Shall I compare thee?
Simile understanding and semantic categories

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to present a few research findings on the process of understanding simile, where special attention was given to the semantic relationship between its three major components: Tenor (hereafter T), Vehicle (hereafter V) and Predicate (hereafter P). By manipulating different degrees of conventionality among these three components and the explicit presence of a P, eight kinds of simile emerged (e.g. conventional T and V but with unconventional P). Questionnaires were formulated consisting of lists of sixteen similes, representing the eight kinds. Subjects were asked to provide a short interpretation of the given similes, to estimate whether the simile conveyed negative, positive or neutral connotations, and finally to grade the degree of difficulty they encountered in understanding it. Thus, for example, most subjects reported that (1) "John is like a snake" says that John is a cunning and dangerous person, that it conveys negative connotations and that they had no difficulty in understanding it. Other, more "difficult" similes got diversified answers. Thus, for example, some subjects claimed that they had difficulty in understanding a phrase like (2) "John is like the state of Israel," and responses concerning its connotations and its specific meanings were more heterogeneous. One conclusion based on the results is that subjects tend to cling to existing semantic categories not only in understanding conventional similes (and, by implication, metaphors and symbols), but also when faced with highly novel ones.

1. A systematic approach to simile understanding

The purpose of this article is to report some findings of an empirical study investigating the process of understanding similes, and to propose an explanation for these findings. I chose to focus on the simile, rather than its famous "sister" metaphor, because of an important methodological reason: in simile,

as opposed to metaphor, the different components of the figurative phrase are more explicit and it is easier to examine and to analyze the role played by each component.[1]

A brief clarification concerning the peculiar characteristics of simile as opposed to metaphor is needed. Recent studies comparing metaphors and similes usually take as their prototypical examples phrases such as "A rumor is a weed" (a metaphor) as against "Rumors are like weed" (a simile). This pair is used, for example, by Chiappe and Kennedy (2001) in their argument against Glucksberg and Keysar's hypothesis (1990, 1993). According to Glucksberg and Keysar, metaphors are a special case of class categorization: as against regular categorical claims relying on pre-existing conventional semantic categories, metaphors create ad-hoc categories. Chiappe and Kennedy make the argument that in order to explain certain phenomena (e.g., the asymmetry between T and vehicles in similes), we do not need the ad-hoc categories hypothesis; we can explain these phenomena by viewing both similes and metaphors as an "invitation" to compare common properties of T and V and we can explain certain differences between these two figures by reference to the status of the shared properties in both. While their argument is apt and convincing, they nevertheless seem to reiterate, in the prototypical examples they use, a problematic presupposition about the nature and structure of similes and metaphors. The metaphors they are citing as their data represent in fact a very special case of metaphor similar in many important respects to a corresponding simile. One gets the impression that the only difference between similes and metaphors lies in the use of expressions such as "as…as" and "like" (in similes) as opposed to the usage of a copula, "is" or "are" (in metaphors). Most metaphoric expressions, however, do not have that form. Many would have the grammatical form of a noun and a verb, where the latter is understood metaphorically (e.g., "The skies are coughing") or of a noun phrase where the adjective is understood metaphorically (e.g., "Green ideas"). An important characteristic of many metaphoric expressions is that they do *not* have the explicit presence of the V term: the word "a human being" (or "a man" or "a person" or "face") does not appear in the expression "The skies are coughing", and there is no explicit mentioning of a tree (or any other typically green object) in the expression "Green ideas." And this explicit presence of a V is precisely the most important mark of similes.[2] The explicit presence of the V can be found in only one, very special case of metaphors: metaphors of equation having the form of "X is a Y" or "Xs are Ys". In fact, these metaphors of equation are in many ways closer to similes than they are to the greater part of typical metaphoric expressions.

Thus, the main reason why I focused on similes in my research is precisely because they allow for an explicit statement of the V *and* of different aspects or properties of this V (e.g., "This rumor spreads like weeds" or "This rumor

is like weed: it is difficult to uproot" or "This rumor is like weed: it smothers truthful reports" or "These rumors blocks the way of truthful reports just like weed smothers useful plants"). A corresponding metaphoric expression (e.g., "This rumor has grown many offshoots") does not have the "luxury" of stating an explicit V and explicit predicates or properties. Metaphor has, nonetheless, other benefits not shared by the corresponding similes (e.g., being more compact, more immediate and more polyvalent). Thus, to draw overall conclusions about the comprehension processes of similes and of metaphors based on expressions such as "A rumor is a weed" and "Rumors are like weeds" is, at best, a very limited and problematic exercise. Consider, for example, metaphorical expression such as "It is difficult to uproot these rumors," "These rumors have spread all over the field," "This rumor has grown many offshoots." Note that in none of these metaphorical expressions does the word "weed" (or any other sort of rapidly growing plant) appear. An adequate comparative analysis of the comprehension process of similes and metaphors should take into account such metaphoric expressions. Note also that any attempt to "translate" such metaphorical expressions into a corresponding simile form, would inevitably involve the introduction of an explicit V (e.g. "This rumor is like weed: it has grown many offshoots").

In addition to the methodological reason just specified, I should also mention the fact that I have written extensively on similes in poetry, and I needed an empirically oriented study as a supplement to the structural and interpretative focus of my previous studies.[3] The present study's main goal was to provide a systematic account of how actual readers process and interpret similes, with special attention to the semantic relationship between the three major components: Tenor, Vehicle, and Predicate,[4] and to the role played by the explicitness of the Predicate in the process of understanding similes.[5] The research was based on a questionnaire consisting of a list of sixteen similes[6]; for each example, subjects were asked to respond in three ways: (a) to provide a short interpretation of the simile, guided by the question *What does the following simile imply about its (human) T?*; (b) to answer the question *Does the simile imply, in your view, negative or positive connotations about its (human) subject/Tenor?*; (c) to grade the degree of difficulty experienced in the process of understanding the simile.

Thus, for example, responding to the simile (1) "Dan is like a snake," most subjects reported that (a) the simile implies that Dan is a cunning, unreliable and dangerous person; (b) that it conveys negative connotations about Dan; and (c) that they have no difficulty in understanding it. Other, more difficult similes received more diverse answers. Thus, for example, some subjects claimed that they had difficulty in understanding (2) "Dan is like the State of Israel," and responses concerning its connotations and what it implies about Dan were much more heterogeneous.

Let me describe now, in more detail, the logic behind the composition of the different types of similes, and then go on to present a few important findings. Before describing the specific types of similes, I should make clear that the research was conducted in Hebrew and the following examples are crude translations of the original Hebrew figurative expressions. In providing the following examples for the different types of simile I tried to choose examples that might sound conventional or non-conventional to the same degree in both languages, but one should of course be fully aware of the fact that there is no exact translation of semantic and cultural nuances, especially when it comes to figurative language: what sounds natural in one language may sound odd in another; what is a conventional, trite metaphor in Hebrew may strike an English speaker as a novelty, and vice versa.

2.   Eight types of simile and major results

The sixteen similes in each questionnaire were taken from eight categories of simile (two in each category), roughly divided into two major groups: *GROUP A* and *GROUP B*. Each of these consists of four sub-categories. *GROUP A* contains similes in which the connection between T and V is conventional due to the fact that it is based on an obvious P, codified in the semantic, linguistic and cultural network. Thus, for example, the connection between human beings and certain animals on the basis of specific traits attributed to these animals is part of our "cultural baggage." Hence, to say that Dan is as cunning as a fox may say something new about Dan, assuming that we do not know him, but it does not say anything new about our cultural and linguistic associations concerning foxes. *GROUP A*, therefore, consists of similes based on Tenors and Vehicles such as "Dan is like a snake" or "Dan is like a lion". Still, in order to check the exact effect of the specific Predicate in connecting Tenor and Vehicle, and the role played by its explicit presence in the simile, four categories were found necessary in *GROUP A*:

Category 1: The conventional T and V are stated, but the obvious, codified P is not explicitly present. Example: "Dan is like a snake." *Category 1* may be called the open conventional simile.[7]

Category 2: The conventional T and V are stated, and the obvious, codified P (s) is explicitly present. Example: "Dan is as dangerous as a snake." *Category 2* may be called the closed conventional simile.

Category 3: The conventional T and V are stated, and instead of the obvious, codified P, its opposite (or antonym) is stated. Example: "Dan is as pleasant as a snake." *Category 3* may be called the ironic conventional simile.

Category 4: The conventional T and V are stated, and instead of the obvious, codified P, a neutral, vague P is chosen, i.e., a P which might (logically

and empirically) be applied, in a very special context, to the Vehicle, but is not one of its codified traits. Example: "Dan is as miserable as a snake." *Category 4* may be called the opaque or confusing conventional simile.

GROUP B, on the other hand, consisted of similes in which the basic connection between T and V was not obvious, and was not part of a pre-existing linguistic and cultural network.[8] Note, by the way, that it was more difficult to compose similes for *GROUP B* than for *GROUP A*. Thus, for example, the metaphorical connection between human beings and the State of Israel is not obvious.[9] When a subject hears the phrase "Dan is like the State of Israel" there is no ready-made P that would automatically come to mind in the same way that the phrase "Dan is like a snake" would evoke one. The four categories belonging to *GROUP B* are as follows.

Category 5: The non-conventional T and V are stated, with no explicit P present. Example: "Dan is like the State of Israel." *Category 5* may be called the open non-conventional simile.

Category 6: The non-conventional T and V are stated, plus a P that makes the connection between T and V less enigmatic. Example: "Dan is as restless as the State of Israel." *Category 6* may be called the closed non-conventional simile.

Category 7: The non-conventional T and V are stated, but instead of a P that makes the connection between T and V less enigmatic, its opposite (or antonym) is stated. Example: "Dan is as peaceful as the State of Israel." *Category 7* may be called the ironic non-conventional simile.

Category 8: The non-conventional T and V are stated, and instead of a P that makes the connection between T and V less enigmatic, a neutral, vague P is chosen, i.e., a P which might (logically and empirically) be applied, in a very special context, to the Vehicle, but is not one of its codified traits. Example: "Dan is as accurate as the State of Israel." *Category 8* may be called the opaque or confusing non-conventional simile.

I composed four different questionnaires. Every category in each questionnaire was represented by two similes and hence each questionnaire had sixteen similes. By composing different questionnaires with different concrete similes I wanted to minimize the risk that the specific characteristics of a specific simile might influence the responses and the results obtained would be biased because of the nature of a specific simile. Each questionnaire was given to a different group of students (most of them freshmen of the Faculty of Humanities), and the total number of subjects responding to the questionnaires was 101. Table 1 presents the major results obtained for the eight categories with respect to the three examined dimensions:

Table 1. *Main results in assessments of eight types of conventional and unconventional similes*

	GROUP A				GROUP B			
	Cat. 1	Cat. 2	Cat. 3	Cat. 4	Cat. 5	Cat. 6	Cat. 7	Cat. 8
Mean % of the agreed upon trait	69.25	82.25	64.4	32.2	32.9	69.25	47.1	22
Mean % of the + or − emotive (the higher)	71.9	84.25	62.25	43.5	47.5	67.8	54	34.8
Mean % of "easy" (e.) or "difficult" (d.) (the higher)	66.75 (e.)	72.25 (e.)	46.75 (e.)	59.5 (d.)	52.5 (d.)	45.5 (e.)	45.7 (d.)	66.6 (d.)

3.   Correlation between levels of response

We shall focus now on a few interesting findings and suggest an explanation for them. First, let me point out an impressive over-all correlation between the basic three dimensions of responses: the cognitive specific interpretation, the emotive-connotative response and the evaluation concerning the difficulty of comprehending the given simile. In GROUP A, a high degree of correspondence is found between responses claiming ease of understanding *and* the assignment of a specific emotive value *and* a high mean percentage of an agreed upon semantic trait. In Category 1 of open conventional similes, there was a high consensus – a mean percentage of 69.25 – concerning specific interpretation. A similar mean percentage (71.9) was reached on a shared emotive connotation evoked by that simile; and these highly consensual figures went together with a high mean percentage of 66.75 claiming the similes in that category to be easy to understand. Category 2 of closed conventional similes showed an increase on all three fronts: a mean percentage of 82.25 on the level of a specific semantic trait, a high consensus concerning the emotive-connotative impression created by the simile (a mean percentage of 84.25) and a mean percentage of 72.25 agreed that similes of that category are easy to understand.

In Category 3, with the ironic P, there was a decrease from the very high mean percentage evident in Category 2, but two things are significant: first, that the ironic twist does not totally confuse subjects and that there is still a relatively high degree of consensus among responses; and, secondly, that the decrease in consensus relative to Category 2 was consistent in all three aspects: a mean percentage of 64.4 concerning a specific semantic feature, a similar mean percentage of 62.25 on the level of emotive-connotative impression, and a mean percentage of 46.75 agreed that these similes are easy to understand. Note, by the way, that this last number is still relatively high, because subjects could respond with one of three options: "easy to understand", "difficult to understand", and also "average degree of difficulty" (and of course

there were always subjects who simply abstained from a specific answer), and in presenting the figure I ignore the "average" responses.

The significant results emerge in Category 4, where a confusing P was introduced into a basically conventional simile: here we witness, in an almost dramatic manner, a decrease in the level of consensus in understanding the similes on both the cognitive and the emotive levels: a mean percentage of only 32.2 agreed on a specific semantic feature, and while a higher degree of consensus was obtained on the emotive-connotative level (43.5 found them + emotive, a rating that will be explained later in the paper), still the degree of consensus is relatively low compared to the results obtained in the first three categories (71.9, 84.25 and 62.25 respectively). This significant decrease corresponds to an impressive mean percentage of 59.5 evaluating the similes in Category 4 as difficult to understand.[10]

When we move to GROUP B, again the basic correspondence between the three levels of responses seems quite clear, but unlike GROUP A, here most results point to a "negative" correspondence, namely, a low degree of consensus on the cognitive and emotive level corresponds to a relatively high degree of agreement that the similes are "difficult to understand". In Category 5 a mean percentage of only 32.9 was obtained on the level of a specific semantic feature, a higher mean percentage (47.5) agreed on the emotive-connotative impact of the similes (I will discuss this difference later in the paper), but still, compared to a mean percentage of 71.9 of consensus obtained in the corresponding Category 1 of GROUP A, this is quite a low figure. These relatively low figures correspond to a mean percentage of 52.5 of subjects who evaluated the simile as "difficult to understand". In Category 7 and 8 we see a repetition of this basic pattern: a relatively low degree of consensus on the cognitive and emotive-connotative levels: a mean percentage of 47.1 and 54 in Category 7 and a mean percentage of 22 and 34.8 respectively in Category 8, and these correspond to the fact that the highest numbers of subjects evaluated the similes as "difficult to understand": mean percentages of 45.7 and 66.6 respectively. Note that in Category 8, where we have a basically non-conventional juxtaposition of Tenor and Vehicle, plus a confusing P, we get the lowest degrees of consensus on the cognitive and emotive-connotative levels as well as the highest figure claiming that the similes in that category are "difficult to understand".

The only exception in GROUP B is Category 6 where we have a relatively high degree of consensus on both the cognitive and the emotive levels (69.25 and 67.8 percent respectively), and this corresponds to 45.5 percent who evaluated the similes as "easy to understand". How can we explain this exception? Recall that Category 6 is the one where we have a basically non-conventional juxtaposition of T and V, but with the addition of a feasible P. This addition seems to have made the difference: what would seem otherwise puzzling ("Dan is like the State of Israel") became more intelligible by virtue of adding

a feasible Predicate connecting the Tenor and Vehicle ("Dan is as restless as the State of Israel"); hence the increase in the degree of consensus on cognitive and emotive responses. The fact that there was a mean percentage of 45.5 of subjects agreeing on its being "easy to understand" is in fact an indication that there was a relatively high consensus on its being an easy-to-understand simile. Perhaps this number may seem relatively low at first sight, but one should bear in mind that Table 1 shows the highest consensual results with respect to the demand to assess the difficulty of understanding: on the same category a mean percentage of only 26.1 thought it to be "difficult to understand" and 28.4 marked it as "average" on the scale of "easy-average-difficult to understand" (see Appendix).

We should, however, be careful about drawing conclusions from these results, particularly about the role of explicit P's in similes. The results of Category 6 suggest that an explicit P facilitates the processing of a simile, but it would be a mistake to infer from the results obtained in this category that the introduction of explicit P's in similes always facilitates their processing. The results obtained in Category 4 and in Category 8 indicate a different direction: in these two categories, the explicit introduction of certain P's made them *more difficult* to understand and *decreased* the degree of consensus on the cognitive and emotive level in comparison to the open versions of the same similes (*Category 1* and *5* respectively). In fact, it is not the mere introduction of an explicit P into a simile that matters, but rather the specific nature of that P , i.e., the specific semantic relations which that Predicate holds with the Tenor and Vehicle: When that P is among the dominant or conspicuous semantic features of the V and is also applicable to the Tenor, the processing is facilitated; however, when the explicit P does not fulfill these requirements, it only puts obstacles in the way of the simile's processing. In other words, the explicit chosen P may function as an element that closes the "circuit" but may also create a "short circuit" in the processing.

4.   Emotive and cognitive response

I asked subjects to respond to the question concerning the emotive connotations conveyed by the simile (i.e., does the simile convey to you a positive or negative impression about the Tenor), because I thought that even when subjects could not articulate a specific interpretation for certain similes, they would still have an emotive response to those similes. A first look at the answers obtained in the different categories would seem to show a mixed result. A closer look corroborates my initial hypothesis. The specific interpretations of similes were analyzed and for each simile the mean percentage of a recurring mentioned semantic trait or P was marked. In order to quantify the subjects' interpretations,

I counted the number of occurrences of different Ps in response to the similes and the mean percentage of the most frequently mentioned P was recorded in Table 1. Thus, for example, in response to the simile "Dan is like a snake," the mean percentage of the mentioned shared P was almost 70 (in terms of the specific content of the responses, the P "cunning" and a few of its synonyms were mentioned) – a figure representing a relatively very high degree of consensus. In analyzing the responses concerning connotations, the figure written down was the mean percentage of either "positive" or "negative" connotation, the higher of the two. In comparing the results of the consensus obtained in the specific interpretation as compared to the consensus regarding emotive connotations, it seems that there are no significant differences between the two in the first three categories of GROUP A, i.e., Categories 1, 2, and 3: in all three categories there is a relatively high degree of consensus on these two fronts: in Category 1 the difference is between 69.25 and 71.9, in Category 2, between 82.25 and 84.25, and in Category 3, between 64.4 and 62.25. Only in Category 4 can one detect a significant change: whereas there was a relatively low degree of consensus in interpreting the similes – the mean percentage of the agreed upon P was only 32.2 – there was a significantly higher degree of consensus of responses concerning the emotive connotation conveyed by the simile: a mean percentage of 43.5. First, let me note that this pattern is consistent with the one predicted by my initial hypothesis, i.e., a higher degree of consensus is expected on the level of emotive-connotation than on the level of conscious, specific semantic traits. But why is this difference evident only in Category 4 of GROUP A? The answer seems to be that only when people experience difficulty on the cognitive level, do they tend to move to the vague and elusive level of emotive connotations, and try to find there a relatively stable point to rely on: positive or negative emotive impression created by the simile, notably by the Vehicle. And Category 4, by its very structure, was built to confuse the subjects, by introducing a P that does not connect the T and the V in an obvious or conventional way, and hence processing on the cognitive level became difficult – and this condition did not apply to the first three categories, where there was no difficulty of processing on the cognitive level.

Let us now look at the results obtained in *GROUP B* (see the right four columns in Table 1). Here a significant change occurred in two categories. In Category 5, the mean percentage of the agreed upon P was 32.9 but there is a significant difference in the level of responses on the emotive-connotative level: a mean percentage of 47.5 shared a certain sentiment (positive or negative one). This result seems to be consistent with my initial hypothesis that when there is a low degree of consensus on the cognitive level, people look for another level of agreement, perhaps less precise than the cognitive semantic level: the emotive-connotative one. We recall that Category 5 is the open category of the non-conventional similes, predicted to be difficult to understand (and

indeed the mean percentage of 52.5 did think them difficult to understand). In Category 6 and Category 7 there was no significant difference between the two levels: In Category 6 there was a relatively high degree of consensus on both the cognitive and the emotive levels: a mean percentage of 69.25 on the cognitive as against 67.8 on the emotive-connotative. Category 6, we recall, is the category where the introduction of a specific plausible P facilitated the construction of a specific interpretation, and hence the results can be explained on the principle that whenever there is a high degree of consensus on the cognitive-semantic level, one can expect a similarly high degree of consensus on the emotive level. In Category 7 there was a lower degree of consensus but it was consistent on both levels: 47.1 on the cognitive and 54 on the emotive. Category 7 is the ironic category. Unlike its counterpart in *GROUP A*, Category 2, however, the degree of consensus is not very high, but it is still much higher than in the case of the open similes in Category 5 (47.1 as opposed to 32.9 percent!). At all events, one should note that there is a difference, and that difference is to the advantage of the emotive-connotative, consistent with the principle that if there is a difficulty on the cognitive level, people move to find a vague sentiment which seems to be shared.

Category 8 was supposed to be the most difficult in terms of its cognitive processing: not only is the basic connection between T and V non-conventional, but the explicit P mentioned was deliberately chosen to confuse the subjects, because it was not an obvious or feasible P. Here, a mean percentage of only 22 on the agreed upon trait was obtained on the cognitive level, but on the level of emotive connotation a higher degree of consensus was found: a mean percentage of 34.8. Thus, the results of Category 8 can unequivocally corroborate the validity of the principle that if there is a difficulty on the cognitive level, people move to a vague sentiment which they seem to share.

5.   Explicitness of P: What role does it play?

Let me present now two additional interesting findings and suggest an explanation for them. As I remarked earlier, I was interested in studying the role played by the P's explicitness in the process of simile understanding. In other words, what role is played by explicitly stating a P in a given simile? First, I wanted to compare responses from *GROUP A*, especially the ones received in Category 1 with those received in Category 2: what are the differences between responses to conventional, trite similes in which the P is explicitly mentioned and those cases where the P is absent. It seems that the results obtained corroborate the hypothesis that the explicit appearance of the expected P facilitates the process of understanding a simile: a mean percentage of 72.25 responded to similes in Category 2 as "easily understood" as opposed to 66.75

in Category 1, where the P was not explicitly stated. Note, however, that the difference is not very significant: in fact it seems that the explicit presence of the Predicate in Category 2 only *enhances or reinforces* an already strong existing tendency for consensual readings of similes in Category 1, on the two levels of comprehension, i.e., the level of specific semantic interpretation and the level of emotive connotations: the mean percentage of the agreed semantic trait was 69.25 in Category 1 and 82.25 in Category 2 and the mean percentage of either negative or positive connotation (the higher of the two) was 71.9 in Category 1 and 84.25 in Category 2.

After comparing Categories 1 and 2 in *GROUP A*, I wanted to compare the results of the two parallel categories in *GROUP B*, namely Category 5 and 6. Here a different picture emerged. The results obtained from responses to similes in Category 5 differed significantly from those to Category 6. Whereas subjects seemed to be, by and large, puzzled by the open, non-conventional similes of Category 5, the introduction of a feasible P to such similes in Category 6 made these similes much easier for processing on all three levels: whereas in Category 5, a mean percentage of 52.5 judged the simile as *difficult* to understand, in Category 6 a mean percentage of 45.5 deemed it *easy* to understand. As for specific semantic interpretation, the move from open to closed simile in *GROUP B* significantly raised the degree of consensus, from a mean of 32.9 in Category 5 to a mean of 69.25 in Category 6, and a similar, though less dramatic increase can be detected also on the level of perceiving emotive connotations: from a mean percentage of 47.5 in Category 5 to 67.8 in Category 6 (see the above Table).

Now let me sum up the results obtained in both *GROUP A* and *GROUP B* and propose an explanation for them: (1) The most important factor in making a simile intelligible, easy to understand and to process seems to be the degree of its codification, i.e., the conventional connection between T and V in the semantic network within a given language and culture; (2) the explicit appearance of a feasible P plays a role only when this conventional connection is absent; when we have such a conventional connection, an explicit P plays only a secondary, supportive role. Note, by the way, that the term "conventional" refers to a status in a given semantic net of associations and not to frequency of use: a phrase connecting a T and a V may be highly conventional even when it is rarely used. This explanation may account for three facts: first, the high degree of consensus obtained in Category 1 even when there is no explicit statement of a Predicate; secondly, the difference between the high consensus in Category 1 as opposed to the low degree of consensus in Category 5; and, finally, it can explain the dramatic difference between results in Category 5 and 6, where the introduction of a feasible P made the otherwise unintelligible similes much easier to process. Thus, the very existence of the Predicate, in and of itself, is not the major factor in comprehending a simile; what is much

more important is the nature of the semantic relationships between T and V and the degree to which they are codified in the linguistic and cultural network of associations.

6.   Ironic similes

With this idea in mind, let us look now at the results obtained in Category 3 of *GROUP A* and the corresponding Category 7 of *GROUP B*. Recall that in these categories I introduced the Tenor, the Vehicle, and the antonym of the expected or feasible Predicate. Let us look, first, at Category 3. Theoretically, when faced with such a construction, a subject could have come up with three different responses: (1) the subject could have been confused or baffled by the unexpected Predicate; or (2) he or she might have tried to fit the unexpected P into the known semantic net by finding a metaphorical reading of some sort of that P (e.g., in "Dan is as innocent as a snake" the word "innocent" can be interpreted, say in the special context of a non-venomous, pet snake, as being harmless and hence be applied to both the snake and Dan). Such an interpretative move, however, did not occur. The results pointed, with a quite impressive majority to the third way: (3) subjects solved the temporarily baffling similes of that category by "correcting" the explicit P and reconstructing the original, expected P out of its antonym: a mean percentage of 64.4 agreed on a specific trait attributed to the Tenor, and that trait was the obvious, conventional P . Thus, for example, "Dan is as innocent as a snake," was understood by an impressive majority as saying that Dan is in fact as cunning (and its synonyms) as a snake. In other words, subjects interpreted such similes as *ironic* expressions, where the explicit P in fact indirectly expresses its opposite. Why was such a move taken by the majority of subjects?

In real life situations we opt for the ironic interpretation when we have good reason to believe that the explicit statement is not true and its opposite is true.[11] Thus, if we know Dan to be a cunning person, and we hear someone saying that Dan is an innocent person, and we know that he knows Dan as well as we do, we come up with the ironic interpretation of the phrase "innocent." A similar logic holds true also of literary texts, when we tend to take a phrase ironically after we have learned something about the persons and the situations involved. The only difference is that our knowledge is derived from the text creating characters and situations similar to real-life persons and situations, and not from real persons and real-life situations. In our questionnaire, however, subjects had no information about "Dan," whether he is in fact an innocent or a cunning person; all they had was the conventional semantic network, based on a shared linguistic and cultural knowledge. The reason why the great majority of subjects opted for the ironic reading of similes in Category

3 seems to be the fact that this is the easiest, most elegant solution. Solution No. 1 mentioned above, staying in a state of bafflement, is inconvenient in terms of mental equilibrium; solution No. 2, finding an indirect metaphorical reading of the baffling Predicate, requires an active and even creative effort, searching the associations of the explicit P and finding within the set of these associations a semantic feature that could be applied to both the V and the T without creating a contradiction.[12]

Opting for the ironic reading is the most elegant solution because it succeeds in solving the conflict between the P and the V (i.e., innocence and a snake) with the minimal mental effort by simply moving to the opposite or the antonym of the stated P, while maintaining that the phrase is meaningful.

The ironic interpretation preferred by most subjects may also indirectly corroborate the hypothesis that the decisive factor in comprehending similes is the net of semantic relationship between Tenor, V and P existing in a given language and culture, because subjects tend by and large to reconstruct that net when faced with concrete "violations" of it. They prefer to re-establish the existing net on adopting the novel P and try to justify it with some sort of metaphorical reading. Thus, again, and from a different angle, it seems that the explicit Predicate, in and of itself, does not play a decisive role in the process of interpreting a simile.

What happened with the ironic category of *GROUP B*, namely Category 7? Here the situation is a bit more complicated, but still one result seems significant and congruent with the principles offered earlier: compared with Category 5, the open version of the non-conventional simile, a much higher degree of consensus was obtained in the specific understanding of the simile: whereas the mean percentage of agreed upon trait in Category 5 was only 32.9, the introduction of the antonym of a feasible P encouraged subjects to a much higher degree of consensus: a mean percentage of 47.1, and that trait is the reconstructed feasible Predicate. Thus, for example, in "Dan is as peaceful as the State of Israel" a significant number of subjects suggested that Dan is, in fact, quite hectic (and synonyms). It seems that the introduction of the antonym of a feasible P triggered the subjects, according to the logic of mental efficiency and elegance described above, to focus on the unstated feasible antonym. In that respect, the antonym of the feasible P served as a clue to the hidden, inexplicit feasible Predicate, facilitating its finding. True, in Category 6, where the feasible P was stated, a higher degree of consensus was obtained with regard to a specific trait (a mean percentage of 69.25), but still, the difference between the results obtained in Category 5 and in Category 7 is significant.

A comparative view of the respective ironic categories, namely Category 3 and Category 7, in *GROUP A* and *GROUP B*, is also instructive: there is a considerably higher degree of consensus in the interpretation of similes in Category 3 (a mean percentage of 64.4) compared to those in Category 7 (a

mean percentage of 47.1). The explanation is simple and is related to the fact that the semantic relationships between Tenor, V and P in *GROUP A* is much more cohesive and tied up in the given linguistic and cultural network, and consequently subjects perform an easier process of correction or re-construction in which the expected P is restored.

7.   Concluding remarks

The most important results of my study seem to be the fundamental role played by the underlying cultural and semantic network of associations connecting Tenor, V and P in the process of understanding similes. This network is responsible for filling in for an absent P (in the case of an open simile), and what is even more striking – it may sometimes even overrule an explicit P (in the case of an ironic simile). The study points to the conclusion that people tend to rely as much as possible on existing semantic categories when they interpret metaphorical expression, including novel ones. This may be related to a wider principle of the economic use of mental energy: the preferred interpretation is the one closest to the standard semantic network. Thus, a simple reliance on an existing semantic category seems to be the first, preferred option, demanding the least mental energy. When this is inapplicable, one would try to simply reverse the given P – as demonstrated in the case of ironic simile – an operation demanding a minimal mental effort. And only if such relatively simple mental procedures are ineffective will a reader opt for an inventive interpretation that requires a re-arrangement of accepted semantic categories.[13] Besides, we should not forget that in many cases, against my personal expectations as a literary scholar, a subject will not even bother to make that small effort but will rather label the unconventional metaphor opaque or meaningless.

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Appendix

The following is an example of one questionnaire (out of four), translated from Hebrew. The sixteen similes represent the eight categories (two similes per category). There are cases, of course, where the English translation does not convey exactly the same meaning of the original Hebrew, but most of them do.

Questionnaire

In front of you, you have a list of similes about Dan. What is implied from each of them about Dan? Write down the first thought that comes to your mind.

If you have additional thoughts, write them too, in the order they came up. If nothing comes up, write – "opaque." Write down also whether the simile evokes a positive or a negative impression about Dan and whether the specific associations came up easily or not (i.e., "easy," "average," "difficult").

Example: "Dan came like a rocket"

Implied meaning:	*General impression*	*Degree of difficulty*
Dan came very quickly	Positive	Easy

The similes	*General impression*		*Degree of difficulty*		
Implied meaning:	Positive	Negative	Easy	Average	Difficult
Dan is like a tortoise					
Dan is as evil as a table					
Dan is cunning like a snake					
Dan is shy like a hoopoe					
Dan is light like a lead					
Dan is fertile like a field of clover					
Dan is sad like a seismograph					
Dan is like the State of Israel					
Dan is official like the sun					
Dan is like a mountain slopes					
Dan is pleasant-to-touch like glass paper					
Dan is cold like a can of soda					
Dan is strong like an ox					
Dan is full like a cleaning in a forest					
Dan is like a mule					
Dan is sated like a sea-shore					

Notes

1. A simile is usually more explicit than a corresponding metaphor, as has already been argued and illustrated in Leech (1969: 156–157). Still, in many instances, similes have also many implicit elements, especially on the level of the predicates, and the process of their comprehension and interpretation requires the making of the implicit elements explicit.
2. For various aspects of the structure of similes, see Fishelov (1993).
3. See, for example, Fishelov (1996) and (1992).
4. The first two terms, Tenor and Vehicle, were introduced by Richards (1936), and are common in the literary analysis of metaphors and similes. These two terms have been replaced in discussions of metaphor in cognitive psychology (e.g., Gibbs, Lakoff and Turner et al.) with the pair "target" and "source." What I call here P was sometimes referred to in classical rhetoric as *tertium comparationis*, and in

some discussions (e.g., Black 1962) as "ground." For a comprehensive analysis of the possible combinations of T, V and P in similes and metaphors, see my book (1996: 80–105). For a basically formal analysis of the presence/absence of these components, see Genette (1972); Cohen (1968). For an analysis of these components from the perspective of speech act theory, see Mack (1975).

5. In addition to these three major components, one should of course add the simile's marker: an expression that directs us to construct analogies (or metaphorical relations) between the T and the V, which can take diverse linguistic forms, the most common among them are "like" and "as…as." For a description of the marker's (or "connective") linguistic manifestations, see Darian (1973). Kittay (1987: 19) makes an interesting suggestion that the marker in similes has in fact a metaphorical status: the expression "like" in the phrase "Dan is like a snake" is used metaphorically, unlike its use in comparative literal statement such as "Dan is like his brother."

6. These sixteen examples represented a mixture of eight categories (as will be explained later). Subjects were not aware of course of the principles according to which the questionnaire has been composed. For an example of one such questionnaire, see the Appendix.

7. For the term "open simile," see the classical discussion in Beardsley (1958: 136–138).

8. The examples of GROUP B are closely related, but not identical to what is sometimes called "literary" or "poetic" similes (and metaphors), characterized by subjective, polyvalence and non-automatic activation of our linguistic, cognitive and cultural resources: see, for example, Lakoff and Turner (1989), Steen (1994: 37–41), Gibbs (1994: 260–261), Fishelov (1993; 1996: 39–47). Note, however, that some examples of GROUP B may be perceived as difficult or opaque or unintelligible, without being necessarily recognized as "literary" or "poetic."

9. I am not talking here of course about possible obvious *metonymic* relations between people and the state of Israel, where they might be its citizens or they might visit it.

10. In fact, after an in-depth scrutiny of the responses to the questionnaires, the category of "difficult to understand" was shown to consist of responses that explicitly stated the simile was difficult to understand, plus those which simply avoided answering specifically on that issue, and also did not provide a specific cognitive interpretation, because those were the most difficult, opaque similes in the questionnaire.

11. For a detailed analysis of the process of understanding ironic expressions in real life, based on Paul Grice's (1975) model, see Booth (1974).

12. To rephrase this second option in terms of Glucksberg and Keysar's view of metaphor comprehension (1990, 1993) – we are invited to create an ad-hoc category that would include innocent people and snakes. The results, however, indicate that this is interpreters' last and least desirable option.

13. If one adopts Glucksberg and Keysar's hypothesis (1990, 1993), one would expect a more normal and easy process of coming up with ad-hoc categories in the process of metaphor comprehension. Many results in my study suggest, however, that such production is quite rare, and that conventional semantic categories are quite "resilient," even when explicit formulae seem to challenge them.

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