

Are similes and metaphors interchangeable?

A case study in opinion discourse

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Since Aristotle, scholars have regarded similes and metaphors as equivalent figures of speech sharing very similar comprehension, interpretation and usage patterns. By analysing the use of similes in real discourse, the aim of this study is to show that these two analogical figures reflect different cognitive processes, as well as different discursive functions, using as a framework cognitive models. To this end, this work presents, first, the main differentiating features of the two figures existing in the literature. And, second, it analyses 100 natural-occurring similes in English opinion discourse (news, interviews and commentary sections) in order to explain the conceptual-semantic and formal-syntactic factors which explain why similes and metaphors are not interchangeable in the discourse type under study; that is, why metaphors can usually be transformed into similes by adding *like*, whereas the opposite process seems to depend on specific conditions of structure, use and interpretation.

Keywords: similes vs. metaphors, opinion discourse, socio-cognitive approach

1. Introduction

The relationship between simile and metaphor has interested linguists, philosophers, psycholinguists and rhetoricians since Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. Two main approaches to the topic have existed and exist today. On the one hand, the *equivalence view*, also called classical or comparative approach, by which metaphor is considered a simile with an elliptic 'like' that makes claims about a category (Tversky, 1977; papers included in Ortony, 1993[1979]; Gentner, 1983; Addison, 1993; Gentner & Bowdle, 2001; Glucksberg, 2001; Roncero, Kennedy, & Smyth, 2006). On the other hand, the *non-equivalence* or categorization approach, by which a metaphor is a categorization assertion, whereas a simile is an assertion of similitude, among other cognitive and discursive differences (Glucksberg & Keysar, 1990; Aisenman, 1999; Chiappe & Kennedy, 2000; Chiappe, Kennedy, & Chiappe, 2003; Croft & Cruse,

2004; Israel, Riddle Harding, & Tobin, 2004; Glucksberg & Haught, 2006; Utsumi, 2007; Bernárdez, 2009; Moder, 2012; Dancygier & Sweetser, 2014).

By analysing natural occurring examples of the construction *A is like B* in English opinion discourse, the present work gives evidence for the second view, namely that metaphors and similes do not only show structural differences, but also reflect different cognitive processes as well as different discursive functions. The working hypothesis of the paper is thus the cognitive linguistics' theoretical premise that any change or difference in the structure of a linguistic form entails meaning and/or functional changes, however slight they might be. The idea that language construes the world in a particular way depending on the specific context, speaker's purpose, addressee, etc., and that it therefore provides different ways of directing attention to certain aspects of what we are talking about, that it reflects different viewpoints, etc., explains why these two figures of speech would not exist if they were identical; that is, they would not be cognitively or linguistically efficient (Langacker, 1987).

In order to support this working hypothesis, I first present, in Section 2, the main features of similes. In Section 3, I review the main structural, semantic, cognitive and discursive differences between similes and metaphors in the literature. In Section 4, I explain the data and methodology of the study, as well as the analysis. Finally, the preliminary results of the work are summarized in Section 5.

2. What is a simile?

From a formal point of view, a simile is a conceptual and discursive process of analogy that follows the structure of literal comparisons, that is, it consists of two elements (A and B) prototypically marked by the comparison marker *like*. A stands for the target, topic or *comparandum*, i.e. the entity described by the simile, and B is the source, vehicle or *comparatum*. A third element, E, the property shared by A and B or *tertium comparationis*, can be implicit or explicit:

- (1) *Independence is like an elephant – difficult to describe but instantly recognizable*
(89)¹

In Example (1), *independence* (A) is a process that is defined in relation to *elephant* (B). The core construction, *A is like B*, in this case is followed by a discourse portion that highlights in which respect A is similar to B, that is, the specific property

1. Number in brackets before example corresponds to example within the text, and after the text to number in corpus.

compared (the *tertium comparationis*). *Difficult to describe but instantly recognizable* thus makes explicit in which sense these two unrelated entities can be compared.

Similes, like literal comparisons, “assert or deny a likeness between two things in such a way that one of them describes the other” (Bredin, 1998, p. 74). They elaborate the “properties of a primary figure, the target, by matching them with corresponding properties in the secondary figure, the source (Israel et al., 2004, p. 133). But similes differ from comparisons in various ways. In the first place, the entities compared must belong to different domains, as in the case of conceptual metaphors. This means that the two entities are “normally felt to be incompatible”, and “must somehow be, or be construed as being, fundamentally unlike each other, and therefore unlikely to be compared” (Israel et al., 2004, pp. 124–125). According to Cuenca (2015, p. 144), a simile can be described as a double movement of conceptualization since similes assert a similarity, but, at the same time, they presuppose dissimilarity: the two entities are dissimilar in most respects but similar at least in one, and this is why an elaboration is generally needed or expected. In the second place, similes unlike literal comparisons are not symmetrical, that is, target and source cannot be interchanged without affecting the meaning of the construction, as in (?) *An elephant is like independence*. This seems to be related to the fact that in this type of predicational construction the target or subject is a semantically autonomous element, whereas the predicate or source is dependent (Sullivan, 2013, in Dancygier & Sweetser, 2014).

Let us now briefly summarize the main structural or constructional² features of similes that will help to understand their specific cognitive and discursive functions in comparison to metaphors, presented in Sections 3 and 4.

According to the research presented in Cuenca and Romano (2013) and Cuenca (2015), the similes in the data show different syntactic and semantic configurations:

- i. There are three main configurations: NP *is like* NP, NP *is like* Clause, and Clause *is like* Clause: *Scotland is like an adolescent* (11), *Video chat is like talking to neighbours minus the fence* (40) and *Watching football is like dancing* (40).
- ii. When the target, A, is an NP, it is usually a definite NP or proper noun, whereas the source, B, is either definite or indefinite, a feature, we will see, which influences the speaker’s choice for metaphor or simile: *Football is like ‘the game of life’* (43) or *Church of England is like a coffee chain* (32).
- iii. From a semantic point of view, both A and B can correspond to different types of stable discrete entities, dynamic entities, or predications. There is a general

2. Dancygier and Sweetser (2014) and Cuenca (2015) consider the *A is like B* structure as a grammatical construction in the sense of Construction Grammar (Fillmore, 1988; Goldberg, 1995).

- pattern of correspondences between the entities compared: discrete entities are compared with discrete entities, *Spain is like a father* (5); dynamic entities are compared with dynamic entities, *Breast cancer is like climate change* (50); and predications with predications, *Shopping for milk is like choosing a school* (90).
- iv. B, the source, is conceptually more complex, a fact that corroborates the more descriptive functions of similes in contrast to metaphors: *Westminster MPs voting for independence is like turkeys voting for Christmas, but come on, they don't have to act like turkeys as well, do they?* (17). This example projects two elements (*Westminster MPs = turkeys and independence = Christmas*), and, in addition, the source combines the well-known idiomatic expression with a metaphorical wordplay: 'MPs' don't have to act like turkeys'.
 - v. The elaboration, considered optional by most scholars (Fromilhague, 1995; Bredin, 1998; Israel et al., 2004; Roncero et al., 2006; Pierini, 2007), is not obligatory but a key element in the production and interpretation of similes if one analyses naturally occurring data. As a matter of fact, only 8% of the examples analysed in Catalan appeared without elaboration (Cuenca, 2015) and 15% of the English examples.

3. Similes vs. metaphors: An overview

For many years, scholars followed Aristotle adopting the equivalence view, an approach which, as already mentioned, regards these figures of speech as variants of a unique (or very similar) conceptual process of analogy. This is also true of Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT). For CMT, metaphor is not a linguistic phenomenon but rather a conceptual phenomenon consisting of a mapping process between two domains – the base or source and the target, which differ only in the surface presence or absence of the word *like*. Within this conceptual view, both figures are treated the same with regard to comprehension, interpretation, and usage (Aisenman, 1999).

The equivalence approach follows the belief in linguistics, psycholinguistics and philosophy of language that gives unconditional priority to literal meanings. Any utterance in any context is first interpreted literally. If the literal interpretation fails to make sense in that context, or is 'defective' in any way, then a search for an alternative interpretation is made (Fogelin, 1988; Searle, 1979). Metaphors and their counterpart similes are thus literally false, as in *My job is a jail / My job is like a jail*, where one's job cannot literally be a jail and so an alternative 'true' interpretation is sought, the figurative one, which is equivalent in both forms (Fogelin, 1988, p. 29; in Glucksberg & Haught, 2006, p. 361).

In short, within the equivalence view, a simile is a figurative comparison that includes the word *like* (or *as*), such as *Football is like life*; and a metaphor is a figurative comparison with an elliptic *like*, as in *Football is life*. Similes would simply “make explicit what a metaphor merely implies” (Israel et al., 2004, p. 123).

The equivalence approach has been challenged by different psycholinguistic, cognitive and discourse studies (Black, 1979; Glucksberg & Keysar, 1990; Bredin, 1998; Aisenman, 1999; Gentner & Bowdle, 2001; Chiappe et al., 2003; Croft & Cruse, 2004; Israel et al., 2004; Bowdle & Gentner, 2005; Glucksberg & Haught, 2006; Utsumi, 2007; Bernárdez, 2009; Moder, 2012; Dancygier & Sweetser, 2014; among others). For these scholars, metaphors and similes are understood in their own right, showing different cognitive, communicative and discursive functions. Below and in chronological order, I summarize the main findings of previous work on the topic.

One of the first scholars to challenge the equivalence view is Black (1979). For Black, the main difference between metaphor and simile is that of ‘*discursive force*’, metaphor being the stronger figure of the two: “implication is not the same as covert identity: looking at a scene through blue spectacles is different from comparing that scene to something else [...] in discursively comparing one subject with another, we sacrifice the distinctive power and effectiveness of a good metaphor” (Black, 1979, pp. 30–31).³

Glucksberg and Keysar’s (1990) is an early review work which questions several assumptions of the comparison model. The paper presents topics discussed both in the previous and later literature, such as differences in ‘*comprehension*’, ‘*rhetorical force*’, and ‘*communicative functions*’:

- i. Following one of the most repeated premises of the non-equivalent view, the fact that similes are assertions of similitude, whereas metaphors are categorization assertions, Glucksberg and Keysar (1990, p. 6) consider that metaphors are not “first recognized as comparison statements, that is, as implicit similes, and then the attributes of the vehicle or source are compared to, or mapped onto, the features of the topic”. In fact, defenders of the comparative view suggest the opposite, that “similes are to be understood as implicit metaphors” (Glucksberg & Keysar, 1990, p. 7), that is, “the similarity that is thereby perceived among category members is thus a product of that categorization, not an antecedent of it; the categorization produces the similarity, not the other way around” (Glucksberg & Keysar, 1990, p. 11). In addition, similes pose a more difficult

3. A conclusion that is very close to cognitive linguistics’ idea that language construes the world in a particular way depending on the specific contextual factors.

- comprehension problem for listeners, since they do not express the class-inclusion relation explicitly (Glucksberg & Keysar, 1990, p. 16).
- ii. In the same line as Black (1979), Glucksberg and Keysar (1990) also consider similes as weaker figures than metaphors: “though many metaphors can be paraphrased as similes, the simile forms seem weaker”, and this is due to the fact that “the canonical metaphor explicitly expresses an unqualified class-inclusion relation and [...] anything that qualifies the class-inclusion character or reduces its scope will reduce metaphoricity” (Glucksberg & Keysar, 1990, p. 16).
 - iii. Finally, for these scholars, the main difference between simile and metaphor stems from the communicative function of metaphors. “Metaphors are used to communicate a complex, patterned set of properties in a shorthand that is understood by the members of a speech community who share relevant mutual knowledge, [...] whereas the simile form suggests that only some properties of the category are to be applied” (Glucksberg & Keysar, 1990, p. 15).

The differences between metaphors and similes have also been studied experimentally by psychologists. Following Gentner's (1983) ‘*structure-mapping*’ analysis, Aisenman (1999) establishes a correlation between the type of predicate mappings (attributive, relational, or double) used by the two compared domains and the linguistic means speakers select to best represent each comparison. The results of his study suggest that similes are the preferred linguistic representation for mapping attributive predicates (one-place predicates as in *X is straight*), whereas metaphors are favoured for mapping relational predicates (n-place predicates, e.g., *X is used to transfer Y to Z*). Aisenman's work points out important ideas for later studies in the field, namely that similes and metaphors have different communicative functions: “The use of similes and metaphors is not accidental. Speakers make their choices in full awareness of the distinct function of each construction ...” (Aisenman, 1999, p. 49).

Supporting this interpretation, Aisenman (1999) measures response time to metaphor and simile, and concludes that metaphors are much more rapidly understood than similes, a conclusion also reached by Johnson (1996) and Glucksberg (2001). According to Aisenman, simile would be cognitively marked, as opposed to metaphor that would be primary, universal and general, both in thinking and in language. Aisenman's results, nevertheless, must be taken with caution, since they are based on a short list of artificial source and target mappings included in Gentner (1983).

In a series of papers, Chiappe and Kennedy (2000), and Chiappe et al. (2003) also conclude that both figures of speech are different phenomena, since similes compare while metaphors categorize. They understand the main difference between metaphor and simile in terms of degrees of similarity or ‘*aptness*’, arguing that

metaphors are preferred when the relationship being expressed is quite ‘apt’ or easily understandable, as in *Cigarettes are time bombs*, but that similes are preferred if similarity is less apt or low, as in *Trees are like straws* (Chiappe et al., 2003). Aptness is high if the vehicle (*time bombs*) points out what the reader takes to be significant features of the topic (*cigarettes*); and low when the vehicle or source (*straws*) and the topic or target do not share many common properties.

Bowdle and Gentner (1999, 2005) and Gentner and Bowdle (2001) analyse the concept of ‘conventionality’⁴ of the figurative meaning as the main difference between metaphors and similes. For these scholars, conventionality plays such a significant role in figurative language that highly conventional expressions have their own classification as clichés. In their experimental works, they conclude that similes are preferred when the vehicle or source of the comparison is novel or creative, and metaphors when the source is more conventional or familiar. This idea is further developed in Bowdle and Gentner’s (2005) ‘*career of metaphor hypothesis*’, which claims that metaphors are basically processed as comparisons when they are first introduced, i.e. when they are novel to a reader or addressee. Over time and with repeated use in different contexts, “...there is a shift [...] from comparison to categorization as metaphors are conventionalized.” This shift from comparisons to categorization assertions constitutes the career of any given metaphor: “...the initial act of comparison [...] gives rise to conventional metaphoric categories” (Bowdle & Gentner, 2005, p. 197).

Croft and Cruse (2004) insist on the ‘*scope of the mappings*’ between source and target as the major difference between both figures. Similes of the sort under study – *A is like B* – have a more restricted mapping between both domains, whereas metaphors posit more open mappings between the two domains. However, Croft and Cruse acknowledge that this correspondence applies to the more prototypical constructions, and that the less prototypical similes may also have open mappings, similar to those found in metaphor. Clearly their findings must be related to the artificial vs. natural character of the data analysed.

Building on their own previous empirical psychological studies, Glucksberg and his associates (Glucksberg & Keysar, 1990; Glucksberg & Haught, 2006) try to demonstrate that metaphors and similes differ both in ‘*interpretability*’ and ‘*meaning*’. Their work reviews, as well, many of the findings in the field and arrives at the following conclusions:

- i. When subjects are asked to relate properties to both figures, they evoke properties at the basic-level in similes but properties inherent to the superordinate category in metaphors. In a simile such as *Ideas are like diamonds* the properties

4. Schmid’s (2014) entrenchment-and-conventionalization model develops this idea as well.

evoked were: ‘rare, desirable, shine and glitter’, whereas in its metaphorical form *Ideas are diamonds*, subjects evoked properties related to valuable entities and not to the basic literal gem, such as ‘brilliant, insightful, fantastic and unique’ (Glucksberg & Haught, 2006, p. 364). If this is so, it would prove the categorical nature of metaphor and the comparative one of simile.

- ii. Glucksberg and Haught propose an alternative to Bowdle and Gentner’s (2005) career of metaphor hypothesis, their ‘*quality-of-metaphor hypothesis*’, by which really good metaphors, in which the vehicle concept is an ideal and salient exemplar of the category it represents, work best as categorizations, whereas poor or limited metaphors might work best as comparisons, even when highly conventional (Glucksberg & Haught, 2006, p. 375). Thus, *I felt like a sardine*, uttered in the specific context of a crowded situation, has a very narrow communicative content: to be packed together like sardines in a can. In no other respect is one characterized as a sardine: not ‘fishy, oily, small, or edible’, explain these researchers. Probably because the attribution of one, context-dependent sardine property is intended, this familiar expression does not seem to work as a categorization assertion, i.e. *I felt I was a sardine* doesn’t quite capture the same intention as *I felt like a sardine* (Glucksberg & Haught, 2006, p. 375). According to these scholars, comparison and categorization may be viewed as complementary strategies for understanding metaphors, with the choice of strategy dependent upon the quality and aptness of the metaphor. Comparisons or similes are resorted to when a categorization does not make much sense, and categorizations are used when the metaphor is apt, whether novel or conventional (Glucksberg & Haught, 2006, p. 375).

Glucksberg and Haught’s work remains somewhat controversial. Their conclusion, that the more likely determinant in the simile-metaphor distinction is ‘*aptness*’ or ‘*ease of comprehension*’, over ‘*novelty*’, has not been corroborated in other analyses, and, as Bernárdez (2009) points out, their work contains several inconsistencies, such as the fact that they consider *shark* to have a literal meaning in the simile *My lawyer is like a shark*, and a metaphorical one in *My lawyer is a shark* (Glucksberg & Haught, 2006, p. 374).

Utsumi (2007) introduces ‘*interpretive diversity*’ as the best explanation for the difference between the figures. This concept refers to the semantic richness of the figurative interpretation of a topic-vehicle pair, which is determined by both the number of features involved in the interpretation and the uniformity of salience distribution of those features. The interpretive diversity view predicts that “interpretively more diverse pairs should be easier to comprehend via a categorization process, and thus the preference for and the relative comprehensibility of the metaphor form should be greater” (Utsumi, 2007, p. 291). This view predicts a positive

correlation between interpretive diversity and difference in comprehensibility. An interpretively more diverse pair will achieve a greater difference in comprehensibility. Specifically, when topic-vehicle pairs are highly diverse, it is predicted that there should not be so much difference in comprehensibility between both forms. When topic-vehicle pairs are less diverse, on the other hand, it is predicted that the metaphor form should be less comprehensible than the corresponding simile form (Utsumi, 2007, p. 301), and this would explain why people prefer *Life is a journey* rather than *Life is like a journey*, and *Highways are like snakes* rather than *Highways are snakes* (Utsumi, 2007, p. 291).

In their study “On simile”, Israel et al. (2004, p. 124) suggest that the main point in studying the difference between similes and metaphor “is not so much a matter of chickens and eggs as one of apples and oranges.” In other words, they are not interested in the ontological priority between both analogical figures, but in the study of simile in its own right by analysing its different forms, meanings and functions. For these cognitive linguists, “the difference between metaphor and simile may have less to do with the kinds of properties they map than with the mapping process itself” (Israel et al., 2004, p. 132).⁵ Building on this idea, they point out formal, conceptual and rhetorical differences between both figures:

- i. One of the most striking differences between these figures is ‘explicitness’. While metaphors need not be overtly marked, similes, by their very nature, must be. Simile is fundamentally a figure of speech requiring overt reference to source and target entities, and an explicit construction connecting them, whereas metaphor is ultimately a figure of thought (Israel et al., 2004, p. 129). Therefore, metaphors, being basically a cognitive rather than a linguistic phenomenon, do not need to be overtly signalled in any way: “given the appropriate mappings, one can use source domain language metaphorically without even mentioning the target domain to which they apply [...] and this gives metaphor a grammatical flexibility which simile lacks” (Israel et al., 2004, p. 129).
- ii. Related to explicitness, similes usually appear with an explanation or elaboration. This formal difference makes similes capable of featuring very imaginative and unexpected juxtapositions, which might not work in a simple metaphor (Israel et al., 2004, p. 130).⁶ This is related to the fact that, while a single conceptual metaphor may feature numerous cross-domain correspondences, similes tend to highlight a single salient property in two domains (Israel et al., 2004, p. 133).

5. As Gentner (1983), Aisenman (1999), or Glucksberg and Haught (2006) suggest.

6. For a similar approach see Roncero et al. (2006).

- iii. Since similes require an explicit comparison construction of some kind, they can serve only the rhetorical and discourse functions which those constructions perform. Unlike similes, metaphorical expressions can appear as a subject noun phrase or a main verb, among other grammatical functions. This allows them to introduce new referents or depict events as they unfold in discourse, while similes necessarily elaborate a previously mentioned referent or relation (Israel et al., 2004, p. 133).
- iv. Similes, in contrast to metaphors, which do give form to a target domain by projecting structure from a source, match structures construed as simultaneously present in both domains. Similes do not add structure to a target, but highlight what is already there. While metaphors may actually structure a domain, similes are essentially a mode of description; similes may not always map attributes, but they do tend to function attributively (Israel et al., 2004, p. 132). As a form of comparison, similes typically serve a descriptive function; that is, they elaborate properties of a primary figure, the target, by matching them with corresponding properties in a secondary figure, the source (Israel et al., 2004, p. 133). Metaphorical expressions can be used descriptively as well, but metaphors are not limited to such a function for the simple reason that metaphors are not limited to any particular grammatical form (Israel et al., 2004, p. 129).

In short, even though Israel et al. (2004) concentrate on single sentence examples, and so ignore many basic uses of simile in real discourse, they do highlight some of their main rhetorical functions, namely that similes may be used to highlight themes in a narrative, to add ironic shading, to inject humour, or to heighten the dramatic tension of a climactic scene (Israel et al., 2004, p. 133).

Bernárdez (2009) is one of the first scholars to explicitly state that the difference between metaphor and simile cannot yield significant and useful results if it is carried out in the absence of context, i.e., without due consideration of the conditions of use of individual metaphors and similes.⁷ In this sense, Bernárdez follows Brandt and Brandt's (2005) cognitive-semiotic model of metaphor interpretation:

What the metaphor means is what it is intended to mean in a particular situation where it is uttered by someone; our claim here is that it does not have intrinsic meanings outside its actual use. The utterer, the 'sense maker', intends to share some content, which is inherently intersubjective, borne of the speaker's intention to have the addressee recognize his utterance as an attempt to engage in a semiotic

7. Previous researches working within a similar approach are: Roncero et al. (2006) or Pierini (2007).

event of shared attention, as well as its pragmatic implications (its status as a communicative act), constitute the meaning of the metaphor.⁸

(Brandt & Brandt, 2005, p. 219; in Bernárdez, 2009)

In his semiotic analysis of similes in Robert Musil's novel *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, Bernárdez concludes that one of the main differences between simile and metaphor is that similes are extensive *textual elements*, whereas metaphors seem to stay basically at the level of the lexis. In other words, metaphor could be ascribed to the 'paradigmatic axis', whereas simile belongs to the 'syntagmatic axis'. Metaphor is then '*substitution, transformation, recategorization*', whereas simile is basically '*expansion*' (Bernárdez, 2009). According to this linguist, this would explain why metaphors can become grammaticalized into lexical items, whereas similes extremely seldom, if ever, reach that stage. Other differences between both analogical figures identified by Bernárdez in his literary analysis are:

- i. In the same lines as Israel et al.'s (2004) findings, he considers similes are used to create comparisons that are much more daring, and less conventional than those achieved through metaphor. A simile can therefore be, and usually is, formally and conceptually much more complex than a metaphor. This difference would also explain why in similes only a very specific part or property of the source domain is mapped onto an equally specific part of the target domain. In *Es gibt solche Gedanken, die wie Bindfaden sind* ("There are thoughts that are like strings"), but not all "thoughts", only those that *sich in endlosen Schlingen um Armen und Beine legen* ("get twisted up in arms and legs"); information that is provided in the *tertium comparationis* or elaboration which specifies one of Musil's character's feelings. Therefore, there seem to be no restrictions concerning the degree of similarity between the domains involved in the mapping. They can be completely disjunct or 'objectively' close, it all depends on the intentions of the creator and the needs of the narrative.
- ii. Similes are an integral part of the narrative or discourse; they not only play a function as part of the conceptual component of the text, but are also part of the text itself. Bernárdez concludes that, whereas metaphor's main function is conceptual, and only secondarily linguistic, simile is as much linguistic-narrative as it is conceptual, since similes, like metaphors, bring forth associations and contrasts through the comparison of two (usually divergent) domains, but at the same time play specific communicative roles.

8. Pages not included because quote is from English 2007 MS, and the final published version, in Spanish, is from 2009.

It is clear, then, that Bernárdez's semiotic-textual framework, which takes into account the real conditions of use of similes, as well as their specific communication functions in specific contexts, concludes, contrary to most previous work, that similes are conceptually, formally and discursively much stronger figures.

Finally, the latest works in the field, coming from cognitive linguistics, also insist on the need to analyse similes and metaphors in their specific contexts of use, as well as on the close relationship between grammatical structure and figurative meaning. Moder (2012) approaches the structural and discursive differences between metaphor (NP *is a* NP) and similes (*It's like* NP) in American radio news magazines by integrating Blending Theory (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002) with a usage-based model of grammatical constructions (Goldberg, 1995). Moder assumes that the major difference between metaphors and similes in American radio news magazines "related to the cognitive cues that the linguistic expressions provided to guide the understander in constructing a mapping and to the ways that the forms were used in their discourse context" (Moder, 2012, p. 163). In addition, Moder states that presence of *like* as a space-builder seems to be crucial in the discursive functions of the similes identified, corroborating the previous assumptions that similes are used for more unexpected mappings.

Dancygier and Sweetser (2014) include similes and metaphors as clear examples of grammatical constructions (Fillmore, 1988; Goldberg, 1995), since they are complex compositional linguistic forms which involve not only combining the formal parts appropriately (putting nouns, verbs, and articles together into a grammatical syntactic form) but also combining the meanings of those forms in a coherent way. In this sense, both metaphors – as predicational copula constructions – and similes – as comparison constructions – are systematically involved in cueing figurative meaning. Both metaphors and similes share certain semantic and syntactic similarities, such as the fact that target and source are irreversible or asymmetric because of the fact that target domains usually occupy semantically autonomous syntactic positions, and expressions of the source domain semantically dependent positions. In spite of these similarities, metaphor and simile project different mappings. For these scholars, and building on Moder (2012) and Croft and Cruse (2004), similes are prototypically restricted in their mappings, while metaphors are prototypically open. Their analysis also draws on Bowdle and Gentner's (2005) '*career of metaphor hypothesis*', as they consider similes to be less conventionalized or unfamiliar forms of metaphors, and predict that if a simile became conventionalized, the relevant mappings would be conventionally available to speakers, and it would no longer be necessary to specify those mappings. As Croft and Cruse (2004), Dancygier and Sweetser (2014) conclude that a simile prompts a blend which is similar to a

metaphor blend, but the cross-mapping is more focused and is usually not expected to yield rich inferences.⁹

Even though most of the distinguishing features discussed in the literature overlap, the summary in Table 1 attempts to clarify them for the reader.

Table 1. Main distinguishing features between similes and metaphors

	Similes	Metaphors
Structure	In addition to the comparative particle <i>like</i> , they usually carry explanations (the elaborations or <i>tertium comparationis</i>); readers / listeners require aid in understanding the analogy (Roncero et al., 2006; Cuenca, 2015)	Copula structure with no link. Do not usually include an elaboration; mappings are more open, since speaker assumes relevant mutual knowledge with listener
Cognitive function	Are assertions of <i>similitude</i> (Glucksberg & Keysar, 1990; Chiappe et al., 2003)	They are <i>categorization</i> assertions
Mapping process	Do not add structure to a target, but <i>highlight</i> what is already there (Israel et al., 2004)	<i>Structure</i> target domains in terms of source domains
Number of properties mapped	Tend to highlight a specific <i>salient property</i> in two domains (Israel et al., 2004)	Feature more <i>numerous, open</i> cross-domain correspondences
Type of properties mapped	Map <i>attributive, 1-place, specific, restricted</i> predicates (Gentner, 1983; Gentner & Bowdle, 2001; Aisenman, 1999; Moder, 2012; Croft & Cruse, 2004)	Map <i>relational, n-place, open</i> predicates
Aptness / degree of similarity	Low, since target and source share a relatively low number of properties (Chiappe et al., 2003)	High aptness between target and source
Domains	Allow more <i>unfamiliar, creative</i> comparisons (Gentner & Bowdle, 2001; Bowdle & Gentner, 2005; Bernárdez, 2009)	Map more <i>conventional</i> or familiar concepts
Discursive function	Are extensive textual elements (paradigmatic axis): main function is <i>description, expansion</i> (Israel et al., 2004; Bernárdez, 2009)	Work basically at the level of the lexis (syntagmatic axis): main function is <i>substitution, transformation, recategorization</i>

(continued)

9. Another distinguishing feature pointed out by one of the anonymous evaluators of this paper – and that needs to be studied – is the fact that “... semasiologically, metaphor tends to develop new meanings for the same word or construction and, onomasiologically, it tends to generate new words or even constructions, more easily than simile does.”

Table 1. (continued)

	Similes	Metaphors
Rhetorical force	<i>Stronger</i> because they allow more daring, unexpected mappings (Bernárdez, 2009; Moder, 2012, Dancygier & Sweetser, 2014)	<i>Stronger</i> , more effective, because <i>like</i> , as a hedge, qualifies or weakens the mapping (Black, 1979; Glucksberg & Keysar, 1990)
Complexity	Formally and conceptually more complex (Bernárdez, 2009)	More simple both formally and conceptually

4. Are metaphors and similes interchangeable in English opinion discourse?

4.1 Data and methodology

The corpus analysed consists of 100 texts in English containing similes. The data have been collected from opinion discourse: news, interviews and commentary sections, as well as from comments on news, and blogs. WebCorp¹⁰ and Google's advanced search tools were used to pick up the string '*is like*' in the following ways:

- By genre or site. The words 'interview', 'blog', 'opinion' and 'commentary' were introduced as genre filters.
- By newspaper sites. In addition to the general search through WebCorp, the different British newspapers were filtered through Google to make sure all examples were retrieved.
- By place in text. Google advanced search engine filtered examples in body, headline or both sections in page.

The search results were then filtered again in order to avoid repetitions, constructions that did not match the one under study (*it is like ...*, in the main), non-figurative or literal comparisons, and examples included in lyrics, the Bible and other sources not related to information or opinion discourse.

Starting from the 100 English examples classified in Cuenca and Romano (2013) according to different categories such as: semantic type of first and second element, construction, elaboration, genre, section of text the simile appears in, and direct or indirect speech, the present analysis focuses on two aspects: (i) the

10. A search engine which allows access to the World Wide Web, operated and maintained by the Research and Development Unit for English Studies (RDUES) in the School of English at Birmingham City University (<http://www.webcorp.org.uk/live/search.jsp>).

description and definition of similes in relation with metaphors; and (ii) the analysis of the possible transformation of the similes found in the corpus into metaphors in order to find out when and why similes are preferred. Three different tests have been carried out to achieve these aims:

- a. Test 1: The 100 similes (*A is like B*) were transformed into metaphors (*A is B*) and searched for in WebCorp and Google in order to verify their occurrence.
- b. Test 2: The main contrasting features between similes and metaphors found in the literature (Section 3) were applied to the transformed metaphors in order to understand their different use and rate of appearance in opinion discourse.
- c. Test 3: A small questionnaire was conducted with 15 native subjects in order to test the naturalness and incidence of both structures.

4.2 Similes in opinion discourse

Before analysing the factors explaining why similes and metaphors cannot be easily interchanged in the contexts under study, it is important to understand the main functions of similes in English opinion discourse, a discourse type that has been found to make extensive use of similes.

Following Cuenca and Romano (2013) and Cuenca (2015), four main discursive functions for similes in English, Spanish and Catalan opinion discourse have been identified, namely, (i) that similes are frequent in informative and opinion texts, (ii) that in interviews and news, similes are generally attributed to a specific speaker, (iii) that, if a text contains a simile it is often the case that it is selected as the headline of the text, and (iv), that similes tend to be given a prominent text location. They are usually located at the beginning of the text or at the very end. These findings corroborate Israel et al.'s (2004, p. 126) idea that similes “encode complex descriptive conceptualizations and explicitly encode a point of view attributed to some specific person who selects one feature from B and maps it onto A”, and that “similes serve the basic rhetorical functions of description and evaluation”. The high rate of appearance of similes in this discourse type (Cuenca & Romano, 2013; Cuenca, 2015) is clearly related to their ‘shocking’ function, to call the reader’s attention towards the contents, to persuade him or her to continue reading the article; the more unlikely or non-conventional the mappings the greater the reader’s need to find the conceptual link between source and target by reading the whole article.

In order to provide support for the working hypothesis of this paper – the idea that metaphors and similes reflect different cognitive processes, as well as different discursive functions, and that metaphors can usually be transformed into similes by adding *like*, whereas the opposite process seems to depend on specific conditions

of structure, use and interpretation –, the three tests described in Section 4.1 were carried out.

4.3 Results and discussion

4.3.1 Test 1: Incidence of transformed metaphors in WebCorp and Google

Of the 100 similes found in WebCorp and Google, only 5 were also found in their metaphorical form. These are:

- (7) *Football is (like) the game of life* (43)
- (8) *Football is (like) chess* (38)
- (9) *Football is (like) sex for men* (44)
- (10) *Faith is (like) fire* (95)
- (11) *Scottish Independence is (like) a 4 by 400 metres relay race* (37).

What these five metaphors have in common is the combination of highly conventional semantic mappings, together with a short, simple syntactic structure. All five examples map concepts at a similar semantic level. In this case the metaphors are relating processes or activities with other processes or activities. In addition, their structure shows very basic constructions or configurations, such as NP is NP (8, 9, 10), NP is NPdef (7), and NP is NPindef (11). No examples with more complex structures, such as Clause is Clause, have been found in metaphor form. The highly conventional nature of these expressions is especially relevant in Example (10), which has only been found in the fixed expression or collocation *faith is fire in the heart*. As will be shown in Tests 2 and 3, even though these structures are highly conventional, their mappings are quite different in the two figures.

The concept of conventionality, commonly shared knowledge that is salient and accessible to a community, can be related to Moder's (2012) and Dancygier and Sweetser's (2014) classification of similes into *narrow* and *broad* scope, as well as to Croft and Cruse's (2004) concept of *open* and *restricted* mappings. Narrow-scope similes focus on more specific aspects of the described entity – and I add 'more salient' as well –, and therefore are easily converted into metaphors, whereas broad-scope similes, which do not clearly specify the aspects of the described entity and need a specification or elaboration of the speaker's intentions. Examples, (7) to (10), can be considered narrow scope similes since the mappings are quite specific and conventional.

Finally, as for the discourse type these metaphors occur in, only Example (11) has been found in opinion discourse. The metaphor *Scottish independence is a race*, is based on the highly productive metaphor LONG, DIFFICULT PROCESSES/

ACTIVITIES ARE A RACE (LIFE IS A JOURNEY, CHANGE IS MOTION, PURPOSIVE ACTION IS GOAL DIRECTED MOTION, etc.), which is long, full of obstacles, etc. Examples (7) to (10) have not been found in opinion discourse, but in different famous quotations lists and in web-pages explaining football tactics.

4.3.2 *Test 2: Transformation of similes (“A is like B”) into metaphors (“A is B”)*

In this second test, the 100 similes in the corpus were transformed into metaphors by eliminating *like* in order to check the main contrasting features between similes and metaphors described in the literature (Table 1) and understand the factors behind the different use of both figures in opinion discourse. This second test was based on the researcher’s own intuitions that were next contrasted with those of 15 English native speakers in Test 3.

Table 1 (in Section 3) summarizes the main contrastive features between similes and metaphors discussed in the literature for the last 35 years. Because many of these features overlap, this study concentrates on two important groups: (i) more conceptual, semantic features or factors, such as the level of conventionality of the concepts being compared (Chiappe & Kennedy, 2000; Chiappe et al., 2003; Gentner & Bowdle, 2001; Israel et al., 2004; Bowdle & Gentner, 2005; Bernárdez, 2007, 2009) and, (ii) more formal, structural features such as type and length of syntactic structure (Cuenca & Romano, 2013; Cuenca, 2015; Dancygier & Sweetser, 2014), and type of predicates related (Aisenman, 1999; Gentner, 1983; Moder, 2012; Croft & Cruse, 2004).

a. *Conceptual, semantic factors*

In the first place, the data show that the majority of similes in the corpus, 77%, are non-conventional, that is, the mappings between source and target domains do not contain highly institutionalized or shared common knowledge. In addition, 89% show low aptness, that is, the relationship expressed between source and target is low in similarity, the vehicle/source and the topic/target do not share many common properties (Chiappe et al., 2003). Prototypical examples of similes containing non-conventional mappings and low aptness between source and target domains are:

- (12) *Greece is like a rat’s tail* (20)
- (13) *Church of England is like a coffee chain going out of business* (32)
- (14) *Cancer is like a snowflake* (48)
- (15) *NATO’s Libyan War is like fast food* (85)

In Examples (12) to (15) the mappings do not provide enough clues for the reader to process the construction and this is why the writer needs to provide additional information in the form of an elaboration. In the case of (12), *Greece/its crisis* ‘will come round to hit us’; in (13), the *Church* is ‘losing customers because it does not offer the same menu in every branch’; in (14), like *snowflakes*, ‘every person who is afflicted by cancer is different’; and in (15), in *war* ‘everything should be fast: fast war, fast airplanes, fast bullets, fast victory’.

In the second place, the data under study show that, when target and source domains are highly conventional, metaphor and simile can be interchangeable, as in Example (16), but in other cases the mappings can be quite different. In Examples (17) and (18), the simile form with *like* clearly points out to a specific feature of the mapping by means of the elaboration, whereas the mapping is not clear or more open in the metaphor forms:

- (16) *The relationship between Scotland and England is like a marriage of convenience.*
vs. *The relationship between Scotland and England is a marriage of convenience*
(26)
- (17) *Faith is like fire.* vs. *Faith is fire.* (95)
- (18) *(Why) Scotland is like an adolescent.* vs. *(Why) Scotland is an adolescent* (11)

In Example (17), the elaboration immediately following the simile, ‘It warms; but it can also burn’ specifies the mapping. But, it is not clear which features of *fire* are mapped onto *faith* in *Faith is fire*: intensity, heat, destruction, comfort?

The simile *Scotland is like an adolescent* appears in the news article headline: *Why Scotland is like an adolescent*. Without its elaboration, not present in the headline, the reader cannot fully understand the intended comparison and therefore is likely to read the article below the headline. The elaboration appears scattered through the body of the article, structuring the article: ‘Adolescents moan about their parents, but still accept pocket money ..., neglect their dietary requirements, sneak out to get blind drunk and think it cool to be confronted by the Police, ..., hang out in gangs and indulge in naughty little acts of anti-social behaviour, ..., etc.’ The possibilities for the mappings in the metaphor form without the specific context or elaboration, of course, can be even wider.

In the third place, the analysis shows that, when the mappings are non-conventional, i.e. there is little or no shared common knowledge on the topic within the community, the metaphor form is also possible, but readers need the specific socio-cultural context to understand it. Thus, *Every US city is a Brazilian nightclub* can elicit different mappings in readers, namely that US cities are very noisy, crowded, fun, entertaining? It is almost impossible to interpret the writer’s intended mappings without the specific background knowledge: the fact that 242 people died in

a fire in a nightclub in Santa Maria, R o Grande do Sul on January 27 2013 because the emergency doors were locked; the fact that many nightclubs in the US also lock emergency doors so people cannot enter for free, etc. The simile form includes this information in the headline: *Why every U.S. city is like a Brazilian nightclub. Inferno with no exits for the masses* (99). In this particular case, the elaboration activates the ‘crowded nightclubs can be dangerous’ frame through ‘inferno’, ‘exits’ and ‘masses’, even though the reader might not be familiar with the events being referred to.

Finally, when source and target domains are highly non-conventional, the metaphor form is allowed as well for different pragmatic reasons such as rhetorical force, showing commitment, involvement or irony. For instance, the simile *Voting for Independence is like buying Scotland’s children a one-way ticket to uncertainty* (1) would be possible in its metaphor form without *like*. The mappings in the metaphor form are identical to the simile one, probably because of the specificity of the source: *a one-way ticket to uncertainty*, in which ‘to uncertainty’ can be considered as an elaboration specifying the exact feature mapped onto *independence*. Nevertheless, eliminating *like* brings the source ‘closer’ to the speaker/writer’s stance, expressing more commitment and force, as well as irony. This can be related to the iconic principle of proximity, as is explained below. Table 2 summarizes the conceptual, semantic nature of the domains being mapped:

Table 2. Semantic nature of source and target domains

Entities compared Target – Source	%	Example
1. Discreet entity – Discreet entity	20	“ <i>The Tea Party Is Like the OWS</i> ” – Occupy Wall Street (97)
2. Discreet entity – Dynamic entity	8	“ <i>Obamacare is like Fascism</i> ” (63)
3. Dynamic entity – Discreet entity	13	“ <i>Scottish independence is like Marmite</i> ” (24)
4. Dynamic entity – Dynamic entity	23	“ <i>How Breast Cancer is like Climate Change</i> ” (50)
5. Dynamic entity – Predication	8	“ <i>Video chat is like talking to neighbours minus the fence</i> ” (88)
6. Predication – Discreet/Dynamic entity	4	“ <i>Being with England is like my first day at school</i> ” (21)
7. Predication – Predication	24	“ <i>Giving Alex Salmond control is like putting a fox in charge of the coop</i> ” (2)

The above results show the complexity of the concepts being compared, specifically that of source domains. 70% of source domains are dynamic entities or predications. Even within the 30% of more discrete entities overlapping occurs. *An adolescent, an elephant, and a giant prostitute* could be considered more prototypical stable or discrete entities, but the same cannot be said about: *OWS (Occupy Wall Street), a chain going out of business, a collapsing snowman, bad reality TV, Upstairs-Downstairs*, etc.

The significance of the complexity relationship between target and source domains (Table 2) was tested by Pearson's χ^2 contingency table, which resulted in a statistically significant correlation ($p < 0.0001$). We can therefore conclude that most of the mappings are highly complex from a semantic, conceptual point of view, especially in relation to source domains.¹¹

b. *Formal, syntactic factors*

In the first place, this study does not corroborate either the results of Aissenman's (1999), Gentner's (1983), nor Gentner and Bowdle's (2001) analysis, in which they conclude that similes are the preferred linguistic representation for mapping attributive predicates (one-place predicates as in *X is straight*), whereas metaphors are favoured for mapping relational predicates (n-place predicates, as in *X is used to transfer Y to Z*). This study concludes, together with Dancygier and Sweetser (2014) that the 'relations vs. attributes' criterion does not reliably distinguish metaphors from similes. Even though the distinction between relational and attributive overlaps, most of the predicates mapped in the similes under study are complex entities and processes, as shown in Table 2.

Specifically, the data show that only 23% of the source domains or *comparatum* represent one-word concepts – 20 nouns and 3 -ing verb forms; a fact that does not prove the attributive character of the predicates.¹² As for the nouns, all 20 correspond to indefinite NPs, either marked by the indefinite article (*a skunk, an octopus, a Yorker, an adolescent, a monkey, an onion, a snowflake, a Mercedes, an elephant*) or unmarked (*slavery, Christmas, fire, improve, cinema, chess, sex, golf, fascism, marmite, yoga*). Except for *marmite, you like or hate it*, these entities do not map 'one-place' simple predicates or projections but highly complex and contextually driven mappings, not only specified by their elaborations, but also by the conceptual nature of the nouns, many of them activities, processes, etc. This 77% of more relational or complex predicates can be placed on a complexity cline ranging:

- i. from simple multi-word NP structures (*a giant prostitute, Scottish Independence, global warming, Occupy Wall Street, bad reality TV, Upstairs Downstairs, a hollow Easter egg, a Batman movie, bad religion*, etc.),
- ii. to more complex NPs (*a father forbidding his son from leaving home, lobotomy made out of bricks, a holiday in the country, McDonald's without French fries*, etc.), and finally

11. A conclusion that questions Israel et al.'s (2004, p. 132) statement: "the difference between metaphor and simile may have less to do with the kinds of properties they map than with the mapping process itself".

12. From the 59 NP structures (Table 3), only 20 of the source domains are one-word concepts.

- iii. to highly complex sentences and clauses, and, therefore, mappings (*planting a bomb in the financial system, talking to the neighbours minus the fence, wearing white socks with dress shoes, trying to make the tide go out by pushing it with your hands, voting to live with mum and dad in your wee bedroom like a kid well into your 50s and in return you have to give up the power to make your own choices in life, etc.*).

The expressions analysed thus seem to show a clear preference for more complex conceptual mappings, that is, for what Moder (2012) has called ‘broad-scope’ similes, in which the frames evoked by source and target are usually not salient to the hearer/reader and therefore need specific socio-cultural and cognitive cues for comprehension.

In the second place, now regarding structure, this test shows that the transformed metaphors are generally discarded for specific formal reasons, namely when the concepts compared are long and complex, that is, when A and B are clauses, and when A and B appear in syntactic structures which do not facilitate categorization.

The data show a relationship between iconicity and the speaker/writer’s selection of similes; more specifically, the iconic principle of quantity, by which more complexity or conceptual meaning entails more form; and the iconic principle of proximity/distance, by which conceptual units which belong together conceptually tend to be closely integrated in the structure of language; and conversely, conceptual units that do not belong together tend to be distanced in the structure of language (Givon, 2001; Radden & Dirven, 2007). Applied to the data (Examples 19–22), these principles would explain, on the one hand, why, in the case of the more daring and complex similes, conceptual mappings correlate with a longer and more complex formal realization than that of metaphors; and, on the other hand, how the great conceptual distance or high non-conventionality of the mappings between source and target domains requires the presence of the word *like*. *Like* announces dissimilarity, the need to find a pattern linking source and target domain, it acts as a discourse staller, enabling the speaker/writer’s process of creation and the hearer/reader’s comprehension or construal of the intended mapping by means of the elaboration. As Dancygier and Sweetser (2014) point out, the metaphorical mapping of the simile is not accessible until the elaboration or explanation is read or heard; it is the explanation containing the shared common knowledge that prompts the cross-mapping. This level of conceptual and formal complexity thus precludes figurative mapping in the form of a metaphor.

- (19) *Expecting the Scots to support England is like the English being asked to cheer on France or the Germans* (27)

- (20) *Scottish Independence is like doing a life sentence only to hand the keys back to the jailer on your release date* (14)
- (21) *The present position of Westminster with regard to Scottish independence is like your next-door neighbour telling you whether or not you can use your own front door* (7)
- (22) *To throw away that chance for independence is like voting to live with mum and dad in your wee bedroom like a kid well into your 50s and in return you have to give up the power to make your own choices in life* (18)

The most frequent syntactic structures found in the 100 similes analysed can be seen in the Table 3:

Table 3. Syntactic nature of source and target domains

Structure	%	Example
NP <i>is like</i> NP	57	
NPdef ¹³ <i>is like</i> NPdef	9	“ <i>The Tea Party is like the OWS</i> ” (Occupy Wall Street) (97)
NPdef <i>is like</i> NPindef	15	“ <i>England is like a giant prostitute</i> ” (34)
NPdef <i>is like</i> NP0	6	“ <i>The Scottish National Party’s vision of independence is like luke warm used dishwasher</i> ” (6)
NP0 <i>is like</i> NPindef	9	“ <i>Cancer is like a snowflake</i> ” (48)
NP0 <i>is like</i> NP0	14	“ <i>(Why) bad science is like bad religion</i> ” (59)
NP0 <i>is like</i> NPdef	4	“ <i>Lettings sector in England is like the Wild West</i> ” (33)
Clause <i>is like</i> Clause	23	“ <i>Building a song is like building the best sandwich possible</i> ” (69)
Clause <i>is like</i> NP	4	“ <i>Being with England is like my first day at school</i> ” (31)
NP <i>is like</i> Clause	16	“ <i>Video chat is like talking to neighbours minus the fence</i> ” (88)

The data in Table 3 show that writers of English opinion discourse prefer nominal-structure similes (59%), then clause-structure similes (24%), and finally mixed-structure similes – Clause *is like* NP or NP *is like* Clause – (17%). Within the nominal group, except NPindef *is like* NPindef, of which there is no instance, all other combinations have been found, with NPdef *is like* NPindef and NP0 *is like* NP0 the most frequent.

After the transformation of similes into metaphors, the data analysed show that metaphors are not the preferred figure when conceptual and formal complexity is combined. This could explain why there are no examples of Clause *is* Clause or NP *is* Clause structures in the data. See Examples (23)–(27):

13. Proper nouns have been included in this category.

- (23) *Chasing independence is a dog chasing a motorbike (19)¹⁴
 (24) *Selling your business is Thanksgiving dinner (83)
 (25) *Being with England is my first day at school (31)
 (26) *Same sex marriage is men breastfeeding (62)
 (27) *Scottish Independence is the wife forever telling the husband that she is going to leave him (22)

In addition, the transformation into metaphors has also proved that metaphor forms are not preferred in constructions that hinder categorization. Mappings between the same levels of generality do not facilitate categorization, as in Examples (28)–(32):

- (28) *Four Reasons why cancer is golf (53)
 (29) *Football is chess (38)
 (30) *Budget is Christmas (65)
 (31) *Cooking is yoga (80)
 (32) *Bad science is bad religion (59)

For categorization to take place, we need more indefinite or generic source domains mapped on to more definite or specific targets. This is why NPdef/proper noun *is like* NPindef, and NP0 *is like* NPdef structures could also seem natural in metaphor form (33–36):

- (33) *This whole saga of Scottish Independence is a scene from Macbeth (21)
 (34) *The relationship between Scotland and England is a marriage of convenience (26)
 (35) *David Cameron is a hollow Easter egg (86)
 (36) *Washington is bad reality TV (76)

The analysis of the semantic and formal features of the 100 similes under study, summarized in Tables 2 and 3, reveals a preference for semantic and formal complexity. 41% of the similes (Table 3) correspond to complex structures: NP *is like* CL, CL *is like* NP, or CL *is like* CL, a percentage that coincides with the dynamic entity-predication – categories 5, 6 and 7 – in Table 2. Within the 59% of the NP *is like* NP structures (Table 3), which are formally simpler, 30 (50.85%) refer to more discrete entities and 29 (49.15%) to dynamic entities as source domains. Within this last group, NP *is like* NP, source domains range on a cline from 20 one-word structures, to 28 multi-word phrases (*Occupy Wall Street* or *a giant prostitute*), and

14. Asterisks correspond to non-attested expressions.

to 11 more complex NPs, as in the case of *a holiday in the country* or *McDonald's without French fries*. In short, from a semantic point of view, 70% of source domains refer to dynamic entities and predications, and, structurally, at least 52% show a complex structure: 41 CL-Cl, CL-Np, NP-Cl, and 11 highly complex NP phrases (up to 80% if we include the 28 multi-word NPs).¹⁵

4.3.3 Test 3: Native subjects' intuitions

A small-scale test was conducted with 15 native speakers of English, 14 British and 1 American, in order to corroborate the conclusions summarized above. As can be seen in Appendices 1 and 2, subjects were asked to (i) decide on the naturalness of the same expression in both metaphor and simile form; and (ii) to complete the expressions, again both in metaphor and simile form, in order to check whether their interpretation or the features elicited were similar or different. The questions were not contextualized, and therefore subjects had to rely only on their own cultural-experiential knowledge.

As for question 1, the results show a general tendency to consider b forms of expressions, the similes, more natural (see examples in Appendix 1B and conclusions in Table 4):

Table 4. Naturalness of metaphors vs. similes

Example	a	b	Example	a	b
1	5	10	9	0	13
2	4	10	10	0	13
3	4	10	11	0	13
4	4	9	12	0	12
5	0	13	13	0	10
6	4	10	14	3	12
7	7	7	15	3	12
8	2	12			

These results corroborate the idea that conceptual and formal complexity favours simile forms, whereas the more conventional and syntactically simpler and shorter forms favour metaphor form. Most subjects (7–13 / 46–86%) preferred the simile forms in all 15 examples, and this was especially noticeable in the most conceptually and structurally complex similes, Examples (9) to (15):¹⁶

15. Categorizations that must be taken with caution. Is an entity like *Occupy Wall Street* less complex than *Fascism*? Or a multiword NP such as *my first day at school* less complex than the predicate *talking to the neighbours without the fence*?

16. Numbers correspond to those in questionnaire, not to numbers in corpus.

- (9) *Chasing independence is (like) a dog chasing a motorbike*
- (10) *Selling your business is (like) Thanksgiving dinner*
- (11) *Same sex marriage is (like) men breastfeeding*
- (12) *Four reasons cancer is (like) golf*
- (13) *Cooking is (like) yoga*
- (14) *Bad science is (like) bad religion*
- (15) *David Cameron is (like) a hollow Easter egg*

Examples (9), (10), (11) and (15) combine both non-conventionality and non-aptness of source and target mappings together with long and complex structures. Examples (12), (13) and (14) are complex, not chosen as metaphor forms, because the entities mapped in source and target domains do not facilitate categorization (see Section 4), since the entities compared belong to the same level of generality.

Those subjects who showed preference for the metaphor form (2–7 / 13–46%), did so with those examples which have the more formally simple and conceptually conventional mappings: (1), (2), (3), (4), (6) and (8):

- (1) *Football is (like) chess*
- (2) *Football is (like) sex for men*
- (3) *Faith is (like) fire*
- (4) *Greece is (like) a rat's tail¹⁷*
- (5) *Cancer is (like) a snowflake*
- (6) *NATO's Libyan War is (like) fast food*
- (7) *The relationship between Scotland and England is (like) a marriage of convenience*
- (8) *Why Scotland is (like) an adolescent*

For Example (7), the relationship between Scotland and England *is (like)* a marriage of convenience, 7 subjects (46%) chose the a-metaphor form, and 7 (46%) the b-simile form. This result could be related to the fact that the expression contains highly conventional, culturally well-established mappings within a complex structure, two complex noun phrases expressing dynamic entities, rather than simple nouns expressing discrete entities.

In a second question (see Appendix 2), subjects were asked to complete the same target expressions, both in metaphor and simile form, in order to check the

17. In this case, formal simplicity might be the factor conditioning 4 of the subjects' choice, since the mapping is non-conventional.

number and type of properties or features elicited for each figure, as well as the type and complexity of the source domains.¹⁸

From all the differences between similes and metaphors, explained in Section 3 and summarized in Table 1, the following were applied to this second task: (i) Similes tend to highlight a specific, salient property, whereas metaphors feature more *numerous, open* cross-domain correspondences; (ii) Similes allow more *daring, unfamiliar, creative* comparisons, whereas metaphors map more *conventional* or familiar concepts; and (iii) Similes are formally and conceptually more complex than metaphors.

A first conclusion after analysing subjects' responses to this second question is that many more subjects added features to the simile form (10–14 subjects / 66–93%) than to the metaphor form (5–8 subjects / 33–53%) of each target expression. The reason why such a great number of subjects encountered more difficulties completing features for the metaphor form of the examples: *Football is chess, Faith is fire, Cancer is a snowflake, Scotland is an adolescent, and Cooking is yoga*, might be related to the fact that the predicative-metaphor form implies more familiar mappings or knowledge – especially in non-contextualized examples as the ones presented in the questionnaire –, whereas with the presence of 'like', as already mentioned, the two things compared are “normally felt to be incomparable, typically using vivid or startling images to suggest unexpected connections between source and target” (Israel et al., 2004, p. 124), and this is precisely the function of *like*; to announce dissimilarity, that something new and unexpected is coming (Cuenca & Romano, 2013).

A second conclusion is that in general, within the answers that include more descriptive characteristics,¹⁹ and even though a certain amount of overlapping can be observed, the features proposed by subjects to complete the forms for the 5 examples in the questionnaire do show a tendency that corroborates the hypothesis that the metaphor-forms elicit more general, familiar mappings, whereas the simile-forms elicit more specific and daring mappings, which are also more complex from a formal, structural point of view. This evidence can be seen in all 5 pairs of examples (Appendix 2), and illustrated here with the characteristics provided by subjects for one of these pairs of analogical figures:

18. This task was especially difficult for most subjects, since they had no contextual information to rely on.

19. Subjects were not asked to provide specific features of the source domain that could be mapped onto the target, but to complete the expressions freely. This, together with the cultural-experiential knowledge of each subject explains answers such as: *Scotland is an adolescent, An autobiography by Alex Salmon*; or *Scotland is an adolescent, Explained in 10 simple steps by JC McBee*.

- a. **Cooking is yoga, ...**, it is a meditative activity; for the nose and stomach; it is the process; not the food that feeds your mind; relaxing and therapeutic; in the kitchen.
- b. **Cooking is like yoga, ...**, each muscle is one ingredient but the recipe is incomplete without the combination of all of them; you have to be flexible (2 subjects); when done properly, it can have a therapeutic effect; in that it absorbs all aspects of your body, mind and senses; they are both modern fads turned into popular cults by morons; despite the burning smell; it can clear your head of all your daily worries; you can stretch yourself with surprising results; but it nourishes the stomach, not the soul; it abstracts you totally from all other thoughts.

Even though a much bigger-scale empirical study with native subjects is necessary to corroborate these hypotheses, in the above examples, we not only see the difficulty of subjects to come up with features or explanations for the mappings in the metaphor form, (only 5 responses were offered), but also the greater variety of the expressions provided as the elaboration for the simile form. The greater variety, originality and, especially, the greater complexity of the 12 explanations provided for the simile form could be related to the fact that both figures entail different mapping processes. As already mentioned, *like* prepares the reader/listener for something new, unexpected, shocking; subjects feel freer to guess, whereas the metaphor form implies common knowledge, which subjects clearly did not have for the blend between COOKING and YOGA and, therefore did not 'dare' or feel as free to express. Native's choice between metaphor and simile form was tested by means of a binomial distribution test, obtaining a very high statistical significance: $p < 0.000001$.

In short, both in metaphor and simile, source and target domains activate well known concepts or domains which belong to readers' common shared cultural knowledge, but in the case of similes it is the relationship between the concepts compared – the mappings – that is non-conventional. The reader is familiar with the frames triggered by source and target but has no information on how or why they are being compared, and this is why an elaboration is needed in similes, and why it is difficult to find an explanation for metaphors if source and target are not usually related in a specific language or culture.

5. Some conclusions

The main aim of this work has been to study the use of similes in real discursive contexts, namely in English opinion discourse (news, interviews, commentary sections, comments to news and blogs), as well as to explain the different use between similes and metaphors in this specific discourse type.

Starting from the cognitive linguistics' premise that any change in the form/structure of an expression will necessarily bring differences in meaning, i.e. the non-equivalence approach, and following this approach to both analogical figures, the present analysis of 100 similes in English opinion discourse has shown that:

- i. From all the semantic, formal, cognitive and pragmatic distinguishing features proposed by scholars in the last 35 years to explain the differences between the two figures, *conventionality* or *shared common knowledge* and *formal complexity* seem to be factors which influence the preference of writers of opinion discourse for similes.
- ii. The preference of similes for the more daring, unexpected and complex structures and that of metaphors for the more familiar and simple ones, is related to iconicity, more specifically to the principles of 'quantity' and 'proximity – distance'.
- iii. *Like* announces dissimilarity, the need to find a pattern linking source and target domain, and therefore acts as a staller, facilitating the speaker/writer's process of creation and the hearer/reader's comprehension of the intended mapping by means of the elaboration.
- iv. Similes, like metaphors contain well-known source and target domains, but the complexity and non-conventionality of the mappings in the case of the simile forms require the space builder *like*, as well as the elaboration.
- v. Similes and metaphors are not always interchangeable, metaphors can usually be transformed into similes by adding *like*, but the opposite process, transforming similes into metaphors by eliminating *like*, depends on very specific cognitive, semantic, formal, and pragmatic parameters.

In short, even though these findings need to be corroborated in future research within other discourse types and extended to more native subjects, they do help to corroborate one of cognitive linguistics' main premises, – the idea that structures or expressions with identical meanings or functions are not cognitively or linguistically efficient –, as well as to contribute to cognitive linguists' recent interest in the analysis of natural occurring data.

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Appendix 1. Questionnaire

- (1) A. Which of the following expressions in each pair do you find more natural, (a) or (b)? Is there any of them that you think is incorrect or not natural at all?
1.
 - a. Football is chess
 - b. Football is like chess
 2.
 - a. Football is sex for men
 - b. Football is like sex for men

3. a. Faith is fire
b. Faith is like fire
4. a. Greece is a rat's tail
b. Greece is like a rat's tail
5. a. Cancer is a snowflake
b. Cancer is like a snowflake
6. a. NATO's Libyan War is fast food
b. NATO's Libyan War is like fast food
7. a. The relationship between Scotland and England is a marriage of convenience
b. The relationship between Scotland and England is like a marriage of convenience
8. a. Why Scotland is an adolescent.
b. Why Scotland is like an adolescent.
9. a. Chasing independence is a dog chasing a motorbike
b. Chasing independence is like a dog chasing a motorbike
10. a. Selling your business is Thanksgiving dinner
b. Selling your business is like Thanksgiving dinner
11. a. Same sex marriage is men breastfeeding
b. Same sex marriage is like men breastfeeding
12. a. Four Reasons cancer is golf
b. Four Reasons cancer is like golf
13. a. Cooking is yoga
b. Cooking is like yoga
14. a. Bad science is bad religion
b. Bad science is like bad religion
15. a. David Cameron is a hollow Easter egg
b. David Cameron is like a hollow Easter egg

B. **For Examples (1), (3), (5), (8) & (13), can you complete the expressions as in the examples below:**

Football is life: *'It is very important, ...'*

Football is like life: *'It has good and bad moments, it is difficult, ...'*

Appendix 2. Answers to Task 2 in Questionnaire

1. Football is chess, ..., It's a game; Integrating mind and body strategies; It is all about tactics and strategy; It's all about positioning and strategy; For thickos; It gives you a headache, it's incomprehensible.
Football is like chess, ..., It is a game of strategy (3); It requires a lot of mental effort; Position and strategy are important; It's a game of strategy and skills (3); You have to be good at strategy to win; You have to watch your moves; It has rules and strategies which require skill to perfect because it requires foresight and strategies; And you end up buried in shit at the end of it; Players can move in different directions. Extremely expensive and those who act as its arbiters or referees are always blind.
2. Faith is fire, ..., It is like a source of power and energy; That will gradually burn through mankind; It burns you if you get in too deeply; It burns strongly in one's heart; That burns up reason; It burns everything in its path.

Faith is like fire, ..., The stronger it is the more it consumes you; You never know when you're going to get burned; It burns everything in its path (2); It destroys everything it touches (2); It has the power to sustain and destroy life in that it spreads through humanity with zeal when the conditions are right; You are burnt out after showing too much or it; It can become a burning obsession; It attracts you and then creates images in your mind; It's hard to extinguish.

3. Cancer is a snowflake, ..., It is a mutation that does not exist in isolation; You do not even feel it until it turns into a snowball; But without the ice; And without the ageing process; Your body might not notice the first one; It cannot be seen by the naked eye; And the pope is a feminist; It transforms and spreads everywhere.

Cancer is like a snowflake, ..., It is made up of cells with jagged edges? Each one is unique; But not at all beautiful; It can quickly progress into a storm with devastating effects; That is only noticeable when it snowballs through your life; Which does not melt and accumulates into a second ice age; There is nothing to worry about until it is joined by many others; If left, lots of other snowflakes join it and it becomes a big lump; That multiplies instead of melting.

4. Scotland is an adolescent, ..., With passion and without experience; An autobiography by Alex Salmond; It wants to be free, but still depend on you; It has grown and is challenging the authority of its parent, seeking independence; Explained in 10 simple steps by JC McBe; It doesn't know what it wants; It wants the best of both worlds.

Scotland is like an adolescent, ..., It needs to break away and fly the nest? It can't make up its mind; That has to make a lot of decisions and lacks the experience and understanding to do so; Because the vote for independence is to be decided by idiotic 16-year-olds; And why England says so; It says it can manage its own affairs, but expects you to do it instead; It seeks freedom and Independence (2); Is a strange question to ask of an ancient nation; It doesn't know what it wants (2); It wants the best of both worlds.

5. Cooking is yoga, ..., It is a meditative activity; For the nose and stomach; It is the process, not the food that feeds your mind; Relaxing and therapeutic; In the kitchen.

Cooking is like yoga, ..., Each muscle is one ingredient but the recipe is incomplete without the combination of all of them; You have to be flexible (2); When done properly, it can have a therapeutic effect; In that it absorbs all aspects of your body, mind and senses; They are both modern fads turned into popular cults by morons; Despite the burning smell; It can clear your head of all your daily worries; You can stretch yourself with surprising results; But it nourishes the stomach, not the soul; It abstracts you totally from all other thoughts.

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