

Similes are Manners, comparisons are Quantities (except when they aren't)

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1. Introduction

Hengeveld & Mackenzie (2008) do not formally distinguish between similes and comparisons. In fact, as they introduce the sentence in (1) the authors state that “[i]n English, Comparison is typically signalled by the preposition *like*”; in this way, similes are explicitly equated with straightforward comparisons of the type of (2):

- (1) She sings like a nightingale. (Hengeveld & Mackenzie 2008: 264)
- (2) John is more intelligent than his brother. (Hengeveld & Mackenzie 2008: 455)

The goal of this paper is to demonstrate that these two types of construction are indeed similar in that both the simile phrase in (1) and the comparative expression in (2) function as modifiers at the Representational Level, but crucially differ as regards the semantic category that underlies each type of modifier. More specifically, I will argue that simile modifiers of the type of (1) are best accounted for as Manner expressions, whereas comparison modifiers belong to the semantic category of Quantities. This analysis, however, does not apply to all simile modifiers, nor to structures in which a simile is used in predicative position (e.g. *She is like a nightingale*). Similarly, comparisons cannot be analyzed as Quantities when the relation between the two terms of the comparison is not one of modification but is expressed lexically by a predicate like *prefer* or *would rather*, which takes both the target and the standard of comparison as its arguments (e.g. *I prefer tea to coffee*).

2. Similes

2.1. Similes are Manners

Although Hengeveld & Mackenzie (2008: 264-265) argue that similes of the type of (1) are in fact comparisons, and as such must be distinguished from Manners, they also point out that in (1) “the manner of her singing is understood figuratively, through the simile *like a nightingale*. It is then a small step to reinterpreting *like* as a literal marker of Manner”. That such reinterpretations are indeed possible is also evident when one considers that the English preposition *like* is etymologically related to the adverbializing suffix *-ly*, which allows adjectival Lexical Properties to occur in the head of a Manner and thus functions as a *bona fide* Manner marker. *Like*, however, cannot be regarded as a grammaticalized Manner marker but clearly behaves like a lexical preposition, witness the fact that it can occur in the scope of modifiers (e.g. *very much like X*, *exactly like X*) and undergo processes of lexical derivational (e.g. *unlike*, *likewise*; see Keizer 2007 on availability for modification and derivation as criteria for lexicality). At first glance, it would also appear that the whole Prepositional Phrase *like a nightingale* does not function as a Manner expression: *like* Instrument and Means modifiers, and unlike Manner modifiers, this phrase cannot be paraphrased as *in a X way*:

2.2. When similes are not Manners

In predicative constructions as *She is like a nightingale*, the Individual *she* is likened to a nightingale without specifying in which respect she can be said to be ‘like a nightingale’. This means that, unlike in the examples above, the predicate *like* takes the Individual ‘nightingale’, and not a Manner, as its Simile argument. In turn, the Configurational Property (f_j) formed by the preposition and its argument does not head a Manner expression but is directly ascribed to the Individual *she*:

(9) She is like a nightingale.

... (f_i^c : [(f_j : [(f_k : like (f_k)) ($1x_i$:–nightingale–(x))_{Simile}] (f_j)) (f1x_j)_U] (f_i^c)) ...¹

Even in modifier constructions, however, the function Simile is not always assigned to a Manner. For instance, this is not the case of similes of the type of (e.g.) *I am a linguist like my father*. In such structures, the speaker does not assert that the Property ‘linguist’ applies in the same way or to the same degree to both Individuals but simply states that both Individuals participate in the same type of situation. In other words, it is the nuclear predication ‘I be a linguist’ that is said to resemble the nuclear predication ‘my father be a linguist’. It is thus the latter Configurational Property that occurs as an argument of *like*, contracting the function Simile. This leads to the following representation for *I am a linguist like my father*, where (f_i^c) = ‘I be a linguist’ and (f_m^c) = ‘my father be a linguist’:

(10) ... (f_i^c : [(f_j : linguist (f_j)) ($1x_i$)_U] (f_i^c): (f_k : [(f_l : like (f_l)) (f_m^c : [(f_n : ($1x_j$:–my father–(x_j))_U] (f_m^c))_{Simile}] (f_k)) (f_i^c)) ...

3. Comparisons

3.1. Comparisons are Quantities

In Hengeveld & Mackenzie (2008: 455), comparison modifiers are represented as shown in (11):

(11) John is much/markedly more intelligent than his brother.

(f_1 : [(f_2 : [(f_3 : Adj (f_3): [(f_4 : more (f_4): [(f_5 : Adv (f_5)) (f_4)_U] (f_3)_U] (x_1)_{Standard}]] (f_2)) (x_2)_U] (f_1))

The representation of the degree word *more* as a Lexical Property correctly captures the fact that such elements can be modified by adverbs like *much*, *markedly*, etc. The same analysis applies when the comparative suffix *-er* is used instead of the word *more*, since exactly the same type of adverbial modification is required in both cases.² The alternation between *more* and the suffix *-er* is therefore regarded as a matter for the Phonological Level. Abstracting away from the presence of secondary modifiers such as *much* or *markedly*, this leads to the following analysis for the utterance in (11):

(12) ... (f_i^c : [(f_j : [(f_k : intelligent (f_k): (f_l : more (f_l)) (f_k)) (m1x_i :–John’s brother–(x_i))_{Standard}] (f_j)) (m1x_j)_U] (f_i^c)) ...

The representations in (11)-(12), however, present a number of problems. First, they suggest that *intelligent* is only modified by *more* (not by *more than his brother*) and the Standard of Comparison *his brother* is an argument of the modified Property (f_k), *more intelligent* (and not of the Property (f_l),

¹ Unlike in classificational predications (Hengeveld & Mackenzie 2008: 204), there is no requirement that the Simile argument of *like* belong to the same category as the term of which the Property *like X* is predicated (cf. **John is an explosion vs. John is like an explosion*).

² As noted by Nagamura (2018), Keizer’s (2015: 238) analysis of *-er* as a Comparative operator cannot account for such modifications, since as mentioned above grammatical elements are not modifiable.

more): if this were so, it should be possible to omit *more* and say **John is intelligent than his brother* – which, as pointed out by Hengeveld & Mackenzie, is in fact ungrammatical. Second, degree adverbs such as *highly* are analyzed as “indicating the Quantity of application of their head” (Hengeveld and Mackenzie 2008: 270), i.e. they function as lexical heads of variables of the (q) type:

(13) highly intelligent

(f_i: intelligent (f_i): (q_i: (f_j: high (f_j)) (q_i))_ϕ (f_i))_ϕ

It is unclear, then, why *more than his brother*, which likewise indicates “the Quantity of application of [its] head” should not be represented in the same way. In this regard, it should be stressed that many languages use degree words reserved to Quantities as a means of marking comparisons (e.g. Italian *Giovanni è piu intelligente di quanto lo sia suo fratello*, lit. “Giovanni is more intelligent than how-much his brother is”). Besides this, the assignment of the function Standard to *his brother* would suggest that the comparison in (11) is between the Individuals ‘John’ and ‘John’s brother’: this, however, is not the real meaning of such constructions. Rather, a comparison is established between the extent to which John is intelligent (the target of comparison) and the extent to which John’s brother is intelligent (the Standard of Comparison). That is, the two terms of the comparison are not two Individuals but two Quantities, cf. the paraphrase *John is intelligent to a degree (q_i) such that (q_i) is greater than the degree (q_j) to which John’s brother is intelligent*. This analysis leads to a representation that is structurally identical to that proposed for similes in (8), that is:

(14) ... (f_i^c: [(f_j: intelligent (f_j): (q_i:

(f_k: [(f_i: more (f_i)) (q_j:

(f_m: [(f_j): (q_j) (f_j)) (°1x_i:–John’s brother–(x_i))_U] (f_m))
(q_j))_{Standard}

] (f_k))

(q_i))

(f_j)) (°1x_j))_U

] (f_i^c)) ...

Needless to say, the same type of analysis applies to comparison modifiers that do not have scope over a predicate, as in (11), but rather over an argument (e.g. *John drinks more coffee than his brother*) or over other modifiers (e.g. *She sings more beautifully than a nightingale*).

3.2. When comparisons are not Quantities

Just as not all similes are Manners, not all comparisons are Quantities. Compare (15a-b), where both terms of comparison are arguments of the lexical(ized) predicates *prefer* and *would rather*.

(15) a. I prefer tea to coffee.

b. I would rather have tea than coffee.

With such predicates, a paraphrase in terms of amounts or degrees is clearly nonsensical, or in any case does not bring out the real meaning of the sentence – e.g. **I prefer tea to an amount of coffee; *I would rather have tea than the degree to which I would have coffee*. It follows that the semantic function Standard of Comparison cannot be assigned to a (q)-variable in such cases. Rather, in (15a) the Standard is the Individual *coffee* and in (15b) it is the Configurational Property ‘I have coffee’:

- (16) a. ... (f_i^c: [(f_j: prefer (f_j) (1x_i)_A (x_j:—tea—(x_j))_U (x_k:—coffee—(x_k))_{Standard}] (f_i^c)) ...
- b. ... (f_i^c: [(f_j: would_rather (f_j) (1x_i)_A(f_k: [(f_i: have (f_i) (1x_i)_A (x_j:—tea—(x_j))_U] (f_k))_U
(f_m: [(f_i) (1x_i)_A (x_k:—coffee—(x_j))_U] (f_m))_{Standard}
] (f_i^c)) ...

4. Conclusions and outline of the full paper

By assigning the same type of underlying structure to both simile and comparison modifiers, the proposed approach takes Hengeveld & Mackenzie's (2008) observation about the similarity of these two types of modifiers to its logical consequence. At the same time, it improves FDG's standard account of both similes and comparisons (i) by analyzing simile modifiers as Manners (except when the simile is established between two Configurational Properties, see (10)) and comparison modifiers as Quantities; and (ii) by discriminating between modifying and predicative uses of similes, and between modifying and argument-denoting uses of comparisons. Further topics to be addressed in the paper which could not be included in this abstract concern the grammaticalization of both Simile and Standard-of-Comparison markers as markers of rhetorical functions at the Interpersonal Level – respectively, Exemplification (e.g. *social medias like Facebook*) and “metacomparison” (e.g. *Your problems are legal more than financial*, see McCawley 1964; Bresnan 1973; Pinkham 1985).

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