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Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/110522wx>

Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 25(25)

ISSN

1069-7977

Authors

Gokcesu, Selin
Bowdle, Brian F.

Publication Date

2003

Peer reviewed

Conventionality, Similarity, and the Metaphor / Simile Distinction

Selin Gokcesu (bgokcesu@indiana.edu)
Brian F. Bowdle (bbowdle@indiana.edu)
Department of Psychology, Indiana University
Bloomington, IN 47401 USA

Nominal metaphors (figurative statements of the form *X is Y*) can often be restated as similes (figurative statements of the form *X is like Y*). Thus, one can say both *Time is a river* and *Time is like a river*. This grammatical alternation is often assumed to be arbitrary, with metaphors and their simile counterparts being synonymous. (Indeed, metaphors are traditionally defined as elliptical similes.) However, a handful of studies have suggested that the two forms may in fact not be equivalent. For example, Gibb and Wales (1990) found that similes are preferred over metaphors for figurative statements with concrete predicates, and Reynolds and Ortony (1980) found that simile comprehension developmentally precedes metaphor comprehension.

What accounts for these differences between the two forms? Two recent proposals have been made. According to Gentner and Bowdle's (2001) *career of metaphor hypothesis*, conventionality plays a key role. On this view, novel figurative statements are processed as comparisons between the target concept (a-term) and the base concept (b-term). Therefore, similes will be strongly preferred over metaphors for novel statements, as the grammatical form of metaphors suggests comparison, whereas the grammatical form of similes suggests categorization. As metaphoric base terms become conventionalized, however, they take on additional, more abstract meanings that can act as metaphoric categories. Thus, conventional figurative statements can be processed either as comparisons involving the original sense of the base term, or as categorizations involving the derived sense of the base term, which means that they can be phrased either as similes or as metaphors.

Aisenman (1999) has proposed an alternative account. According to Aisenman, the distinction between metaphors and similes is closely tied to the type of similarity expressed by the figurative statement. If the similarity between the target and base is primarily attributional – that is, if both items are perceptually alike – then the simile form will be preferred. If, on the other hand, the similarity between the target and base is primarily relational – that is, if both items are functionally alike – then the metaphor form will be preferred. The basic assumption here is that function tends to be more conceptually central than physical appearance. Thus, relational similarity should call for the “stronger” grammatical form: namely, the metaphor

We tested these two alternative accounts of the metaphor / simile distinction by presenting subjects with both novel and conventional figurative statements whose

target and base terms were either attributionally similar or relationally similar. In one experiment, subjects received all four types of statements (novel + attributional, novel + relational, conventional + attributional, conventional + relational) as both metaphors and similes, and were asked to indicate which form they preferred. A main effect of conventionality was obtained, with the simile form being preferred more strongly for novel statements than for conventional statements. However, there was only a marginal effect of similarity type in the direction predicted by Aisenman's account.

In a second experiment, subjects were presented with the same statements, each statement being phrased either as a metaphor or as a simile. Subjects were asked to rate the aptness of the statements. An interaction between conventionality and grammatical form was obtained, such that similes were rated as more apt than metaphors for novel statements, but not for conventional statements. There was no interaction between similarity type and grammatical form. Relational statements were not rated as more apt when phrased as metaphors, and attributional statements were not rated as more apt when phrased as similes.

Overall, the results of these experiments support the career of metaphor hypothesis and its approach to the metaphor / simile distinction. Nevertheless, we believe that type of similarity could play a key role during the process of conventionalization. Relational figurative comparisons may be more likely than attributional figurative comparisons to lead to the abstraction of conventional metaphoric categories. Indeed, our research suggests that the majority of conventional metaphor bases are relationally defined.

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