Available online at www.sciencedirect.com

ScienceDirect

Lingua 175–176 (2016) 54–68

Lingua

www.elsevier.com/locate/lingua

Similes as poetic comparisons

Adam Gargani *

8 Canterbury Rd., Hale, Altrincham, Cheshire WA15 8PL, United Kingdom

Received 12 July 2015; received in revised form 25 October 2015; accepted 28 October 2015
Available online 3 December 2015

Abstract

Similes achieve poetic effects in virtue of the fact that they communicate explicit comparisons. This has been described as the 'standard view' of how similes are understood within relevance theory (Wałaszewska, 2013), although it has only recently been developed at length (Gargani, 2014, Cf. O'Donoghue, 2009). In this paper I defend the standard view of similes as poetic comparisons, and argue that whatever like in similes encodes, it is the same as like in formally equivalent non-poetic comparisons. On my account, the assumption that metaphors and similes are understood in broadly the same way is false, but the content of similes which corresponds to the ad hoc concept communicated as part of the explicature by a metaphor (where applicable) can be captured in terms of a notion of comparison-relevant content. I end by comparing this account with an alternative proposal to explain simile within relevance theory by Wałaszewska (2013).

Keywords: Simile; Metaphor; Relevance theory; Poetic effects

1. Introduction

A key issue in pragmatics and philosophy of language is accounting for how figurative meaning arises (e.g. Blackburn, 1984; Sperber and Wilson, 1995). Sperber and Wilson have developed an approach to poetic effects and loose uses of language within an ostensive-inferential theory of communication, namely Relevance Theory (RT)[1] (Sperber and Wilson, 1995). RT aims to account for how communication works in general, and, as such, it promises to revolutionise our explanations of how all figurative utterances are understood (Sperber and Wilson, 1990/2012:96). A central feature of this approach has been the attempt to characterise tropes as uses of language which are not *sui generis*. This approach has been applied extensively to metaphor and hyperbole on the one hand (Sperber and Wilson, 2008/2012),[2] and irony on the other (Wilson and Sperber, 2012).

However, until recently, simile has remained poorly explained within this framework (e.g. O'Donoghue, 2009; Carston and Wearing, 2011; Gargani, 2014), and there is still some disagreement on how best to account for simile within RT (Cf. Wałaszewska, 2013). In this paper I argue that the account of similes which emerges from existing discussions of metaphor within RT (the 'standard view' of simile within RT, Wałaszewska, 2013) is more than adequate to account for a wider range of data than competing accounts of simile understanding. The 'standard view' (e.g. Carston, 2002;

* Tel.: +44 7464 619 560; fax: +44 161 980 6899.
E-mail address: a.gargani84@gmail.com.

[1] In this paper, the abbreviation RT stands for 'Relevance Theory' or 'relevance-theoretic'.

[2] I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to the view that metonymy still poses a challenge for RT (Wilson and Carston, 2007).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.lingua.2015.10.019
0024-3841/

Gargani, 2014) sees similes as simply comparisons which achieve poetic effects. I introduce the term 'poetic comparison' to capture the observation that similes are particular *uses* of comparisons. There are researchers who pay attention to the formal identity between similes and certain comparison constructions (e.g. Wikberg, 2008; Barnden, 2012), but by far the most common assumption outside the RT framework remains that similes are a type of metaphor, not a type of comparison at all (although see Glucksberg and Haught, 2006, for experimental evidence in support of a strong distinction between metaphor and simile).

In this paper I show that focusing upon the metaphor–simile relationship provides little insight into how similes are understood, despite the ostensible appeal of comparing two types of figurative utterance which can often be substituted for each other. RT predicts that some uses of comparisons will be understood in a particular way, namely as similes. After developing an account of simile understanding along these lines, I compare it with a recent alternative account by Wałaszewska (2013), which appeals to the RT accounts of metaphor understanding (Carston, 2002, 2010a) and procedural meaning (Blakemore, 2002), and argue that such an approach will be unsuccessful.

2. The metaphor–simile relationship

2.1. Why is the comparison of metaphor and simile so appealing?

There are two fundamental questions about metaphor which require explanation by theorists: (i) how can speakers use a word which standardly means one thing to mean something else? and (ii) how do hearers derive effects which we might class as figurative from understanding metaphorical utterances? To illustrate, an utterance of (1a) is understood as communicating not that Achilles is a member of the species *Panthera leo*, but something else:

(1a) Achilles is a lion.

One might say that an utterance of (1a) is taken as communicating that Achilles is fearless, ruthless in battle, and so on. Some of the encyclopaedic properties of *lion* may be stable over time, even across cultures. However, (1b) will typically be understood in a slightly different way by different native speakers of English:

(1b) Achilles is a gazelle.

Perhaps Achilles is understood as being capable of leaping gracefully, running fast, and so on. For a modern English-speaking audience, the interpretation of (1b) will probably incorporate properties such as speed, proficiency at jumping, and so on, which are closely related to general knowledge about gazelles that the audience might have. But because the metaphorical use of *gazelle* is far less conventionalised in English than the metaphorical use of *lion*, the interpretation of *gazelle* in (1b) is likely to be more subjective. The fact that such interpretations are possible and that creative uses of metaphor correlate with a particular kind of subjective personal experience that is often associated with interpreting literary works requires explanation. In the RT framework, these experiences are often analysed in terms of a notion of *poetic effect.*

In their ability to create poetic effects, similes have much in common with metaphors (e.g. Corbett and Connors, 1999:396f). Moreover, metaphors often seem to be translatable into similes and vice versa with no loss of meaning. For example, (2a) and (2b) may be seen as having equivalent effects to (1a) and (1b):

(2a) Achilles is like a lion.
(2b) Achilles is like a gazelle.

It is for these two reasons, translatability and equivalence of effects, that metaphor and simile have typically been treated as manifestations of the same linguistic, pragmatic or conceptual–psychological phenomenon across a range of theoretical perspectives (e.g. Stern, 2000; Lakoff and Johnson, 2003; Wałaszewska, 2013). But it is not a 'figurative sense' of *lion* or *gazelle* that Achilles is compared to in (2a) and (2b). The 'figurative' meaning arises somehow despite the fact that *lion* and *gazelle* are being used in their primary, standardised, 'literal' sense (Carston, 2002:357).[3] Metaphors and similes cannot be substituted *salvo sensu* in every case. For instance, (3a) and (3b) have been shown to be interpreted differently by experimental participants (Glucksberg and Haught, 2006):

(3a) My lawyer is a shark.
(3b) My lawyer is like a shark.

[3] The claim that metaphors are literally false or patently true plays a role in Gricean accounts of metaphor understanding (Grice, 1989; Searle, 1993), but RT does not appeal to conversational norms such as Grice's cooperative principle and concomitant maxims.