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Similes and Sets

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Abstract

This paper is a report on an analysis of the English preposition ***like.*** I investigated the 101,096 occurrences of this preposition in the British National Corpus (BNC). What is its normal role and function? It seems that ***like*** has a central role to play in cognition, more powerful than metaphor and going far beyond mere comparison of similarities. It is a truism that ***like*** introduces similes (e.g. "he looked like a broiled frog"), but this is only part of the story, true mainly when the preposition is attached to a verb of perception. Another function of this preposition, especially when it is attached to a noun, is to introduce a fuzzy set (e.g. "people like doctors and nurses"). There are semantic similarities between these two functions.

This paper is complementary to the account of metaphor given within the framework of the theory of norms and exploitations (TNE) in Hanks 2004. A central tenet of TNE is that analogy is the motivating force, not merely of language change, but also of language in use. People make meanings by exploiting the belief structures associated with words words (lexical semantics) analogically. They talk about new things by comparing them to familiar concepts, shared concepts, and culturally identifiable stereotypes. And when people talk, they often want to say new things. For this reason, similes, which are more common than metaphors, have a central role in the theory.

Previous Literature on Similes

There is a vast literature on metaphor, but the literature explicitly devoted to similes is less extensive. By leading authors on metaphor and figurative language (from Max Black 1962 to Glucksberg 2001) similes are generally either ignored or treated merely as a sort

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of second-class metaphor. Miller 1979 explicitly "defends the traditional view is an abbreviated simile". [SAY MORE] In their second edition, Lakoff and Johnson 2003 added an afterword in which they deny that a metaphor is a kind of simile or that metaphors are based on similarity, but they do not explore the phenomenon of similes in any detail. Others, for example Davidson 1978, draw attention to the literal difference between metaphors and similes. Whereas all metaphors are literally false (like lies), all similes are "trivially true. Everything is like everything else." According to this truth-conditional semantic viewpoint, the purpose of a metaphor is not to make a true statement, but rather to invite the hearer to notice something special about the topic by making an untrue statement about it. The role of similes in this semantic/pragmatic schema is less clear.

1. Does the Preposition *like* always Signal a Simile?

Although it may be true, as Davidson says, that "everything is like everything else", it is equally true that some things are *more* alike than others. Truth-conditional semantics, with its simple true-false mechanism, does not allow for this. In particular a language community relies on conventional beliefs about likeness, beliefs which may or may not be true but which are certainly meaningful and can be measured in terms of usage.

It would be logical to suppose that, if someone says that A is ***like*** B, then they are implying that A is ***not*** B. If B denotes a set (as most common nouns do), then saying that A is like B might seem to imply that A is not a member of the set denoted by B. However, common everyday usage of English does not support this supposition. In some cases it is true and in others not. Attempting to distinguish inclusion from non-inclusion misses the point. For example, the expression "people like doctors and lawyers" is generally used to pick out a set that *includes* doctors, lawyers, and other middle-class professionals. On the other hand, the sentence "A banker without money is like a doctor without pills" refers to a set of people (bankers) that *does not include* doctors.

The alternation is pervasive. On the one hand:

1. "But pharmacists, **like doctors**, have run out of vaccines". *Pharmacists are not doctors.*
2. "A sigh went through him **like a wave**". *A sigh is not a wave.*
3. "They moved in white **like doctors and nurses**". *"They" are not doctors and nurses.*
4. "A white BMW which **looks more like a modern bathroom cabinet** than a car." *A BMW is not a bathroom cabinet.*
5. "Bruce Davidson always **sounded like a Speak Your Weight machine** when he was delivering a prepared statement." *Bruce Davidson is not a Speak Your Weight machine.*

On the other hand:

6. 'That puts her on a par with big earners **like doctors and airline pilots**." *Doctors and airline pilots really are big earners.*
7. "an opportunity to study the great comics **like Tommy Cooper and Dave Allen**." *Tommy Cooper and Dave Allen really were (in the writer's opinion) great comics.*
8. "1842, the decade which … saw the foundation of satirical journals like Punch and Kladderadatsch." *Punch and Kladderadatsch really were satirical journals*.
   a

In other cases, set membership is indeterminate or undecidable from the local context:

9. "The only time that Donald didn't **look like a doctor** was when people at parties asked him anything." *It is not clear whether Donald was a doctor or not.*
10. "He didn't **look much like a docto**r to Alina. He was crouched in the corner by the big kitchen range, his sleeves rolled up and his shirt and trousers covered in white ash." *It is not certain whether he was a doctor, but probably he was.*
11. "That old woman **looks like a witch**." *Maybe she* ***is*** *a witch, maybe not.*

The existence of indeterminate and undecidable cases such as these militates against postulating two separate senses of ***like***, which may at first sight seem tempting and which has indeed tempted some lexicographers into making this dubious distinction.

Some careful writers of English prefer to reserve ***like*** for similes strictly so called – cases where A is not B – using ***such as*** for cases where A is B, e.g. "people such as doctors and lawyers". This is an unobjectionable stylistic choice, but no conclusions can be drawn from it about the meaning of the word. BNC demonstrates very clearly that the use of ***like*** to denote sets by exemplification is well established in the everyday idiom of English. If we look at what ***like*** is really doing, we see that the two kinds of uses are perfectly compatible and indeed it seems more trouble than it is worth to split them. There is no need to stigmatize one particular group of uses, and there is no need to postulate two separate senses. The primary function of ***like*** is categorization by reference to some shared property. At its simplest, in 1, doctors and pharmacists are categorized together in respect of having run out of vaccines and in 6 doctors and airline pilots are offered as examples of the category of high earners. More complicated are cases like 2, 4, and 11. The common property shared by sighs and waves (movement), by the old woman and witches, or by a BMW and a bathroom cabinet (a particular kind of whiteness and/or a particular kind of boxy shape perhaps), is in each case alluded to rather that stated explicitly. In 11, reference is to a cultural stereotype rather than to a perceptual reality. In making this simile, the writer or speaker did not commit him/herself to the reality of witchcraft.

2. The Appeal to Perceptions and Imagination

Like is often governed by a verb of perception, as in 12-19.

12. The flat smelled **like the lair of a strange animal**.

13. In the television debate Mr Goddard sounded **like a petulant school master who was sure that a pupil had done something wrong but could n't prove it.**
14. When the last resonances of the symphony had died, all that was left was an electronic whine. It sounded **like an idiot child whistling**.

With verbs of perception (*look like, sound like, taste like, smell like*), ***like*** often invokes an appeal to a cultural stereotype rather than to an actual experience of reality. If a place smells like the lair of an animal, if someone looks like a witch, if an adult behave likes a child, or if something tastes like dry sherry, these statements rely on English speakers sharing stereotypical beliefs about the appearance of lairs and witches, the behaviour of children, and the flavour of dry sherry.

Categorizations by resemblance are often rather imprecise, and a cultural stereotype is invoked indirectly rather than directly. What exactly does an idiot child whistling sound like? Wrong question! Categorization by resemblance is regularly extended to references to situations that are not stereotypical and almost certainly not experienced, but only imagined. A child is certainly a stereotype, and the activity of whistling is certainly a stereotype; however, an idiot child is somewhat less stereotypical, and a whistling idiot child is not stereotypical at all. Yet the simile is not only effective, but is typical of ordinary language in use. What seems to be going on is that utterer relies on the imagination of all other members of a speech community operating in roughly similar ways. In fact, the details do not seem to matter as much as the general impression. Often, a general negative or positive semantic prosody seems to be all that is actually required by way of the readers' interpretation. The rest is open. For example, in 13 and 14, the semantic prosody is clearly negative, but the reader is not only free but actually invited to construct in his or her own way the details of what an idiot child whistling or a petulant schoolmaster might sound like.

Such similes of perception are often extended to situations that the reader would be most unlikely to have experienced personally, as in 15-16.

15. I took the pastry. It tasted **like sweetened cardboard.**
16. The occupants of the tunnel awoke in the morning with mouths that tasted **like the bottom of a parrot's cage.**

Similes play a central role in enabling people to come to terms with the infinite variety of new phenomena encountered in daily life. Examples such as 15 and 16 do not appeal to experience, but to the imagination. They say, in effect, not "You know what the bottom of a parrot's cage taste like", but rather "You can imagine what the bottom of a parrot's cage might taste like." This kind of extension to irrealis situations is an important aspect of similes. It is discussed in more detail below.

Notice, too, that these irrealis similes do not translate easily into metaphors. We do not find metaphors such as the following:

??My mouth was the bottom of a parrot's cage.

??The pastry was sweetened cardboard.

It is worth noting at this point that ***sound like*** and ***look like*** are used, not merely for categorization of perceptual features but also for the tentative evaluation of propositions.

17. Raskolnikov knows (but leaves us to infer) that his present state of mind renders chatter on the stairs intolerable, which **looks like fear of his landlady** but really isn't.
18. While the economy was booming, the Training and Enterprise Councils **sounded like a neat solution** to the skills shortage.
19. At first sight this **looks like an uninteresting stipulation** about how to use the word 'fact'.

The Raskolnikov example, contrasting appearance and reality, is typical. Writers like Dostoyevsky are pains to stress that appearance and reality are very different. Similarly, somehow, in 18 we know (or at least suspect) that the writer is going to go on and say that Training and Enterprise Councils turned out not to be such a good idea after all, and in 19 that the stipulation about the word 'fact' is going to be interesting after all. The purpose of using 'sounded like' rather than 'were' or 'looks like' rather than 'is' in such cases is to present the categorization as loose and tentative, along with a note of doubt or vagueness.

3. Nouns typically used to make Similes

In 21,000 occurrences of 'like a(n) N' it is striking that the same small set of nouns, and nouns of the same semantic type, recur rather frequently. Out of many thousands of nouns that could in theory function as secondary subjects in similes, a few dozen recur frequently to form conventional similes. These nouns are strongly associated with particular properties, and function as cultural reference points. Other nouns are used occasionally, and in more creative ways. These nouns can be grouped according to semantic class.

The most common semantic class of words used in similes applied to people are humans in various kinds of roles, followed by familiar animals.

[[Human Role 1]] Status in Relation to the Individual
child (X 248); baby (X 90); boy (X 33); girl (X 30); father (X 25); mother (X 23); kid (X 23); brother (X 17; sister only 8); family (X 16); lover (X 14); friend (X 13); adult (X 11)

[[Human Role 2]] Role in Society
actor (X 23); queen (X 23); prisoner (X 18); model (X 17); schoolboy (X 17); schoolgirl (X 17); soldier (X 17); king (X 16); policeman (X 16); princess (X 16); stranger (X 16); doctor (X 15); boxer (X 15); thief (X 15); athlete (X 13); slave (X 13); criminal (X 12); monk (X 12); native (X 12); peasant (X 11); priest (X 11); film star (X 11); tramp (X 11);

clown (X 10)

[[Human Role 3]] Attributes
fool (X 39); idiot (X 35); mad [N]; madman, madwoman (X 35); demented [[Person]] (X 27); maniac (X 14); a man possessed, a man with something on his mind; a lady (X 18); a gentleman (X 16); {spoiled | spoilt} {child | brat} (X 16); blind [[Person]] (X 15); naughty [[Child]] (X 19); nice [[Person | Thing]] (X 26); trapped [[Animal]]; dead [[Person | Animal]] (X 23); caged [[Animal]] (X 23); frightened [[Animal | Child]] (X 21); drunk | {drunken [[Person]]} (X 18)

[[Animal]]
dog (X 122); cat (X 107); bird (X 67); animal (X 64); fish (X 58); horse (X 45); rabbit (X 36); snake (X 27); duck (X 26); pig (X 26); butterfly (X 23); terrier (X 21); hawk (X 20); lion (X 19); bull (X 18); rat (X 18); spider (X 18); insect (X 18); bee (X 17); mouse (X 16); bear (X 14); tiger (X 14); fox (X 14); wolf (X 14); frog (X 14); human being (X 14); parrot (X 13); snail (X 13); fly (X 13); lamb (X 12); monkey (X 12); vulture (X 12); shark (X 11).

Conventional similes are associated with particular verbs at different levels of generality. Thus, at the most general level, a person may ***look like*** or ***behave like*** any of various creatures or humans in particular roles – a rat, a dragon, a witch, an old man – without being any of these things. Alternatively, he/she may look like a doctor or an accountant and actually be a doctor or an accountant. In both cases, the meaningfulness depends on recognition of a cultural stereotype for the set of rats, dragons, witches, doctors, and accountants.

Precision here is precisely not what is at issue. Categorization by resemblance tends to be vague and tentative and thought-provoking, rather than precise and dry and logical. Because so much depends on cultural stereotypes, many conventional similes tend to have idiom status. A contrastive example will illustrate this point. If I tell you that my friend Tom was behaving like a capybara, I am making quite a precise statement, the truth of which can be evaluated, but I risk not communicating successfully, because there is no cultural stereotype in English for the behaviour of capybaras. You have probably never even seen a capybara. On the other hand, if I tell you that Tom was behaving like a bear with a sore head, my communicative intention is more likely to succeed, even though it is equally unlikely that you have ever seen a literal bear with a literal sore head. Communication succeeds in this case through mutual recognition of the English-speaking cultural stereotype of a bear with a sore head as being a large, unhappy, irritable, and possibly dangerous man (not an ursine), typically one with a hangover, rather than through scientific investigation of the behaviour and moods of bears. This, of course, is an idiom, or something very like one. Similes form idioms, just like metaphors.

At a rather more delicate semantic level, a particular verb and a particular noun often combine to pick out stereotypical behaviour of any of a large number of familiar creatures (real and imaginary) or human roles. For example, people ***fly*** or ***soar*** like a bird, even though they don't have wings. At a more specific level, people ***gather, hover, circle round, descend,*** or ***swoop down*** like vultures. Here, again, it is important to

emphasize that similes do not necessarily have anything to do with the actual, scientifically verifiable properties of the secondary subject. Maybe vultures swoop, maybe they don't. It doesn't matter. What matters is that they are believed to swoop. There is at least one case in BNC of a simile involving very un-vulture-like behaviour – "swooping for the kill like a vulture": vultures do not kill; they feed on bodies that are already dead – and yet even this ill-conceived simile fits well enough into the loose general belief pattern of vultures as being unpleasant creatures that feed on dead people.

[[Artefact]]
magnet (X 91); knife (X 46); rocket (X 30); light (X 25); cork (X 25); drug (X 24); rag doll (X 23); beacon (X 23); curtain (X 22); machine (X 22); bomb (X 21); bullet (X 20); ship (X 20); prison (X 18); book (X 18); sack (X 18); train (X 17), glove (X 16); automaton (X 16); ball (X 15); top (X 15); mirror (X 14); box (X 13); map (X 13); whip (X 13); jigsaw (X 12); pack of cards (X 12); cloak (X 11); balloon (X 11); drum (X 11); sword (X 11); arrow (X 11); scarecrow (X 11); yo-yo (X 11); sponge (X 11); dagger (X 10); flag (X 10); oven (X 10).

Similar principles apply to artefacts in similes. The verb most associated with the simile ***like a magnet*** is ***attract***, closely followed by ***draw***. The verbs most associated with ***like a knife*** are not only ***cut***, but also ***strike, twist***, and ***go/run through***.

There are also quite a few cases where the preposition is governed by a noun: e.g. ***a smile like a knife***. In this case, the shared semantic property is left unspecified and more is left to the reader's imaginative interpretation.

20. an outraged salmon leapt from the water and made off upstream **like a rocket.**

The function of many similes seems to be to say something quite simple and straightforward in a colourful way. For example, in 20, there is in reality not much similarity between a salmon and a rocket – the simile does not add much – and matters are made worse by the attribution of outrage, a human quality, to a salmon – an example of the pathetic fallacy, in which human emotions are attributed to creatures, plants, or inanimate objects. Nevertheless, the sentence is communicatively effective. It works. The simile, albeit conventional, is more effective than a simple factual equivalent, e.g. 'fast', and reinforces the colourfulness of the pathetic fallacy, although, after a careful and logical analysis of the sentence, one might complain that it makes confusion worse confounded.

Human cognition in everyday life is fast and vague rather than precise and detailed. Precise and detailed cognitive entities can of course be constructed – that is what the whole of science is about – but such constructions are laborious and painstaking. They exist in a parallel universe to the cognitive processes of ordinary language users. Illustrating this point, the English language has an everyday expression that simultaneously draws attention to the rapidity of cognition and the vagueness of cognitive entities. This expression is ***just like that,*** used without an antecedent for the demonstrative pronoun, as in 21 and 22.

21. You can't change thoughts and beliefs **just like that.**
22. For a long time I didn't want children, and then I wanted them. All of a sudden, **just like that.**

A parallel expression, ***like this,*** reminds us that not all thought is necessarily verbal. It is sometimes used to accompany an explanation couched in the form of an action rather than words, as in 23.

23. Now, hold your two hands forward in front of you **like this**, as if you were going to dive.

Are these expression similes? They certainly fall into the class of exemplification by resemblance, and in particular resemblance to an entity that is only vaguely defined (in the case of 21 and 22, hardly defined at all).

[[Event]]
`wave (X 30); game (X 24); blow (X 22); scene from [or out of] a play (X 19); storm (X 14); holiday (X 12); accident (X 12); disease (X 11); tornado (X 12); whiplash (X 10); whirlwind (X 10).`

A different class of nouns commonly used in constructing similes denote events. A wide range of primary subjects, including both physical and abstract entities as well as events, are presented in terms of a wave, for example, (*a joke, a mass of blonde hair, the hum of voices, a murmur, blind terror, black shapes in the sky, the audience, the truth …*), but the verb, unsurprisingly, is usually a verb of motion (*move, rise, wash over, spread over, sweep along, sweep around, go over, come back, come through, ripple through, run away, engulf, …).* Jokes don't move, but waves do. The purpose of the simile is to show the effect of a joke, as an event, on an audience.

24. And they suddenly began to laugh, the joke toppling over them **like a wave**

With *game* as the secondary subject, the verb is usually *be* or *become*, as in 25 and 26.

25. Murder is **like a game of hazard**.
26. Court proceedings have become **like a game**.
27. You are moving the point of attack downfield; you are changing the thrust of attack from back row to wing back to fly-half. The permutations are endless. It used to be **like a game of chess**. Now it 's, at best, just wham-bam draughts.

One game may even be presented in terms of another game. In 27 the writer laments that the game of rugby used to be like a game of chess but now (switching to a metaphor to make the point more strongly), it is "just wham-bam draughts". The point is, of course, that chess, stereotypically, requires much deeper thinking than draughts.

To summarize the argument in this section: each frequent simile-making noun has a salient attribute (occasionally more than one), and this is what is exploited in similes. Very often, the relevant attribute is explicitly activated in the verb or some other part of

the local context.

Placement on an Axis

Finally in this section, mention must be made of a common group of adjectives that are used in prepositional phrases headed by ***like,*** used to place a concept at one end or another of any of various axes, in particular **big** <—> **small** (*big, vast, huge, enormous, great; little, small, miniature, tiny*); **new** <—> **old** (*new, young, old*); **normal** <—> **exceptional** (*real, normal, proper, true, typical; toy*). Categorization by resemblances in such cases places a concept at one end or another of an axis. This function underlies many other similes too, not just those containing evaluative adjectives.

Other frequent simile makers
`A cross between [one thing] and [another] (X 34); flame (X 16); cloud (X 15); good idea (X 14); lifetime (13); mask (X 11); river (X 12); star (X 20); statue (X 14); stone (X 51).`

In seeking to categorize the unfamiliar, speakers sometimes resort to a double comparison, as in 28 and 29. Once again, the function is not to create a precise factual statement, but rather to activate the imagination on the basis of vague possibilities – and to entertain. (Similes are a literary device; it would be an error to underrate the writer's intention to be amusing.)

28. George thought she **looked like a cross between a Christmas tree and an American footballer**. "You look lovely, Elaine."
29. … one of Mrs Crumwallis's repulsive collections of cacti. This one was thick and protuberant, and bent unexpectedly at the top: it **looked like a cross between a penis and a corkscrew.**

4. Using Similes to Talk about Personal Feelings

Similes, more or less conventional, also play an important role in presenting the inner and unknowable feelings of an individual to the outside world. This device is especially popular among fiction writers, who of course have privileged access to the feelings of the characters they create. Consider 30, for example.

30. He **felt like a lame dog who had found a wonderful home**.

In 30 the author (Catherine Cookson) use the simile to evoke private feelings by reference to some easily imagined situation. But how is it that she can expect a reader who has never encountered or even thought much about a homeless lame dog to 'get the message' from the comparison? The answer, I suggest, must lie somewhere deep in the cultural stereotype that English speakers, jointly and severally, assign to dogs, lameness, and homelessness: not just the cognitive values of these concepts, but more particularly their emotive associations An emotional as well as a cognitive reaction is invited. Each

reader or hearer is invited to construct his or her own interpretation on the basis of beliefs associated with the concept or concepts, assisted by surrounding comments from the author in the co-text. A fuller context for 30 is given in 30a.

> 30a. … Some feeling like that which had attacked Jim Nesbitt last year and made him marry that girl in Durham, who, to his mind, had nothing going for her. Plain as a pikestaff, really, even prominent front teeth; yet he had been unbearable until he got her; and now, as Jim himself said, he **felt like a lame dog who had found a wonderful home**. He thought it was a very strange simile, because he had never looked upon Jim as a lame dog, more like a gay dog.

The author's discussion of the simile makes it clear that it is intended to invoke pathos rather than contempt, and that the emotive content is what matters, as contrasted with, say, the finer points of vetinerary surgery.

> 31. He later complained he **felt like a Spanish general without a horse**.

31 is particularly instructive. In this case, the person making the simile is a newspaper editor (not a character in a historical novel) in the 1980s, complaining about constraints on editorial freedom. His metaphor appeals, not to the reality of modern Spanish generals (who probably ride about in cars rather than on horses), but to some cultural stereotype. Why "Spanish"? Are Spanish generals particularly noted for their cavalry expertise? Not as far as I know. Perhaps the reference is to some painting or to some historical event that is unknown to me. Nevertheless, the simile works for me: I am able to 'get the message' – or rather, get ***a*** message – by drawing on my stereotypical beliefs about generals, cavalry soldiers, and the temperament of Spaniards. Note how vague and emotive these stereotypes are: they must be, in order to be effective. The aim of simile like these is not cognitive precision, but vagueness. Vagueness allows a world of possibilities to open up in the mind of the reader or hearer, while precision constrains, deadens, and dulls the mind of the reader.

> 32. Shiona **felt like striking him**. The man was intolerable.

Even though the syntax of 32 is different from 30-31 (it contains a gerund – a verbal noun – rather than a concrete noun), it exploits the same communicative function of evoking insight into private feelings by postulating a resemblance. Again, a quest for precision is inappropriate. One would not, for example, ask Shiona, "Where exactly did you want to strike him, and how many times?"

5. Realis and Irrealis

Another striking feature of similes, already mentioned briefly above, is that many of them 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 irrealis group of simile makers is further evidence that similes do not invite interpretation one thing in terms of familiar experience, but rather they invite the reader or hearer to categorize one thing in terms of a salient properties conventionally attributed to another thing within a particular language or culture. This attribution is part of the convention of the language, and not necessarily part of the familiar experience of the language user. No one living today is in a position to know whether Trojans really work hard, yet the expression 'working like a Trojan' lives on in our language. We still talk of 'working like a slave', even though none of us have any direct knowledge of slavery.

> 33. The loud, coarse voice ripped through the quiet air with shocking force, **like a dagger through silk**.
> 34. I was so tired I was **like a zombie**.

You do not need to have cut silk with a dagger to understand 33. Indeed, the co-text states quite explicitly the aspect of cutting silk with a dagger that the reader is supposed to react to: "shocking force".

English speakers who have never met a zombie and even those do not believe in zombies can still understand 34. Zombies are not interpreted truth-conditionally. Scientism and logicism have deadened our linguistic sensitivities to the way the conventions of language rely on operations of the imagination and the persistence of culture. In order to understand a language, it is necessary to be familiar with a substantial part of its literature and to have seen some of its films and TV programs. Only very few anchors in actual experience of the physical world are necessary.

The following table summarizes some irrealis but conventional similes that are found several times in different texts in BNC. Typical verbs are mentioned in parentheses. Some are more typical than others. They are on the borderline between free, compositional text and frozen idioms. A few of these expressions are so idiomatic (i.e. opaque) that a gloss seems necessary. For example, it is very odd to talk of building a friendship in terms of 'a house on fire'. For someone who does not know that this is a conventional expression, the meaning must be confused rather than intensified by the simile. But for the most part, similes can be dynamic.

(shriek) like a banshee (X 9)
(behave) like a bear with a sore head (X 4)
(laugh) like a drain (X 9)
(get on) like a house on fire (X 13) [= be friends]
(go down) like a lead balloon (X 5)
(sleep) like a log (X 17)
(fuss or cluck round) like a mother hen (X 8)
(be) like a red rag to a bull (X 9) [= provoke someone]
(stick out) like a sore thumb (X 34)
(come down on someone) like a ton of bricks (X 18)
(sleep) like a top (X 3)
(work like) a Trojan (X 4)

These English phrases are all effectively irrealis. The resonance, insofar as it exists at all, is highly conventionalized. Banshees are not part of the everyday physical world, tops don't sleep, drains don't laugh, and only a Dadaist would try to build a balloon of lead. Even if reality does briefly impinge (no doubt drowned rats really do look horribly damp and unattractive), it is irrelevant. The point of mentioning them is to add a touch of colour – conventional colour – not to invite interpretation of one thing in terms of another. One does not need to have seen or felt a sore thumb to interpret the expression "(stick out) like a sore thumb". In fact, it is doubtful whether sore thumbs stick out any more noticeably than any other kind of thumb.

Irrealis similes can also be highly dynamic. Consider the simile in 35.

35. He **looked like a broiled frog**, hunched over his desk, grinning and satisfied.

You don't have to have seen a broiled frog to appreciate the effect of this. As a matter of fact, it is inconceivable that a frog, when broiled, would grin or look satisfied, and almost equally unlikely that any readers have ever seen a broiled frog. The purpose of the writer who created this simile, as with most professional writers, is to create interpretative resonance. The resonance is no doubt slightly different for each reader (how could we know?), and yet curiously enough the overall effect even of this dynamic simile is conventional enough. Partly this is because the meaning is qualitative or evaluative rather than classifying. Whoever "he" is, the purpose – and the effect – of the simile is to cause the reader to perceive him as an unpleasant or unattractive man. No doubt a serious case can be made for the beauty of frogs, but that is irrelevant. Conventionally in English, a man described as like a frog is typically small and ugly, not very fit, and has bulging eyes. The adjective "broiled" is now mainly an American cookery term, but it survives in occasional British usage referring to an unpleasant pink skin colouring resulting from sunburn. Truth-conditional scientific discourse, though important, represents only a small subset of real language in real use, and one that makes only one kind of contribution to our understanding of and interaction with the world.

6. What is the Difference between a Metaphor and a

Simile?

Similes share with metaphors the exploitation of cultural stereotypes, but they exploit them differently. Consider the following two examples:

36. Philip Wilbraham denies he is **a vulture purchaser** who has been picking up bargains on the cheap. "I wouldn't say we had bought things at knock-down prices," he says. "The businesses we have bought have not been in trouble. But we have benefited from the general lowering of prices."

37. She always found the supper she cooked for the children irresistible and when she gave them bacon and baked beans she would swoop down on their plates **like a vulture on a battlefield**.

Metaphors do not normally specify which particular characteristic of the secondary subject is invoked for resonance. By contrast, similes typically pick out a particular feature of the secondary subject (e.g. swooping down on the dead or dying). It would of course have been possible for Mr Wilbraham to deny that he had been swooping down, but what he actually did was to deny that he was a vulture purchaser, and then in a second sentence he indicated some aspect of the behaviour of a purchaser that might count as being that of a metaphorical vulture (buying business in trouble – dying businesses – at knock-down prices). If he had wanted to focus instead on the relevant behaviour of vultures, he could have had to use a simile, saying something like "I don't swoop down on businesses in trouble like a vulture purchaser." Conversely, the behaviour of the mother so enchanted by her own cooking that she steals her children's food from their plates is compared explicitly to one particular aspect of vulture behaviour – swooping. If she had wanted to use a metaphor, she could not have focused attention on this, the relevant feature of vulture behaviour, in the same clause.

Thus, metaphors are typically holistic, whereas similes typically pick out a particular feature of the secondary subject. Metaphors are stronger than similes. "This wood is iron" is a stronger statement than "this wood was hard, like iron" or "this wood is as hard as iron." It implies (falsely) that all the properties of iron are present in the wood in question – and the metaphor does not mention the relevant characteristic (hardness).

Similes, on the other hand, are liberating. The statement that a garage is a puddle – a metaphor – invites blank incomprehension, but the statement that a garage is like a puddle – a simile – invites a more constructive reaction, for example the question, "In what respect?" Dynamic metaphors are sometimes hard to interpret (exactly what did Schopenhauer mean when he said that a geometric proof is a mousetrap?), but you can say anything is *like* anything else, with less fear of being incomprehensible. ***Like*** invites one's interlocutor to consider just some salient properties that the primary and secondary subject share, For this reason, similes, especially dynamic similes, are much more common in the language than metaphors. They play a central role in enabling people to interpret and talk about the world around them, including new, unfamiliar, and previously unencountered phenomena. The right way to explain something unfamiliar, it seems, is to

invite the reader or hearer to compare the unfamiliar thing, not only with familiar experiences, but with an imagined interpretation of something familiar.

7. Conclusions

1. Understanding similes is an important corollary to understanding metaphors.
2. The distinction between conventional and dynamic language use is less important for similes than for metaphors. There is much more scope for dynamism in similes.
3. Dynamic metaphors are rare, but dynamic similes are common. It is striking, for example, how often a noun governed by ***like*** is modified or qualified.
4. Similes tend to focus attention on particular attributes, whereas metaphors are holistic.
5. Nevertheless, the focus of a simile is generally vague and emotive rather than precise and scientific. The reader's or hearer's imagination is activated (as opposed to the activation of precise beliefs). This means that similes are particularly valuable as a way of tentatively categorizing something new or unfamiliar.
6. The preposition ***like*** does not only serve to introduce similes. In addition, it proposes partial or full membership of a cognitive set. On the one hand, someone 'shrieking like a banshee' is not actually a banshee, but on the other hand, the expression 'people like doctors and lawyers' normally denotes a set that includes actual doctors and lawyers.
7. The purpose of saying that something is like something else is to activate recognition (often emotive recognition) of a particular semantic property, in contrast to the greater 'resonance' of a metaphor. Such a semantic property is part of the convention of the language, not necessarily a fact about the world.
8. Nouns governed by ***like*** mostly fall into rather a small group of semantic sets. The main sets are: Human Role, Animal, Artefact, and Irrealis. These nouns serve as cognitive and cultural reference points for members of the speech community.
9. Despite (or because of) all this, similes are liberating, whereas metaphors are restricted.

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