

Investigating Similes: ‘not so much told as suggested’

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Abstract

This paper discusses an investigation of similes in three small corpora of English texts: literary fiction, particularly Conrad, from the early modernist period; late 19th-century adventure fiction; and 19th-century nonfictional narratives of exploration. Similes are especially tractable for corpus research, since, unlike metaphors and metonyms, they contain fixed lexical signals (*like, as, resemble, etc.*). Although some simile features only emerge from investigating individual contexts, corpora enable an overview of patterns of behaviour.

Similes are traditionally said to explain the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar: that is, the vehicle (simile itself) refers to something more familiar to the reader/hearer than the object (entity or situation to which it is applied). Evidence from the corpora shows several variations on this basic paradigm:

- Vehicle is easier to visualize than Object, which is unfamiliar or unknown;
- Vehicle is less easy to visualize than Object should be by default, but in this instance Object does not conform to expectations or prototype;
- Vehicle is incongruent or inappropriate, thus creating irony, humour, etc.;
- Vehicle provides an explanation for Object: either hypothetical but possible, or unreal/impossible but giving the appearance of being the case;
- Vehicle emphasizes the degree to which Object is the case: this includes hyperbolic and stereotyped/idiomatic similes;
- Vehicle provides writer’s evaluation or interpretation of Object, either overtly or indirectly/subliminally.

Most striking is the way in which some writers, texts, and text types prefer one kind of simile to another. Predictably, nonfictional narratives tend to use simile to describe the appearance or behaviour of the unfamiliar. However, similes in Conrad texts often have an effect of defamiliarizing, destabilizing expectations: this can be related to Conrad’s ‘impressionism’ and creation of uncertainty in narrator and reader. Such patterns will be discussed and exemplified in the paper.

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