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HOW TO SAY NEW THINGS: AN ESSAY ON LINGUISTIC CREATIVITY

Abstract

A central function of natural language is describing perceptions, including novel perceptions. A common mechanism for this latter function is comparison. New, unfamiliar perceptions are compared with something more familiar. A related function is the creation of similes, figures of speech intended to grab a reader's or hearer's attention and activate his or her imagination. The most common word in English used for making comparisons and similes (though by no means the only one) is the preposition *like*: A is like B; A looks, sounds, tastes, smells, feels, or behaves like B.

In this essay, I discuss the relationship between comparisons and similes and I explore some aspects of their role in the creative use of ordinary language. I start with an elaborate comparison by G. K. Chesterton, which I discuss, not because it is great literature or fine writing, but because it illustrates how people use comparisons and similes to describe the new in terms of the given, the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar.

Key words

Linguistic creativity; simile; metaphor; perception; word meaning; conventional beliefs; norms; exploitations

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Is the sea like cauliflowers?

"It's like cauliflowers", said a country girl from Buckinghamshire (let us call her Elsie), when she first saw the sea, according to G. K Chesterton ('The Garden of the Sea', in *Alarms and Discursions*, 1910).

The remark fell on ears ready to hear, for Chesterton was already primed by having thought up a similar analogy of his own. "Now that is a piece of pure literature," he commented. "Vivid, entirely independent and original, and perfectly

true. I had always been haunted with an analogous kinship which I could never locate; cabbages always remind me of the sea, and the sea always reminds me of cabbages. It is partly, perhaps, the veined mingling of violet and green, as in the sea a purple that is almost dark red may mix with a green that is almost yellow, and still be the blue sea as a whole. But it is more the grand curves of the cabbage that curl over cavernously like waves, and it is partly again that dreamy repetition, as of a pattern, that made two great poets, Aeschylus and Shakespeare, use a word like 'multitudinous' of the ocean. But just where my fancy halted the Buckinghamshire young woman rushed (so to speak) to my imaginative rescue. Cauliflowers are twenty times better than cabbages, for they show the wave breaking as well as curling, and the efflorescence of the branching foam, blind, bubbling, and opaque. Moreover, the strong lines of life are suggested; the arches of the rushing waves have all the rigid energy of green stalks, as if the whole sea were one great green plant with one immense white flower rooted in the abyss."

This is a typical Edwardian piece of writing, a purple passage. Is it effective? How good is the comparison? I shall assume, with Chesterton, that Elsie meant a field of growing cauliflowers, not a display of individual vegetables in a greengrocer's shop[1], shorn of much of their surrounding greenery. Even so, it is far-fetched – and for that reason, attention-grabbing. An essential word in Chesterton's comparison is 'remind' – accounting for and classifying novel perceptions is often a matter of being reminded of something else. His claim that the comparison is "vivid" is fair enough, but his claim that it is "perfectly true" is obvious nonsense, perhaps designed deliberately, provocatively, to provoke protests in the thoughts of literal-minded readers. To Chesterton's numerous parallels, we may add at least one more, namely perceptual uniformity: both the sea and a field of cauliflowers extend over a large expanse, which, from a suitable distance, can be seen as a uniform mass. Nevertheless, there are many respects in which the sea is not a bit like a field of cauliflowers (or cabbages). For one thing, the sea (though volatile and in perpetual motion) is as permanent a fixture in our world as anything that we are ever likely to experience. Cabbages and cauliflowers, on the other hand, are static but impermanent things. They do not toss and churn and ebb and flow like the sea, but insofar as they are volatile at all, theirs is the volatility of decay – quietly, imperceptibly rotting towards oblivion. After several weeks of unidirectional decay, left to themselves cabbages and cauliflowers shrivel, turn brown, putrefy, and ultimately achieve a state of non-being. But the sea does not shrivel up or decay. It is always with us. With the benefit, perhaps, of wider knowledge of the world than Elsie (a knowledge that might have blocked her creative comparison, as it blocks the creative use of language for pundits enslaved by logical theories of literal meaning), we pride ourselves on knowing that the sea is full of living creatures and that it is constantly moving (though purposelessly) in deep currents and throwing up great waves, rollers, and breakers. Despite this, to the land-based, cauliflower-growing, first-time observer, from a suitable distance the sea may look like a large expanse of static entities such as a field of cauliflowers.

The sea, then, is like a field of brassicaceous vegetables in a few respects, but unlike them in many others: primarily in its constancy and volatility. Other differences come crowding in: the sea is a liquid mass; cauliflowers are solid entities; one cannot eat the sea, and despite Chesterton's best efforts, it is hard to see cauliflowers as being entities that are breaking and curling, with bubbling foam and the energy of rushing waves. And although it is undoubtedly true that neither brassicae nor the sea have a power of visual perception, the relevance of 'blind' is far from obvious. The colours are not convincing, either. There is no need to go on. The bottom line is that this is not a particularly apt comparison. Chesterton, in his enthusiasm, is overegging it.

Elsie's comparison is not as evocative as Wallace Stevens' famous metaphor (1).

(1)   *Society is a sea.*

Contemplation of Stevens' metaphor can continue, over quite a long period, to bring to mind ever-increasing numbers of analogous properties which society can be perceived as sharing with the sea. I will not even begin to list them at this point: this is a matter for the reader's own imagination. Prolonged contemplation of Elsie's comparison, on the other hand, throws up only increasing numbers of discordant properties.

Similes are not Metaphors

The next question concerns the linguistic or semantic classification of Elsie's statement. Clearly, it is not a metaphor. Metaphors are literally false statements, uttered for rhetorical effect. They are not formed with the preposition *like*.

(2)   *The sea is a field of cauliflowers*.[2]

(3)   *The sea is <u>like</u> a field of cauliflowers*.

(2), if someone uttered it in earnest, would be a metaphor (though hard to interpret without additional context). (3), on the other hand, is a comparison, perhaps one that belongs to the special subset of comparisons called 'similes'. Chesterton himself was in no doubt about this: towards the end of his essay he refers to it as "the cauliflower simile". However, it is not clear that he had devoted much thought to the definition or semantic status of similes and how they are to be distinguished from other kinds of comparison.

Dictionaries, which attend to such matters, assert that a simile is a kind of comparison, but with this difference: a simile involves comparing two things that are not really alike:

> **simile** … 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*)
> *(New) Oxford Dictionary of English* (1998, 2005)

> **simile** … a figure of speech comparing two unlike things that is often intro-
> duced by **like** or **as** (as in *cheeks* **like** *roses*)
> *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (10th edn 1993, 11th edn 2003)

A couple of examples and a bit of further elucidation may help to make the dif-
ference clearer. According to this standard account, a straightforward comparison
(e.g. *Steven is like Bill* or *an owl is like a hawk*) is not a simile because, in each
case, the two things that are compared are alike in several important respects,
including their semantic type: the same superordinate term or 'hypernym' is in-
volved: *Steven* and *Bill* are both humans – and likewise both *owls* and *hawks* are
kinds of birds. On the other hand, the statements *Steven is like a hawk* and *Bill
is like an owl* are similes (figures of speech) because they involve comparisons
between two things that have different superordinates. The shared property in a
comparison (and the unshared property in a simile) is not necessarily a superor-
dinate – though it often is – but it must be salient.

In a simile, a semantic feature shared between the topic (in this case, *Steven* or
Bill) and the vehicle (*hawk, owl*), is also invoked, but in this case it is a minor fea-
ture. In all major respects, a person and a bird (*hawk, owl*) have little in common.
The coiner of a simile forces one to notice some previously unnoticed, even pre-
posterous shared feature. Even so, the shared semantic feature may be implied,
but not stated explicitly. If the shared semantic feature is not mentioned explic-
itly, it is assumed to be something that, by convention, is common knowledge.
Hawks are conventionally believed to have good eyesight, so, in the absence of
any contextual evidence to the contrary, (4) would most probably mean – conven-
tionally, it does mean – that Steven has good eyesight, while (5) is more likely to
be a figurative way of saying that Bill is wise, a conventional belief about owls
being that they are wise.

(4)   *Steven is like a hawk.*

(5)   *Bill is an owl.*

Notice that this has nothing to do with scientific truth: owls may, in reality, be
very stupid birds, but their quality of wisdom is enshrined in the linguistic system
of English – a fact that would take generations of hard-nosed scientist war on
literature and folk beliefs to dislodge.

Thus, similes typically involve blending two sets of conventional and appar-
ently incompatible beliefs, either by drawing on conventional folk beliefs ('owls
are wise') or by stating the shared property. If *Bill is like an owl* were used in

a less conventional way, e.g. to mean that Bill swoops suddenly and silently at night on small, unsuspecting prey (mice or timid people), the speaker would have to say so explicitly.

Similes usually involve saying something memorable, but do not necessarily involve saying anything new. Conventional similes are often nothing more than colourful, attention-grabbing ways of stating the obvious.

(6)   *My mouth tasted like the bottom of a parrot's cage.*

(6) is a conventional simile in British English, being no more than an attention-grabbing way of saying "I had a disgusting taste in my mouth". This is an out-and-out simile, because mouths and parrot's cages have no semantic features in common other than that they are both physical rather than abstract objects. The focus of this simile is on the verb (*taste*), rather than on the topic (*my mouth*) and the vehicle (*the bottom of a parrot's cage*).

Contrary to the many claims in the literature that metaphors and similes are grounded in experience – an 'experiential gestalt' in the words of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) – it must be acknowledged that the relevant gestalt for most similes is more linguistic – encoded linguistic belief – than experiential. The reader is invited to imagine what the bottom of a parrot's cage might taste like, not to recall some actual experience of licking parrot droppings.

Let us explore a little further the difference between similes and ordinary comparisons. Similes are figures of speech like metaphors, but instead of asserting something that is literally false, they have the structure of comparisons, asserting something that, on the face of it, seems to be claimed to be literally true. An ordinary comparison asserts literal truth with respect to some semantic property. If I say, "Steven has brown eyes like his father", I may be mistaken (for example, either Steven or his father may have blue eyes, or they may have eyes that are different shades of brown), but my mistake would not affect the truth-conditional status of my assertion. On the other hand, if I use a conventional simile – "Steven has eyes like a hawk" – the semantic status of my assertion is less clear. Conventionally, my intention in making such a remark is simply to assert that, by human standards, Steven is exceptionally good at spotting things. To do this, I use a simile, which by convention has this meaning. The shared property between Steven's eyes and those of a hawk is not explicitly stated; it is assumed to be common knowledge. If I wanted to say that Steven's eyes are like those of a hawk in respect of colour, shape, retina size, or some other property, I would have to mention that property explicitly, for it is not established as part of the conventional belief structure of English. Davidson (1978) claims that "all similes are trivially true", but this is not correct. "Eyes like a hawk" is an expression that has conventional status in English, which would be unaffected if scientists were to discover that in reality hawks have very poor eyesight and locate their prey by sonar, like bats. So it is not true, as Davidson (1978) claimed, that "all similes are trivially true".

We now have a three-way distinction:

a) Metaphors assert something that is not literally true, in order to activate the readers' or hearers' imagination and cause them to perceive some common property, for example, some semantic property that society shares with the sea.

b) Comparisons assert a semantic property that is shared by two entities and is literally true.

c) Similes exploit conventional, linguistically encoded beliefs, not shared semantic properties.

The structure of metaphors and similes

According to metaphor theorists such as Max Black (1962), Searle (1979), and Kövecses (2004), a linguistic metaphor consists of three components: the primary subject, the vehicle, and the shared property. The latter is very often implicit rather than explicit. Thus, in "Society is a sea", the primary subject is 'society', the vehicle of the metaphor is 'a sea', and the shared property is unstated, so it is whatever the reader wants it to be – vastness, volatility, being inhabited by different kinds of creatures, and/or anything else that comes to mind.

Similes are structurally more complex, requiring at least the following components:

a) the primary subject (*Steven*)

b) the eventuality – a state or event (*seeing small objects clearly from a great distance* or *swooping suddenly on timid, unsuspecting creatures*, as the case may be)

c) the comparator (*like*)

d) the vehicle (*a hawk*)

e) the shared property (*predator*)

The philosopher Max Black took the view that metaphors are 'interactions': "a writer [or speaker] activates two thoughts of different things together: the meaning is the result of their interaction" (Black 1962: 38). He contrasted this with 'the substitution view', in which the meaning of one term (*a sea*) is substituted for the meaning of another (*society*), and with 'the comparison view', in which the meanings of the two terms are merely compared. To this must be added a fourth view, namely the truth-conditional view, according to which metaphors are simply false. As a truth-conditional philosopher, Donald Davidson (1978), put it, "All metaphors are false, like lies."

Elsie's comparison cannot readily be converted into a metaphor. If she had said, "*The sea is cauliflowers*" or "*Look, there are cauliflowers stretching out from the beach to the horizon*", her communicative bona fides should, to say the least, have been called into question. Chesterton would have been justified in asking, "What on earth do you mean?" or he might have privately concluded that she

was mad, rather than going into raptures over the literary quality of her utterance. But what she actually said was, "It is <u>like</u> cauliflowers."

What, then, is the difference between a comparison and a simile? Comparisons are straightforward assertions of perceptible resemblance between two things in some respect, which may be implied, as in (7), or stated explicitly, as in (8).

(7)   *Bill is like his father.*

(8)   *Bill is cheating the tax man, just like his father before him.*

Similes, on the other hand, are, according to English dictionaries, figures of speech that assert a resemblance between two things that are, on the face of it, not really alike at all.

An undeniable example of a simile is (9), from Jon Lee Anderson's book *The Fall of Baghdad* (2005), describing the rare public appearances of Saddam Hussein during his long regime before the American invasion.

(9)   *He simply appeared and vanished again – like the visitation of a divinity.*

Saddam here is compared to a divinity, but in reality of course he was not really a divinity at all – far from it. Divine beings and murderous dictators are two unlike things.

On these grounds, Elsie's remark does indeed count as a simile, rather than a straightforward comparison. The sea and a cauliflower are two unlike things. However, if we probe a little more deeply into the difference between comparisons and similes, we may conclude that her remark lies somewhere in the grey area between them. In the first place, and despite Chesterton's exuberant claims about it being "a piece of pure literature", it seems very unlikely that it was intended by Elsie as a figure of speech. Rather, it was an attempt to describe a novel perception in terms of something that was familiar. No doubt Elsie had in mind the white flowers of growing cauliflower plant, coyly nestling, almost hidden, in an exuberance of green leaves, rather than the naked white stripped-down version of the kind sold by greengrocers and nowadays in supermarkets. Chesterton says, "The girl thought of it as a field of vegetables."

The unreal vehicles of similes

In the second place, similes more often than not employ as their vehicle, not merely something that is literally unlike the target, but something that is unreal or nonexistent outside the realms of the imagination, or at any rate well outside the everyday experience of ordinary people. (9) is an example: most of us rarely if ever experience the visitation of a divinity, and yet Anderson, a very factual

writer, uses it as the vehicle of a simile intended to convey to the reader what the appearances of Saddam Hussein were like. How can this be? If (as we may confidently assume) most of his readers have no personal experience of the visitation of a divinity, how can Anderson appeal to it in trying to explain the impact of Saddam's appearances? The answer has to be that, real or not, the concept of a visitation of a divinity is enshrined in the collective culture of English readers. We may not have personally experienced such a visitation, but we have read about such a thing often enough to be subconsciously convinced about what it would be like. Knowing about the supposed visitations of divinities is part of knowing English, even though it may not be (or may no longer be) part of knowing facts about the world. This point is important, not least because it stands in stark contrast to the claim by Lakoff and Johnson (L&J 1980) that the foundation of each conceptual metaphor is an "experiential Gestalt." Of course, the two points of view are not incompatible. L&J were talking about the role of conceptual metaphors as a fundamental component of human cognition: they argue that typically, in ordinary, conventional language, abstract concepts may be realized in terms of metaphors based on concrete events, entities, and relations. Here, on the other hand, we are talking about the role of figures of speech in linguistic creativity. In this context, it is striking how many similes have a vehicle that lie outside the realm of everyday experience. In an analysis of over 101,000 uses of the preposition *like* in the British National Corpus, Hanks (2005) reports that a remarkably high proportion of similes have a vehicle that is irrealis:

> Many of them [similes] rely on reference to something that does not exist (or whose existence is not universally accepted): witches, ghosts, angels, zombies. To this category may also be added references to categories from literature ("like King Lear", "like something out of Dostoyevsky"), films ("like something out of a Hammer horror", "like King Kong"), and folk tales ("like something out of a fairy story", "like Cinderella" (X 7)). The latter category is a reminder of the persistence of folk culture over time and its continued use to interpret the world around us.

[[Irrealis 1 = Event]]
dream (X 74); nightmare (X 30); bad dream (X 15); miracle (X 12)

[[Irrealis 2 = Entity]]
ghost (X 46); angel (X 42); shadow (X 31); zombie (X 26); witch (X 18); god (X 16); demon (X 16); fairy tale (X 12).

The vehicle in such similes is very often highly conventional. *Howling like a banshee* and *tasting like the bottom of a parrot's cage* are further example of conventional similes based on non-existential experiences. The experience appealed to in such cases is a purely linguistic gestalt, with no counterpart in human experience of everyday reality. Other conventional linguistic gestalts as vehicles

include entities that undeniably exist, such as *watching someone like a hawk* and *cunning as a fox*, which may well have a foundation in observed reality, although these conventional similes would continue to work perfectly effectively even if naturalists were to discover that hawks in reality are rather short-sighted (spotting their prey by sonar, perhaps, like bats) and that foxes are really rather stupid. What matters, for purposes of tasks such as understanding and using a language, is the set of conventional beliefs embedded in the linguistic culture, not the scientific reality of concepts of the world. The meaning of *treat someone like a dog* was, is, and will continue to be 'treat someone badly', even though in reality dogs in the English-speaking world nowadays seem generally to be treated rather well. Thus, the meaning of *treat someone like a dog* is entirely conventional. On the other hand, *pamper someone like a dog* would have to be creative.[3]

So a distinction must be drawn between conventional and creative uses of language. Although similes and comparisons may be novel and creative, they may also be compositional and unoriginal (as in 10) or conventional (as in 11).

(10)   *The man who lives at No. 49 looks like John's grandfather*.

(11)   *He was watching me like a hawk*.

There are grey areas rather than sharp dividing lines between these distinctions. Elsie's remark is undoubtedly creative: probably, no one before had ever said that the sea looks like a cauliflower, and even if they had, it is even more probable that Elsie did not inherit the observation from someone else, but rather that she made it up on the spot, as a first reaction to a sight of the sea.

Fixed truths and variable truths

Contrary to Chesterton's inflated claim, Elsie's remark is not "pure literature". It is, however, a very good example of the sort of thing that people say when they want to convey a novel perception. Typically, they coin a comparison, relating the new to something given. The remark is not "perfectly true", but it is somewhat true.

The notion 'somewhat true' is unlikely to find favour with truth-conditional semanticists, for whom truth is an absolute. In discussing meaning in language, however, it is necessary to distinguish at least two kinds of truth: fixed and variable. An example of a fixed truth is (12).

(12)   *A triangle is a two-dimensional figure consisting of three straight lines with three angles, each of which joins two of the lines*.

Definitions of geometrical figures such as (12), like other definitions from the domains of mathematics and traditional logic, are of course tautologies. They

are indeed perfectly and eternally true, but they do not convey very much information, except perhaps to beginners in geometry classes. For such learners, however, ostensive definition ("*Look! This is a triangle!*") is likely to be more communicatively successful.

Conclusion: conventional beliefs about cauliflowers and cabbages

To come back to where we began, after our brief circular tour of similes and metaphors, namely linguistic exploitations of the terms *cauliflower* and *cabbage*, we may note that evidence from large corpora makes it possible to identify conventional exploitations of any term in a language. Corpus analysis yields many surprises. It turns out that conventional beliefs (which are exploited linguistically) about cabbages are very different from those about cauliflowers.

A conventional exploitation of **cabbage** has little or nothing to do with the physical appearance of the vegetable, but rather the cabbage is used metaphorically to refer to people whose mental powers and conscious mind have completely decayed, as in (13)-(15).

(13)   *The old ways are still vivid in many people's minds – rows and rows of very old patients who never moved from their beds, many of them confused and incontinent because of drugs or disease. Most were unhappy – to the outside world they were just thought of as 'cabbages', without thoughts or feelings.*

(14)   *A year later he had his second stroke. This time he was taken to Darlington Memorial Hospital where he continued to be an outpatient for three years. 'It was at this time that my silent plea possessively started; "I will not become a cabbage" which I continually repeated mentally and verbally, as best I could, for a long time.' ... 'I said I would not become a cabbage and I did survive it.' He was determined to regain as much of his former abilities as he could and each time he began his rehabilitation with as much vigour as he could muster.*

(15)   *Long-term ... prisoners have a genuine fear of becoming cabbages.*

(13)-(15) have nothing to do with the physical appearance of a cabbage. Conventional exploitations of **cauliflower**, on the other hand, do sometimes refer to the physical appearance of the vegetable. There is a conventional term in English, **cauliflower ear**, (not recorded, alas, in the British National Corpus). It refers to the appearance of a damaged ear of a wrestler, boxer, or rugby forward, which has been repeatedly pounded and exposed to injury, so that it becomes misshapen. Reference to physical appearance is further supported by examples (16)-(18), which are taken from the BNC.

(16)   *The silver chimney of the Petrobras refinery sends a perpetual flame into the afternoon sky. Clouds like brassy cauliflowers form over the steel-blue blades of the distant mountain range that borders the plain.*

(17)   *There is a fairly sustained blast of escaping gas from the throat of the volcano, which carries the cauliflower cloud of ash much higher into the air.*

(18)   *... other coral types, such as stony corals, gorgonians or such beautiful soft corals as cauliflower corals.*

It is perhaps, not stretching the point too far to regard these miscellaneous exploitations of the physical appearance of a cauliflower as another reason for supporting Chesterton's view that Elsie's comparison of the sea to cauliflowers was felicitous. There seems to be something uniquely striking about the appearance of cauliflowers, which lends itself readily to exploitation when someone wants to say something new.

   Thus we see that when someone wants to describe something new – something different, something not previously experienced – they typically reach for a comparison, and that comparison are a rich source of creativity in language. The creativity may be for a serious purpose, such as explaining something unfamiliar, or it may be nothing more than a jeu d'esprit, an attention-grabbing flight of the linguistic imagination. In either case, exploitation of conventional, literal norms plays an important part in the normal use of language.

Acknowledgment

Notes

[1]   Supermarkets had not been invented in Chesterton's day.

[2]   This paper follows the convention of printing invented examples in italics.

[3]   *Pamper someone like a lapdog*, on the other hand, could be conventional. Lapdogs, unlike other breeds of dog, are conventionally pampered.

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