. “It feels like rape.”

**The metaphor has weakened to a simile, as the speaker’s initial shock is replaced by querulous self-pity.**

# Similes vs. metaphors (2)

- Linguistic metaphors can usually be reformulated as similes
- Similes often can't be re-formulated as metaphors
- Metaphors are semantically stronger than similes
- Constraints on metaphor creation are more severe
- Similes are used to report perceptions
- Similes licence certain kinds of logical mayhem.
- Similes are even more attention-grabbing

# Distribution of similes in text (1)

- Not all documents contain similes.
- Where a document contains many similes, they are not evenly distributed, but tend to cluster. Why?

## Distribution of similes in text (2)

- P. G. Wodehouse, *Piccadilly Jim* (1918).  
140 similes in 300 pages (~ 1 every 2 pages).  
But the distribution is very uneven, e.g.  
Pp.7-15: 18 similes in 9 pages (av. 2 per page):  
introducing the location and main characters.  
Pp. 16-37: The incidence drops to less than 1  
simile every 3 pages as the narrative gets going.  
There are 6 times more similes per page in the  
opening 9 pages than in the next 20 pages.

## Distribution of similes in text (3)

Simile cluster in *PJ*; associated plot developments:

p. 51: Mr. Crocker quarrels with his wife;

pp. 62-65: Mr. Pett is intimidated by his wife;

pp. 84-86 (incl. some metaphors): Jimmy is refused admittance to Lord Percy Whipple;

pp. 97-99: Paddington Station: departure of the boat train

pp. 113-115: Jimmy arrives in New York

pp. 143-149: Jerry Mitchell strikes Ogden and gets fired

p. 276: Sudden uproar

pp. 276-280. Denouement.

## Distribution of similes in text (4)

**Non-fiction:** Jon Lee Anderson: *The Fall of Baghdad* (2005). Very factual style, few similes. The three main clusters are:

- pp. 1-21 (8 similes). Saddam's Iraq. E.g.: *He simply appeared and vanished again -- like the visitation of a divinity.*
- pp. 229-231 (4 similes). Bombs start to fall. E.g.: *debris everywhere, which looked shorn, as if a giant rake had come along and torn off the top layer of earth.*
- p. 279. Battle comes to the city. E.g. *a rhythmic noise, like a great steel drum being pounded mechanically, ... a huge crackling roar, like metallic popcorn popping.*



# Simile or Comparison?

- Anderson, *The Fall of Baghdad*, p. xiii:
  - Saddam inhabited a mythological realm, **like** a throwback to Herod's day, when warrior kings reigned as semidivine creatures, malevolent and munificent all at once, capable of the greatest cruelties as well as the most extravagant gestures of patronage.

# Conventional similes and cognitive salience

Conventional similes appeal to a cognitively salient property, which may or may not be stated explicitly:

- The hardness of *iron*
- The coldness of *ice*
- The brightness of the *sun*
- The vastness of the *sea*
- The barrenness of a *desert*
- The confusion of a *jungle*

# Signalling the unusual

From the British National Corpus:

- howling **like** a **demented** banshee
- I look **like** a **demented** barber
- the idea of God pursuing a whole family **like** a **demented** genealogist
- My script looks **like** **demented** knitting
- A single woman in their midst acts **like** a **demented** lighthouse
- Thrashing plastic **like** a **demented** clock spring
- The paddle ... thrashing **like** a **demented** washing machine
- Rising and falling **like** a **demented** yo-yo

# Conclusions

- **Typology:**
  - There are many ways of making a simile (not just *like* and *as*). The boundaries of the category are fuzzy.
- **Given and new:**
  - Similes are associated with the new rather than the given – e.g. plot development or reporting perceptions.
- **A language is a conventional belief system:**
  - Similes appeal to beliefs in the language system, not to facts about the world. Not an ‘experiential Gestalt’.
  - The **vehicle** of a simile is often semantically unrealistic.
- **Attention-grabbing function:**
  - similes aim to stir up readers’ imaginations -- to grab their attention and make them do some cognitive work.