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Missing the Mark:

Similes, Metaphors, Where They Fail, and What it Means

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Approval Page	ii
Table of Contents	iii
List of Figures	iv
1.0 Introduction	1
1.1 What are Similes and Metaphors?.....	1
1.2 Assumptions.....	3
1.2.1 Similes and Metaphors are not Linguistically Relevant.....	3
1.2.2 Similes and Metaphors are the Same Thing.....	4
2.0 Previous Work	7
2.1 How Similes and Metaphors Work.....	7
2.2 Why Similes and Metaphors are Used.....	9
2.3 The Relationship Between the Figurative and Literal.....	10
3.0 Conceptual Models for Similes and Metaphors	13
3.1 Similes and Metaphors as Comparison Statements.....	13
3.2 Similes and Metaphors as Categorical Assertions.....	15
3.3 Mixed Model.....	18
3.4 Choosing a Model.....	20
4.0 Failure	23
4.1 What is Failure?.....	23
4.2 Types of Failure.....	29
4.2.1 Reversal.....	30
4.2.2 Semantic Aptness.....	36
4.2.3 Literal Comparisons.....	43
4.2.4 Identity Statements.....	46
5.0 Conclusion	50
References	54

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Graphic representation of similes and metaphors as comparison statements.....	15
Figure 2: Graphic representation of similes and metaphors as categorical assertions.....	18
Figure 3: Graphic representation of similes as comparison statements and metaphors as categorical assertions.....	20
Figure 4: The use of a failed simile in a ‘Dilbert’ comic.....	25
Figure 5: Trying to find meaning in ‘failed’ forms.....	53

1.0 Introduction

1.1 What are Similes and Metaphors?

The concepts of similes and metaphors are not unfamiliar to most people, and may elicit memories of the teachings of an English class, the imagery of poetry, the colourful prose attributed to some writers in their descriptions, or the attempts of a speaker to sound sophisticated.

According to *Webster's Student Dictionary*, a simile is “a figure of speech expressing comparison or likeness by the use of such terms as *like* or *as*.”

(1) My love is like a red, red rose. (Robert Burns)

In the same source, a metaphor is defined as “a figure of speech in which one object is likened to another by speaking of it as if it were that other.”

(2) Man is a wolf.

Both similes and metaphors are examples of what is known as figurative language, or “expression(s) that use words not in their literal sense but to produce a fanciful or vivid impression” (*Webster's Student Dictionary*). Other commonly used types of figurative language that may sometimes take the form of similes and metaphors are literary devices such as irony, personification, and hyperbole. In figurative language, there is a divergence between what is said and what is meant: they are not intended to be taken literally, or they make some comparison or likening that is somehow surprising.

In the case of similes and metaphors, both express some relationship between a ‘topic,’ (what is being compared, or comes first in the utterance), and a ‘vehicle,’ (what it is being compared with, or comes second in the utterance), by use of some ‘ground’ (the compared

attribute). This relationship may be explicitly stated, as in a simile, through its use of comparative terms, usually but not exclusively *like* or *as*, or merely implied, as in a metaphor, which lacks these terms. What exactly the ground is can vary, though it is most commonly to do with the behaviour, function, or appearance that is common to both topic and vehicle.

The most common form a simile takes is ‘X is like (a) Y,’ and is generally considered to be the basic form, as in example (3a). Another relatively common form involves the use of a tertium, which makes explicit the grounds by which the topic and vehicle are related. These similes generally take the form ‘X is Y like Z,’ as in (3b), or ‘X is as Y as Z,’ as found in (3c).

- (3) a. Cities are like jungles. (Chiappe *et al*, 2003: 103)
- b. She’s sweet like sugar.
- c. He’s as blind as a bat.

Metaphors generally take the form ‘X is a Y,’ which is also considered its most basic form, as in (4a). This is by far the most common form, but there are others. The use of a noun-noun compound combines the vehicle and topic into a single unit, (4b). Alternatively, the vehicle alone can be used to refer to the topic without directly making a metaphor, as in (4c).

- (4) a. Crime is a disease. (Chiappe *et al*, 2003: 103)
- b. He’s a real shark-lawyer. (i.e. The lawyer is a shark)
- c. Einstein just left the room. (i.e. John is Einstein)

While the figurative relation they are making is generally implied, unlike the explicit simile form, metaphors may also be accompanied by some indication of their status as figurative speech. This is usually to prevent any confusion that might arise if the statement is taken literally, as in (5), made by a three-inch tall Roman soldier.

(5) Octavius: “We may be small, but our hearts are large...metaphorically speaking.”

(Night at the Museum)

1.2 Assumptions

Because they are familiar concepts and are generally not given much thought outside a scholarly context, there are a number of assumptions held about similes and metaphors. Like any assumptions, they may or may not be true, but they are worth looking at nevertheless, to confirm or dispel.

1.2.1 Similes and Metaphors are not Linguistically Relevant

One assumption that people may hold about similes and metaphors is that they are a peripheral phenomenon of language, used primarily for ornamentation because they somehow sound ‘nice,’ and are therefore irrelevant outside the literary world, interesting only in the context of an English classroom, or poetry recital. They do not find it surprising that Alfred Noyes, in his poem “The Highwayman,” would describe the road as “a ribbon of moonlight, over the purple moor,” or that William Shakespeare would make the observation that “all the world’s a stage and the men and women merely players” in the play *As You Like It*, or that in Alexandre Dumas’ *The Count of Monte Cristo*, the rising sea could be likened to “a monstrous bird, cover[ing] the sky with its wings,” similes and metaphors being commonly found devices in poems and plays and books.

However, while similes and metaphors are certainly a staple of the written word, they are not limited to it and in fact are all around. Whether one agrees with Forrest Gump that “life [is] like a box of chocolates,” in the movie of the same name, or Jon Bon Jovi when he sings “life is like an open highway,” in the song “It’s My Life,” it must be conceded that similes and

metaphors are alive and well in the world of popular culture.

Not only are they used in the literary world and popular culture, these figurative devices frequently appear in everyday usage, but the ease with which they can be understood allows them to go unnoticed, unless they are unusual or particularly fitting, in which case they might be noted. Some are used to the point that they become idioms, and still others become so standard that they lose their figurative meaning entirely and become fixed in the language, or so-called ‘dead metaphors,’ as in referring to a callous person as ‘cold,’ or speedy motion as ‘flying.’ Others may go unnoticed because they may take a different form than the typical ‘X is (like) Y.’ Clearly, the interpretation of figurative speech is as easy and natural as the interpretation of literal speech for it not to be noticed in such a way.

Far from being restricted in their occurrence to some specialized usage, or some kind of strange phenomenon that cannot be explained, similes and metaphors pervade the English language (though they are not restricted to it), and are an integral part of it. As such, they are as interesting and important as any literal form of language.

1.2.2 Similes and Metaphors are the Same Thing

A second common assumption is that similes and metaphors are essentially instances of the same figurative phenomenon, worded in two different ways. Aristotle effectively summed up this view when he wrote: “the simile is also a metaphor...the difference is but slight” (*Rhetoric III*). While this view tends to see metaphors as compressed, or ‘elliptical’ similes, in which the comparative term has been dropped, a simile may also be regarded as a special kind of metaphor, distinguished by its use of the comparative term, but otherwise the same.

This assumption is, first, fuelled by the fact that similes and metaphors are often defined

in terms of each other. What is a simile? A metaphor with the addition of *like* or *as*, making it a direct comparison. What is a metaphor? A simile without the *like* or *as*, making it an indirect comparison.

A second factor contributing to this assumption is the fact that similes and metaphors are often interchangeable. This may not always be the case with more complex instances that deviate from the 'X is (like) Y' forms, but at least in this basic form they seem to be easily interchanged, seemingly without any perceptible or significant change in meaning.

- (6) a. The moon was like a silver coin.
b. The moon was a silver coin.

Taken together, the fact that the most basic forms sometimes only differ from each other by a single word, and that they both seem to be fulfilling the same purpose, that of comparison, the evidence seems to indicate that similes and metaphors are, in fact, the same thing. However, there is also evidence that suggests maybe they are not. Not all basic similes and metaphors can be interchanged and retain their full meaning.

- (7) a. The two bears sat facing each other like two matrons having tea.
#b. The two bears were matrons having tea. (Israel *et al*, 2004: 129)

Other forms that can be interchanged may still have a definite preference for one form over the other, depending on the context. This can be seen in the fact that it is possible to assert one form and deny the other.

- (8) a. Ray isn't just like a star, Ray is a star! (Chiappe *et al*, 2003: 99)
b. I didn't say that he is *like* an echo; I said and meant that he is an echo! (Black, 1979: 31)

c. I wouldn't say that he's a Picasso, but he's *like* a Picasso.

In these examples, the metaphorical statements seem to be somehow stronger than their simile counterparts, and so if the topic is not sufficiently similar to the vehicle, the preference is for the simile form, and the metaphor is preferred if the topic is somehow very similar.

Some seemingly interchangeable forms may have slightly different meanings assigned to them according to whether they are worded as a simile or a metaphor.

- (9)
- a. She's like a caterpillar.
 - b. She's a caterpillar.
 - c. He's like a frog.
 - d. He's a frog.

In Fraser's experiment, in which novel similes and metaphors without context were interpreted by the subjects, the general trend found was that the simile form was more likely to be interpreted as regarding the behaviour of the topic. In the examples above, (9a) was often interpreted in ways such as "she's in the process of development," while (9b) was not, despite being different only in the absence of *like*. Similarly, (9c) received several responses along the lines of "he jumps around a lot," while (9d) only received one response of that type (Fraser, 1979: 184).

While it is possible these examples of exceptions are not important or sufficient enough to merit the discarding of the assumption that metaphors and similes are the same figurative phenomenon, they may also be an indication that a closer look needs to be taken, and some thought given to the actual underlying semantic representation of these forms.

2.0 Previous Work

Similes and metaphors, along with other types of figurative language, have proved to be an interesting topic of study, linguistically and otherwise, due largely to the extent of their usage, and have been examined in a variety of different ways in previous studies, from experiments to analysis. Much of the work done has been primarily concerned with metaphor; some deal with similes in passing, if at all, though much of what is written about metaphor could be applied to figurative language in general, as it deals with the difference between what is said and what is meant. There is a great deal of diversity in what is addressed and concluded in these studies, but even those that disagree in their analyses can provide interesting insights into the phenomenon of figurative language. Three main questions that have been granted much attention are: how is it possible to use figurative language despite its divergence from the literal, why anyone would choose to use figurative language in the first place instead of the literal, and what, if any, are the differences between similes and metaphors.

2.1 How Similes and Metaphors Work

A pragmatic issue that has arisen in the study of the figurative is how it is possible to say one thing, but mean something entirely different, which is part of the purpose of figurative language: the expression of the non-literal, in often new and surprising ways. In similes and metaphors, there is a problem concerning “the relations between word and sentence meaning, on the one hand, and a speaker’s meaning or utterance meaning, on the other” (Searle, 1979: 93). Black identifies the ‘mystery’ surrounding metaphor as the fact that, when taken literally, metaphors seem to assert something blatantly false, making a liar of the speaker (Black, 1979: 21). However, most listeners are able to understand the speaker’s underlying meaning without

even the need for explanation.

Levinson, in *Pragmatics*, looks at metaphors in the context of conversational implicature, or the pragmatics of how it is possible to ‘mean’ more than is actually ‘said,’ as he feels that semantic theories of metaphors are insufficient. He treats metaphors as an exploitation or purposeful flouting of Grice’s conversational maxims, particularly the maxim of quality, which requires an utterance to be true. His approach is based on the assumption that the metaphorical content of an utterance is not come upon by principles of semantic interpretation, but the semantics provide a characterization of the expression’s literal meaning, and then pragmatics are able to yield the metaphorical interpretation, because the literal meaning would be in violation of the maxims (Levinson, 1983: 156).

Searle writes that in order to understand metaphors, a listener needs more than just a knowledge of the language, awareness of the conditions under which it was uttered, and shared background assumptions with the speaker, but also principles or factual information that allows for the interpretation of a metaphor. He believes that the speaker’s uttering of a metaphor, along with its literal meaning and truth conditions, allow the listener, in different ways, to ‘call to mind’ the metaphorical meaning, and its truth conditions (Searle, 1979: 99). He lists eight different principles that are peculiar to metaphor that allow the listener to compute its figurative meaning despite a seemingly conflicting literal meaning.

Many psychological understandings of figurative language hold that in order to understand a figurative form, the speaker must first compute a literal meaning for the utterance, and, if it violates some conversational convention, only then are possible alternative meanings assessed, making the process of figurative speech much more complicated than literal speech

(Rumelhart, 1979: 82). Glucksberg (1998) attempts to dispel this notion. In an experiment, Glucksberg presented subjects with literally true statements, literally false statements, metaphors, and scrambled metaphors, and asked the subjects to decide which were literally true. The result was that the subjects had difficulty rejecting the metaphors as literally false, and took a statistically significant longer time to do so, due to the fact that metaphorical meanings cannot be ignored, but are processed as quickly and easily as literal speech. In a second experiment, subjects were presented with noun-noun compounds that could be interpreted metaphorically or literally, and it was found that the subjects overwhelmingly chose the metaphorical interpretations, which would not be expected if metaphors were somehow more difficult to understand (Glucksberg, 1998: 40). From this, it seems that the assumption that metaphors must first be converted to literal forms before they can be interpreted does not seem to be correct, but that they are interpreted as is, despite their departure from what is generally considered 'true.'

2.2 Why Similes and Metaphors are Used

The studies and the everyday use of figurative language confirm that it is possible to say one thing and mean another without causing great confusion; the question of why anyone would actually choose to use figurative language instead of literal is another question to be answered. As demonstrated by Glucksberg, it is not the case that figurative forms are any more difficult to understand, so therefore the use of figurative language is not hampered by any increased complexity. The general consensus about reasons for the use of figurative language is that they are not merely decorative, as Aristotle would have argued. A common reason given for the use of metaphors is that they are needed because a language's literal resources are sometimes insufficient and cannot express certain insights available through metaphorical speech (Black,

1979: 34). Figurative speech exists to fill some gap that literal speech cannot, and therefore has its own importance.

In their book *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson look at how metaphors help people to structure the world around them, and understand it. They argue that metaphors are not just a matter of the language, but that human thought processes are themselves metaphorical, and define and structure conceptual systems, using past experience and certain cultural values as a basis. They look at how many of our conceptual systems are based upon structural metaphors, where a concept is structured metaphorically in terms of another, as in *argument is war*, and *time is money*. They also look at orientational metaphors, that give a spatial orientation to concepts such as *happy is up*, and *sad is down*. Metaphors allow a listener to focus on one aspect of a concept, and to ignore other aspects that are inconsistent with what is being said (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

2.3 The Relationship Between the Figurative and Literal

Other studies look at the relationship between metaphors, similes, and literal speech, and whether it is possible to make a clear distinction between them. A sentence's literal meaning is what determines its truth conditions, or the situations under which it is true, relative to assumptions held by the speaker and listener (Searle, 1979: 96-98). To Davidson, "the most obvious semantic difference between similes and metaphor is that all similes are true and most metaphors are false" (Davidson, 1978: 41). Miller agrees that a metaphor such as *man is a wolf* cannot mean the same as its corresponding simile *man is like a wolf* because of their differing truth values (Miller, 1979: 230). This view sees similes as being literally true, because they are making a comparison, which may be true, in fact. Ortony, however, disagrees, and

believes that similes cannot be literal. He gives the reasons that, first of all, it is logical that similes are not literally true, as seen in the fact that people tend to judge a literal comparison, such as *dictionaries are like encyclopaedias* as true, but a simile, such as *dictionaries are like gold mines* as figurative, not true. Secondly, if similes are literally true, then any possible comparison is also true, so everything is technically like everything else, which leads to a tautology, or necessary truth, and therefore nothing is to be gained at all from the use of similes (Ortony, 1979: 192).

The difficulty of differentiating between similes and actual literal comparisons, and to what degree similes are literal or figurative, has been looked at as well. Israel *et al* believe that the difference between the figurative and literal has to do with the degree to which there is overlap of their cognitive domains: a literal comparison will have similar domain matrices with some differences in specification between its two parts, while a figurative comparison aligns its concepts with different domain matrices, and create similarities where they are not expected (Israel *et al*, 2004: 126). At just what point the domain matrices are dissimilar enough to be considered figurative rather than literal is not an easy distinction to make, nor is the difference between the figurative and literal forms.

In order to answer some of these questions posed regarding how similes and metaphors work, two main semantic theories of metaphor have come to light: the comparison theory, and the interaction theory. The comparison theory states that “metaphors are similes with suppressed or deleted predications of similarity” (Levinson, 1983: 148). This theory has its roots in Aristotle, but has garnered more recent support from Miller (1979). The opposing interaction theory holds that “metaphors are special uses of linguistic expressions where one ‘metaphorical’

expression (or *focus*) is embedded in another ‘literal’ expression (or *frame*), such that the meaning of the focus interacts with and *changes* the meaning of the *frame*, and vice versa” (Levinson, 1983: 148). In other words, metaphors are not only conveying information about the topic as a literal comparison would, but can also affect how the vehicle is viewed. A strong supporter of this theory is Black (1979). Still others do not feel that either theory adequately explains the issues surrounding metaphor and other figurative forms.

Finally, following closely from these two theories, some research has been done on the relation between similes and metaphors and whether they really are the same thing, and how they are understood. Both Glucksberg *et al* (1997) and Chiappe *et al* (2003) examine similes and metaphors in terms of comparisons and categorical assertions by use of reversal, though they reach different conclusions. Three different conceptual models can be produced from these various studies, and will be the subject of this work.

3.0 Conceptual Models for Similes and Metaphors

In the previous work done on similes and metaphors, the question of whether they are, in fact, synonymous with each other has been asked and answered many times and in various ways. For this paper, there are three models to be examined that can be garnered from the conflicts of previous studies and can be represented graphically. The first two— the comparison statement and categorical assertion models— treat similes and metaphors as essentially the same phenomenon, but differ in how exactly they think they are actually best represented, either as comparison statements or categorical assertions. The third, mixed model, sees them as importantly different, and uses the first two models in order to capture this difference in which similes are comparison statements, and metaphors are categorical assertions.

The three models make different claims about what the nature and mental representations of similes and metaphors are, and, based on these claims, different predictions about how they will behave.

3.1 Similes and Metaphors as Comparison Statements

The first possible model has its roots in the comparison theory, in which the differences between similes and metaphors are superficial, and they are both seen as asserting the same relation between the topic and vehicle: that of a comparison statement.

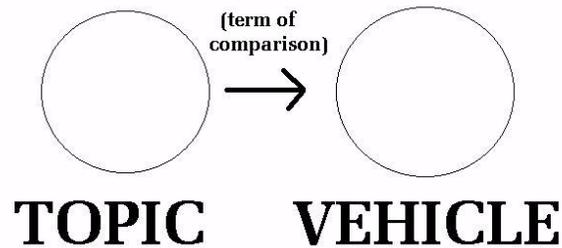
The relation between the topic and vehicle is similar to that of a literal comparison statement, in which two like things are compared due to some similarity between them. This comparison can be made between individuals, or general sets. It is often difficult to determine where a literal comparison ends and where a figurative one begins, or at just what point the two things become so ‘unlike’ that they can no longer be compared literally. Literal comparisons are

usually bidirectional: because they are literally alike, they may both be compared to each other. Figurative comparisons work in much the same manner, in which neither topic nor vehicle is superordinate or subordinate to the other, although, by their nature, the properties being compared are usually more salient in the vehicle, because these properties may not be immediately obvious in the topic alone, hence the need to make a figurative comparison.

According to this model, similes and metaphors are both comparison statements that involve two seemingly unlike things, but that may have some previous unknown likeness. The simile is the more basic of the two forms, being itself an explicit comparison statement, signalling that a comparison is to be made by its use of the comparative terms *like* or *as*. A metaphor is merely an ‘elliptical’ or ‘compressed’ simile, or a simile in which the term of comparison— *like* or *as* or some other indication that a comparison is being made— has been left out, therefore making the comparison implicit. In other words, “a simile tells us...what a metaphor merely nudges us into noting” (Davidson, 1978: 38). In order for a metaphor to be understood, then, the implied comparison must be reconstructed, most often through the mental reinsertion of the deleted term of comparison (Miller, 1979: 228). Once a simile has been attained, a comparison process is undergone, in which the relevant vehicle properties are matched to the topic (Chiappe *et al*, 2003: 86).

Graphically, the conceptualization of similes and metaphors would look like Figure 1 below, in which the topic is compared directly to the vehicle, with the option of using some comparative term.

Figure 1: Graphic representation of similes and metaphors as comparison statements.



Glucksberg's favourite example, *my lawyer is a shark*, could be understood in terms of the above model. In this case, its base form is the simile *my lawyer is like a shark*, in which *my lawyer*, the topic, is compared directly to *a shark*, the vehicle, through the comparative term, in this case *like*. It is understood as two separate identities with some similarity; *lawyer* and *shark* are alike in some yet unspecified way, left for the listener to decide, or the speaker to elaborate upon. To create the metaphor form, the comparative term is deleted, making the comparison implicit, but there nonetheless, creating the need for a little additional processing to understand the comparison as such.

3.2 Similes and Metaphors as Categorical Assertions

A second, less common model comes from Glucksberg (1998), in which the differences between similes and metaphors are again superficial, and they still assert the same relation between topic and vehicle, but this relation is as categorical assertions, not comparison statements.

A literal categorical assertion involves a superset/subset structure in which some object X

belongs in some category Y, as in *robins are birds*. In order to belong inside a category, the item must have some requisite inherent properties that characterize the set (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980: 122). In the case of the category *bird*, the membership requirements are scientific in basis, so in order to belong to the category, the member candidate must be warm-blooded, bipedal, egg-laying, winged, generally with feathers and hollow bones. If the member candidate does not meet these membership requirements, then it is not within the category. Categorical assertions are represented in much the same way as the semantic prototypes of concepts in set theory, in which the more prototypical members of a set are closer to the set's 'centre,' with increasingly less prototypical members moving towards the periphery. This is known as 'graded membership,' in which members of a category have an internal structure and some members are better examples of the category than others. Even in a concept whose boundaries can be clearly defined, like *bird*, this grading can be found, for *robin* is generally a better example of *bird* than *penguin*. This is typical of the way language and conceptual systems are thought to be organized (O'Grady & Archibald, 2004: 181-182). Both *robins are birds* and *penguins are birds* are valid categorical assertions, though the former is generally more easily understood due to its use of a prototype of the category. Not all categorical assertions require the use of prototypes, but many categories do involve graded membership.

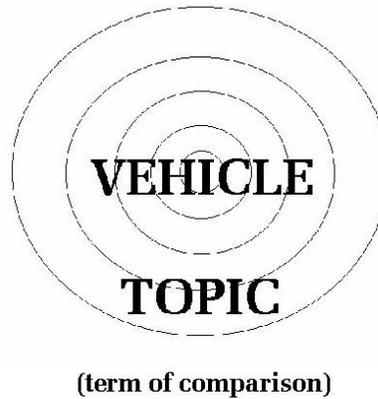
As categorical assertions, similes and metaphors are still understood as being essentially comparisons, in which unlike things are compared; however, the nature of this comparison is no longer the same as that of a literal comparison statement. Rather than make a direct comparison between two individuals or sets, as in the first model, a categorical assertion makes a comparison within a single set, or category. It is usually necessary that the vehicle be a more prototypical

member of the category, to the point that it can define the category, and is therefore understood as being 'higher,' or superordinate to the subordinate topic related to it. Only those vehicle features that are relevant to the grounds of the category and make it a prototype are utilized in the comparison. Glucksberg differentiates between M, or metaphorical, properties and L, or literal, properties. The M properties are associated with the meaning of a word at the superordinate level, while the L properties are associated with the meaning of a word at the basic, literal level. Therefore, the M properties are what is referred to by the metaphorical vehicle, not the L properties, which define the literal (Glucksberg, 1998: 41).

Although this model, like the comparison statement model, asserts that similes and metaphors are essentially the same phenomenon with the same representation, it differs from the first model in that metaphors are taken to be the more basic form of the two, being explicit categorical assertions. Similes are cases in which a comparative term has been added in order to emphasize that a comparison is being made, and are therefore implicit categorical assertions, and must be understood as 'expanded' metaphors (Ibid).

Graphically, this model would look like Figure 2 below, in which the topic exists in some category defined by the more prototypical vehicle, again with the optional use of a comparative term.

Figure 2: Graphic representation of similes and metaphors as categorical assertions.



The same example, *my lawyer is a shark*, can also be understood in terms of the categorical assertion model. *Lawyer* takes the place of the topic, and is asserted as belonging to the periphery of a category, in this case *predator*, of which *shark*, the vehicle, is a prototypical member. Only those features, or M properties, that contribute to *shark* defining the category *predator* are relevant, such as ‘aggression’ and ‘dangerousness,’ not other, lower L properties such as ‘swims’ or ‘has fins,’ which are also used to define a literal shark. The comparative terms *like* or *as* may be added to create the sentence *my lawyer is like a shark*, but they are merely decorative and make the assertion implicit; nothing significant results from their addition.

3.3 Mixed Model

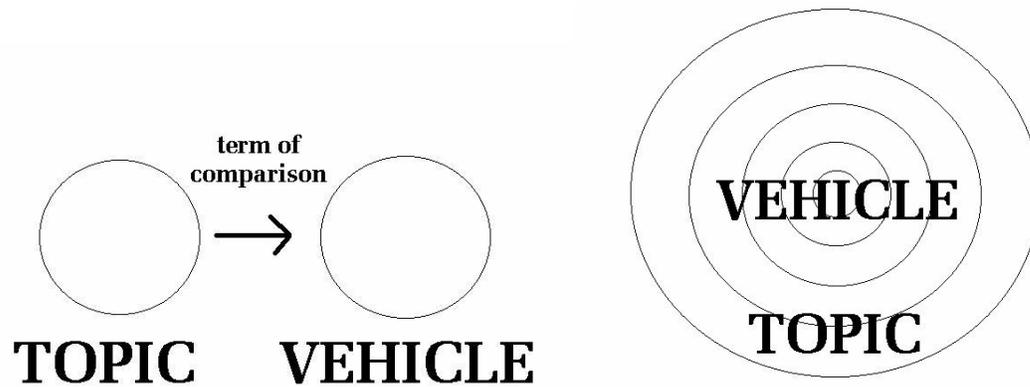
A third and final model based on the work by Chiappe *et al* (2003) takes the previous two models and combines them. The differences between similes and metaphors are not superficial and they do not assert the same relation between the topic and vehicle, but rather have completely different conceptual representations. In this model, similes are seen as comparison statements, as in the first model, and metaphors are more like categorical assertions, as in the second model.

Because similes and metaphors are two different, though related, phenomena with different representations, one cannot be considered a more basic form. Similes are explicit comparison statements, identified as such by their terms of comparison, and metaphors are explicit categorical assertions, lacking the terms of comparison. While the two forms are still comparisons of some kind, and similar enough that they may still sometimes be interchangeable, this model predicts that, as essentially different forms of figurative speech, it should be possible to distinguish between the two.

Under this model, a simile would be represented in the manner of the first model, in which the topic and vehicle are directly compared by means of a comparative term *like* or *as*. A metaphor, on the other hand, would take the form of the second model, in which the topic and vehicle fall within a single category, with the category defined by whatever the vehicle is a prototype of.

Graphically, the mixed model combines the representations of the first and second models, with the difference that similes as comparison statements require some term of comparison, while metaphors as categorical assertions do not use these terms, whereas in the previous two models these terms were optional. It would look like Figure 3 below.

Figure 3: Graphic representation of similes as comparison statements and metaphors as categorical assertions.



In the case of the example used, *my lawyer is (like) a shark*, it would, depending on whether it is being used as a simile or metaphor, take the form of either a comparison statement or categorical assertion. Even though the two may seem interchangeable, in fact two different assertions are being made about the relation between the topic and vehicle: either the lawyer is like a shark in some unspecified yet figurative way, or the lawyer is so much like a shark, he or she belongs in the category *predator*, of which *shark* is a prototype. The difference between these two points is not extreme, but exists nonetheless. The simile or metaphor form will be chosen depending on what exactly the speaker is trying to say about the relation between *lawyer* and *shark*.

3.4 Choosing a Model

With these three different models, it is the intent of this paper to choose one as a more accurate conceptual representation of similes and metaphors. The choice will be made on the basis of the different predictions made by the models about the behaviour of the two forms.

The first model predicts that, because similes and metaphors are essentially the same, they will behave in the same manner as well regardless of the circumstances. Furthermore, because they are in the same form as literal comparisons, they should both behave similarly to literal comparisons, different only in their figurative nature. Because it is technically possible to compare anything to anything else, similes and metaphors as comparison statements should be relatively unrestricted in their use and where they can occur, and should be able to tolerate some degree of abnormality.

The second model makes the same prediction as the previous one in that similes and metaphors, as the same phenomenon, should act the same. However, because they take the form of literal categorical assertions, they should act in the same manner as categorical assertions, not comparison statements. Because of their superordinate-subordinate structure, there are greater restrictions placed on what exactly can be compared, and therefore both similes and metaphors should be more sensitive to any abnormalities, making them far more limited in their creativity than the first model would predict.

Unlike the previous two models, in which similes and metaphors are thought to be the same, in the third model they are not, and therefore it is predicted that they will behave differently in at least some ways. In the manner of the first model, similes should behave like literal comparison statements, while, following from the second model, metaphors should behave like literal categorical assertions. Metaphors should, therefore, be more sensitive than similes to strangeness of form, though they will both have some restrictions.

While metaphors and similes could be compared according to their behaviour in normal, 'correct' usage, in this paper I will be looking at their behaviour in abnormal, generally incorrect

or unusual usage: that of failure.

This question, and these three models (though without their graphic representations) have been examined to some length in experimental environments. Glucksberg *et al* (1997) looked at a particular type of failure– reversal– and came to the conclusion that the second model, with similes and metaphors as categorical assertions, was best. Chiappe *et al* (2003) attempted to refute Glucksberg *et al*'s claim by use of a similar experiment in reversal, and, to a lesser extent, semantic aptness and conventionality, and championed the third, mixed model as a result. Failure has also been looked at by other authors, but mostly as side notes or support for other points, but not so much in the concept of conceptual representation. This paper will, therefore, to some extent tread upon ground that has already been covered. The goal, however, is to further investigate the nature of similes and metaphors by looking at their failure not only in reversal and semantic aptness, but also in literal comparisons and identity statements, and to see which, if any, of the models holds for all cases of failure. Ultimately, it will hopefully be possible to give a cohesive and comprehensive analysis of failure in similes and metaphors: what it is, why it sounds odd or humorous, and whether or not it can show any differences between the forms.

4.0 Failure

4.1 What is Failure?

While examples of simile and metaphor usage pervade the English language, the same is not true of their failed counterparts for the reason that failed similes and metaphors are exactly that— failed— and therefore not as likely to be created or repeated. But what does it mean for a figure of speech to ‘fail’?

Similes and metaphors are not all equally effective, but seem to fall along a continuum, or require “some degree of artistic success” (Davidson, 1978: 31). Figuratively speaking, the making of similes and metaphors is like archery: some hit the target dead-centre, others hit closer to the edges, and some miss the mark entirely. Those that are truly effective in conveying their meaning may even become standard, used again and again as idioms. Some even go so far as to become a part of the literal language in the form of ‘dead’ metaphors, which have been used so much that their figurative meaning has disappeared except under close scrutiny or historical study. In general, dead metaphors are not considered metaphors at all, but the fact is they started out as one. Others, less effective, may be restricted in use and context, able to convey a meaning, but, in any other contexts, in a way that there is a sense the meaning could have been better conveyed in a different way, or would have fit better in another place or time. Still others need a lengthy explanation to be understood, are poor, incomprehensible in all but the most restricted of contexts, ineffective, or even laughable, and it is these that may be said to have ‘failed.’ As agreed upon in previous studies, figurative speech is used because it is somehow more effective than literal language, and can be used without any explanation needed; with a failed figure of speech, there is a sense that it would have saved time and been better to not have used it in the

first place.

Whether or not failed similes and metaphors even exist is not entirely agreed upon. In the case of metaphors, Davidson believes

“[a] metaphor implies a kind and degree of artistic success; there are no unsuccessful metaphors, just as there are no unfunny jokes. There are tasteless metaphors, but these are turns that nevertheless have brought something off, even if it were not worth bringing off, or could have been brought off better.” (Ibid)

Black believes that unfunny jokes do exist, but are understood in light of what would have been funny, and in the same way some metaphors are ‘weak,’ as opposed to ‘strong’ metaphors that are emphatic and resonant. He also believes that while jokes aim at being funny, a metaphor may purposefully be weak and not suffer for it (Black, 1979: 27). Both Davidson and Black would agree, however, that some instances of figurative speech are better than others. For the purposes of this paper, failed similes and metaphors will be considered to exist, but just because they fail doesn’t mean nothing can be taken from them.

Because one of the purposes of language in general is to communicate ideas and meanings effectively, the use of failed similes and metaphors—which are not effective in conveying their meaning—is rare in actual speech. They may still be encountered, however, by a speaker who is unable to quite grasp the concept of creating figurative speech, or who, on some occasion, may voice a simile or metaphor only to later realize or be informed that it was ineffective. In some cases, similes and metaphors may be purposefully failed, for the purpose of humour, as they tend to elicit a surprised or confused response from the person on their receiving end.

Figure 4: The use of a failed simile in a ‘Dilbert’ comic.



The same sorts of failure can be found in other instances of comedy in popular culture, and a wealth of examples can be found in the movie *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby*.

(10) Cal: “I like to think of Jesus as a mischievous badger.” (*Talladega Nights*)

In the same scene, Jesus is also likened to an interpretive ice dancer, a band’s lead singer, and a ninja, all of which are (apart from borderline blasphemous) seemingly nonsensical in the context and completely random.

Similarly, an email in circulation for a number of years gives examples of similes humorous for their failure.

(11) a. John and Mary had never met. They were like two hummingbirds who had also never met.

b. She walked into my office like a centipede with ninety-eight missing legs.

The email claims these similes were found used in the essays of high school students, but more likely they were purposefully created and compiled. They are funny not only because of the unusual and needless comparisons they make, but also because they were supposedly created by students who were seriously trying use figurative language effectively, where most people would

be able to see they are poorly used.

Despite its marginal use in normal speech, failed figurative language can still be a rich source of information for the understanding of similes and metaphors, especially when examining what exactly would cause such figures of speech to fail. Not only can failure give an idea of how similes and metaphors work, it may even be possible to differentiate between similes and metaphors based on what does, or does not, cause them to fail, and thus to choose a model for their conceptual representation. But in order to understand how the failure of these forms can help distinguish between them and select a model, it is important to understand what exactly failure is, and what it is not, at least for the purposes of this piece.

First of all, similes and metaphors are not considered to have failed if a listener is simply refusing to understand the speaker's use of figurative language, or if the speaker is purposefully being obscure. This stems from H. P. Grice's Cooperative Principle, which states that speakers must "make [their] contribution such as required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which [they] are engaged" (Levinson, 1983: 101). Similarly, the speech is "reflexively governed by the speaker's awareness of the hearer's expectation of cooperative behaviour on his part" (Sadock, 1979: 47). Cooperation goes both ways: the speaker must make the attempt to be understandable, and the hearer must be willing to try to understand, otherwise any hope of deriving meaning from a figurative utterance, as with any utterance, will be lost, leading to such a situation as in (12).

(12) A: "Man is a wolf."

B: "Man is not a wolf; that's ridiculous. Man isn't of the species *Canis lupis*, or have fur and a tail, or hunt in packs..."

Secondly, similes and metaphors will not be considered failed because of a lack of common ground between the speaker and listener. If the listener lacks knowledge of the topic or vehicle's definitions, it will be difficult or impossible for them to understand what a figurative use of these terms means.

(13) My lawyer is a shark.

Glucksberg's metaphor, taken to mean the lawyer is somehow predatory or aggressive, traits commonly associated with sharks, would be incomprehensible to a person who, for some reason, did not know what a lawyer or shark were. Similarly, if the listener lacks the correct prototypes or compared features of either topic or vehicle, the utterance may not have much meaning. If a listener does not know that sharks are prototypical predators, or that some lawyers have a reputation for being particularly aggressive, and that is how they are shark-like, the metaphor's meaning will either be misunderstood, or lost entirely.

Related to common ground, it is possible for the context of a simile or metaphor to be changed, and if the listener lacks the appropriate new context, they may be unable to understand the utterance.

(14) John is (like) Einstein.

The simile/metaphor in (14) would normally be interpreted to mean that John is exceptionally smart, or somehow a genius. However, if Mary had been telling stories all day about how eccentric Einstein was, and then went on to utter (14), she would be taken to mean that John is eccentric rather than exceptionally smart (Bergmann, 1982: 237). Someone not privy to this change of context would be unable to understand the utterance in the way it had been intended, and may lead to confusion, especially if John is not particularly intelligent. Similarly,

uncommonly used instances of figurative speech may have very restricted contexts in which they may be uttered in order to have meaning. Therefore, it is important that the speaker and listener share at least some relevant common ground in order for the figurative forms to be communicated correctly.

Finally, it is possible for the speaker of a figurative form and the listener to have somewhat different interpretations of what exactly the form means without the result being considered failure. There is no single understanding that is assigned to any individual simile or metaphor. Meanings, even outside figurative language, are determinate, or penumbral. A speaker and listener may vary on what features they consider particularly salient in a comparison, because of this indeterminacy, but this does not make the form false or failed unless the differences between what the speaker and listener think a form means are so great that the meaning is lost entirely, and even then there may be exceptions (Martinich, 1991: 512). Because what a metaphor or simile means may be very complex, a speaker doesn't necessarily expect a listener to have the exact same thought on the matter, but rather to take the salient features and construct some complex thought bearing some resemblance to that of the speaker (Sperber & Wilson, 1991: 541-542).

(15) Nuclear reactors are time bombs. (Bergmann, 1982: 231)

Example (15) would typically be taken to mean that nuclear reactors may fail, with horrible consequences. However, it could also be understood as the people responsible for nuclear reactors seem to have a complete disregard for human life, like those people who use time bombs (Ibid).

With these instances removed from consideration, it is possible to examine other

instances of failure. When exactly similes and metaphors pass the boundaries of effectiveness and become ineffective and can be said to truly have failed is a matter of subjectivity, and judgement on the matter may vary between individuals and contexts, and there is no exact definition for this failure that can be referred to. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this paper, a simile or metaphor will be considered ‘failed’ if they sound somehow ‘funny,’ are entirely inaccurate, or simply cannot be understood in the way they were intended, not due to a lack on either the speaker or listener’s part, but due to the utterance itself.

It may be possible to distinguish between similes and metaphors and determine their conceptual representation on the basis of their failure. If similes and metaphors truly are the same phenomenon, with the slight difference of wording, as the comparison statement and categorical assertion models claim, then it should be expected that they will behave in similar manners and fail or not fail in the same circumstances, and fail to the same extent when they do. Their exact behaviour would further be able to identify which of these two models best explain the facts. If, however, they have some important, fundamental differences, as predicted by the mixed model, then they might be expected to behave differently, and this difference might be visible if they fail in different circumstances, or to a different extent.

4.2 Types of Failure

Four different possible situations that could result in failure have been identified for this paper: reversal, lack of semantic aptness, conversion to literal comparisons, and statements of identity. These are not comprehensive, and there are possible exceptions for each, but they provide at least a glimpse of the issues involved, and should give an idea of whether or not failure can effectively provide a basis by which the three models can be evaluated.

The evidence and arguments for the use of reversal to distinguish between similes and metaphors comes largely from the previous work of Chiappe *et al* and Glucksberg *et al*, while that of semantic aptness also relies heavily on Chiappe *et al* as well as other examples from various sources. The notion that literal comparisons and identity statements can be similarly used to differentiate between similes and metaphors has not been examined much previously and is largely original, though examples and evidence have been taken from previous work.

4.2.1 Reversal

The first way in which a simile or metaphor might be said to fail is through reversal, in which the topic takes the place of the vehicle, and the vehicle takes the place of the topic, resulting in such forms as (16), all from Chiappe *et al* (2003), with (a) and (c) showing the original ordering, and (b) and (d) the (failed) reversed forms.

- (16) a. Crime is a disease.
 #b. A disease is crime.
 c. Insults are like daggers.
 #d. Daggers are like insults.

This process was examined by both Glucksberg *et al* (1997) and Chiappe *et al* (2003), on the basis of models similar to those in this paper, with different results.

In order to determine the effects of reversal on metaphor (and, to a lesser degree, simile) comprehension, Glucksberg and his colleagues designed an experiment in which forty volunteers were asked to judge a combination of twenty-four metaphors and their corresponding similes and twelve literal similarity statements on whether or not they made sense when their topic and vehicle nouns or noun phrases were interchanged. Those that were unacceptable were either

judged as uninterpretable with no meaning, less meaningful than the original ordering, re-reversals in which the paraphrase showed that the subject had transformed the statement back into its original order in their interpretation, or new ground in which the paraphrase used a different ground for comparison than the original ordering, or took on a meaning not reconcilable with the original. The results of this experiment were that less than 4% of the reversed metaphorical statements were acceptable, while 82% of the reversed literal comparisons were. 70% of the reversed metaphors and 55% of the reversed similes were re-reversed either explicitly or implicitly to their original order, and 18% of each were given new grounds. Overall, this led to 97.5% of reversed metaphors and similes to be judged unacceptable, compared to 18% of the literal comparisons. Glucksberg *et al*'s experiment led them to conclude that reversals of similes and metaphors led to frequent failure, unlike literal comparisons, which supported their model of similes and metaphors as categorical assertions. They found no significant difference between the behaviour of similes and metaphors in these reversals, and so both were claimed to take the form of categorical assertions (Glucksberg *et al*, 1997).

Upon conducting a similar experiment, Chiappe *et al* came to a different conclusion. In this experiment, the number of figurative items used was increased from twenty-four to fifty-two, and focussed entirely on metaphors and similes, not using any literal comparisons. Forty-four volunteers were shown the different items, half metaphors and half similes, in which some were in their original orders and others were reversed, and were then asked to make a comprehensibility judgement, indicating how easy it was to understand the different statements, and to make a paraphrase of what they thought the statement meant. As Glucksberg *et al* found earlier, the reversed order items were much more difficult to understand than the original order.

In addition, however, and in contrast to Glucksberg *et al*'s findings, it was found that reversibility decreased the comprehensibility of a metaphor form to a greater extent than of the similes.

Reversed metaphors were more likely to be judged entirely incomprehensible, and, when they were judged as understandable, were shown in the paraphrase to have been placed back in the original order by the participant through re-reversal. Chiappe *et al* concluded that “latent and explicit metaphors are more affected by reversal than are their corresponding similes” due to the fact that “metaphor places stronger constraints on the ordering of terms than the simile” (Chiappe *et al*, 2003: 93).

Chiappe *et al* attempt to account for the discrepancies between Glucksberg *et al*'s findings and their own, and feel they may be due to the fact that they more than doubled the number of figurative items used, which gave their study more statistical power and made it easier to detect any differences between the two forms. Also, the exclusion of literal comparisons may have allowed participants to focus more on the differences between similes and metaphors, rather than the differences between figurative and literal forms (Chiappe *et al*, 2003: 98-99). Given the chance, Glucksberg *et al* may be able to present a defence for their own methods, but, as the matter currently stands, Chiappe *et al* seem to have more statistically sound evidence that there does seem to be more than a passing difference between similes and metaphors when reversed.

As noted by both Chiappe *et al* and Glucksberg *et al* and others, the same restrictions on reversal do not apply to literal comparisons, or at least not to the same degree, and some reversal is allowed.

- (17) a. Blackberries are like raspberries.
- b. Raspberries are like blackberries. (Ortony, 1979: 190)

c. Cherries are like olives.

d. Olives are like cherries. (Chiappe *et al*, 2003: 86)

In examples (17a) and (b), blackberries and raspberries are like each other to about the same degree, and for the same reasons, and therefore they can be reversed without becoming anomalous (Ortony, 1979: 190). In the case of (c) and (d), however, (d) would more likely be the preferred order. While (c) is not meaningless, and may still be tolerated, it may be more difficult to understand because the property in question (having pits) is more salient in cherries than in olives, or at least in North American culture (Chiappe *et al*, 2003: 86). Literal comparisons may sometimes be asymmetrical if an applicable predicate of one term is not as salient as in the other. In a case like this, the term with the most salient predicate would be favoured in the position of the vehicle (Ortony, 1979: 196). The more salient form may also be preferred as the vehicle due to the fact that in the language, it is more common for new information to be viewed in terms of old information. Something is salient usually due to the fact that it is better known; therefore, the new knowledge, in the form of the topic, is related to the old knowledge, the vehicle (Miller, 1979: 217).

Pavio effectively sums up this phenomenon: “if B is more salient than A, A is more likely to be compared with and viewed as similar to B than B to A.” While this is applicable to literal comparisons, it is particularly important to similes and even more so metaphors, as such statements are more acceptable when the noun with the more salient properties acts as the vehicle, not the topic (Pavio, 1979: 169). The more salient a term’s feature, the more prototypical that term will be in regards to that feature.

The first model, which has similes and metaphors acting in the same manner as literal

comparison statements would, has difficulty explaining why reversal would have such a negative effect on these figures of speech. The fact that there is a seemingly natural preference for the term with the more salient features to come second even in a literal comparison is not enough to explain the anomalous nature of reversed similes and metaphors. Even if some allowances are made for the figurative nature of these forms and their stronger reliance on prototypes, the first model would further have trouble explaining why reversed metaphors are even worse than similes, when it predicts they should behave in the same manner.

The second model, with similes and metaphors operating as categorical assertions, is an improvement over the first in explaining the effects of reversal. Categorical assertions are, by definition, irreversible because they rely on a superordinate-subordinate relation, as well as on prototypes. So, in the same way that the literal categorical assertion *lions are mammals* cannot be reversed to be *mammals are lions*, the reversal of similes and metaphors should create strange or nonsensical assertions (Chiappe *et al*, 2003: 87). The fact that Chiappe *et al* demonstrated that reversed metaphors are treated as worse than reversed similes, when this model predicts that they should both act in the same manner, is a complication for this model, though it may not be enough to discard it wholly.

As expressed by Chiappe *et al*, the third model seems to provide a better alternative than the second regarding the matter of reversal. Categorical assertions should be more sensitive to processes such as reversal because of their superordinate-subordinate structure, which is why metaphors, if they take the form of categorical assertions and similes do not, show an increased sensitivity. Similes, as literal comparisons, should show less sensitivity to reversals than metaphors, which seems to be the case. In order for this model to hold, the fact that similes still

become anomalous, and to a far greater degree than literal comparison statements would have to be explained as due to the figurative form's need for more vehicle salience than is needed in its literal counterpart.

The results so far seem to favour the mixed model, though the second model cannot be eliminated outright due to the discrepancies between the two experiments. In either case, the first model is clearly insufficient in explaining why reversal would cause failure in similes or metaphors.

An exception to the trend seems to arise in the fact that some metaphors and similes are equally comprehensible even when reversed, as seen in the examples in (18), in which neither seems more anomalous than the other.

- (18) a. My surgeon is a butcher.
b. My butcher is a surgeon.

However, although these metaphors maintain an understandable meaning when reversed, the meaning of (18a) is certainly not the same as that of (18b). The grounds of the metaphor have changed: in (a), *my surgeon* takes on the negative properties of a butcher, while in (b), *my butcher* takes on the positive qualities of a surgeon. So, this is not really an example of metaphor reversal, but of two different metaphors entirely (Glucksberg, 1998: 41).

A second possible exception presented by Glucksberg is the reversal occasionally found in poetic usage of figurative language.

- (19) A mighty fortress is our God. (Glucksberg *et al*, 1997: 54)

In this case, the reversal maintains the original meaning, that God is a mighty fortress. However, poetic language often allows for forms that would be considered strange or ungrammatical in

ordinary usage, so poetic inversion, though not very common, is not unacceptable. Here, it is only on the surface the subject and predicate are reversed, and they are comprehended in their original order (Ibid).

In both cases, reasonable explanations can be provided for the exceptions, and therefore do not affect the findings.

4.2.2 Semantic Aptness

While similes and metaphors allow for the creation of potentially bizarre yet effective relations between topic and vehicle, the extent to which their creativity runs is not infinite, and departing too far from reality can lead to a second condition for failure: lack of semantic aptness. As stated by Black, “one cannot couple any two nouns at random and be sure to produce an effective metaphor,” and the same holds for similes (Black, 1979: 23). Both structures require that, by virtue of nature, there be some kind of similarity between the topic and vehicle: the actual feature being compared.

(20) #A chair is a syllogism. (Ibid)

In this example from Black, there is no discernable sense to the metaphor, at least not without some specially constructed, and undoubtedly restricted, context, identifying it as a failed metaphor.

(21) #She was as sweet as a carrot. (Israel *et al*, 2004: 127)

Though not as nonsensical as (20), example (21) is not particularly good either. It can be understood as meaning the unspecified topic, *she*, is sweet, but, as carrots aren't particularly sweet, or at least not prototypical in their sweetness, (21) leads towards failure, or at least oddness, for reasons of lack of semantic aptness.

Israel *et al* refer to the driving force behind this restriction on creativity as the Superlative Source Constraint, or SSC, which requires that similes (though it can be applied to metaphors as well) have a source construal (whatever stands as the vehicle) that is a paragon (an excellent example or extreme instance) of the compared property. Anomalous similes, as in (21), are a result of the source concept not being an appropriate paragon of the property in question, in this case, sweetness (Ibid). In other words, the vehicles of similes and metaphors must have some salient characteristic associated with them, which is the ground linking them to the topic. A characteristic is considered salient if it is a property “commonly believed to be characteristic of the things— possible or actual [it] applies to” (Bergmann, 1982: 235).

It is this type of failure that is most likely to be encountered in everyday speech, because it is sometimes difficult to judge when a comparison ceases to be semantically apt until the comparison has actually been made. This failure may also be purposefully exploited in popular culture for the purpose of humour.

There are two main types of failure stemming from lack of semantic aptness found in such media as movies and television. The first, discussed above, stems from the vehicle not being a particularly apt example of whatever feature is acting as the ground, as found in example (22), from the movie *Shrek*, below.

- (22) Shrek: “Ogres are like...onions.”
 Donkey: “They stink?”
 Shrek: “Yes...no!”
 Donkey: “Oh, they make you cry?”
 Shrek: “No!”
 Donkey: “Oh, you leave ‘em out in the sun, they get all brown and start sprouting

little white hairs?”

Shrek: “No! Layers! Onions have layers. Ogres have layers. Onions have layers. You get it? We both have layers.” (*Shrek*)

The misunderstanding in (22) above stems in part from the naive Donkey’s inability to understand figurative language, but also from the simile itself: *layers* are unlikely to be the first onion attribute to spring to mind without a more specific context, while the fact that onions have a strong smell and may cause a person to cry when cutting them are more well known and come to mind regardless of context. Donkey further suggests cakes or parfaits as more suitable vehicles for the simile, having layers themselves. However, the similes *ogres are like cakes* and *ogres are like parfaits* are as unlikely as *ogres are like onions* to bring to mind the attribute of *layers*, but at least they are generally more likeable. The conversation ends with Shrek holding to the assertion that ogres are, in fact, like onions.

Another type of figurative failure resulting from semantic aptness or lack thereof and exploited for the purpose of humour comes not when a vehicle is not apt, but when the speaker cannot think of a vehicle at all.

(23) a. Blackadder: “Disease and deprivation stalk our land like...two giant stalking things.” (*Blackadder the Third*)

b. Buffy: “I have at least three lives to contend with, none of which really mesh. It’s kind of like oil and water and...a third unmeshable thing.” (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*)

In the examples in (23), the speakers cannot come up with something prototypical enough to be the vehicle in their comparison. In (a), there is no prototypical giant stalking thing that disease and deprivation can be compared with, and in (b), there is similarly no prototypical substance

besides oil and water that has *doesn't mesh* as a salient feature, or at least not which the speaker is aware of. Because of this, the vehicle may be left unsaid, or weakly finished by stating that the topics are like some unknown things with that particular property.

In addition to their work on reversal, Chiappe *et al* looked at semantic aptness in similes and metaphors and its effect on comprehension, as well as its preference of form in a second experiment, which looked at both aptness and conventionality, and whether similes or metaphors were preferred according to these variables. Of the one hundred four participants, thirty-eight were asked to rate the same items from the first experiment according to their aptness on a scale of one (not apt) to ten (very apt), or “the extent to which the statement captures important features of the topic” (Chiappe *et al*, 2003: 97).

- (24) a. Highways are (like) snakes.
 b. Health is (like) a glass. (Ibid, 103)

In almost all cases, the simile form of an utterance was rated higher for aptness than its metaphor form, despite their use of the same topic and vehicle. The less apt a metaphor was, the more likely it would fail. Similes can also fail when not appropriately apt, but may be used to express even less apt relations, again showing less sensitivity than their metaphor counterparts. From this, they concluded that “the choice of the metaphor or simile form reflects one’s view on the extent to which the statement captures important features of the topic” (Ibid, 99). If a metaphor fails, it may be reworded as a simile and perhaps not fail, and be considered more apt. Example (24a) was interpreted by 100% of the participants to mean that highways are long and winding, and was able to work effectively as a simile or a metaphor, because of the high level of aptness. Example (24b), on the other hand, was only interpreted 60% of the time to mean that health is

fragile, and so was preferred as a simile, being less apt.

In addition to this, because similes can be fleshed out through the use of a tertium, or ‘third element,’ they “can feature very fanciful and unexpected juxtapositions which might not work in a similar metaphor” (Israel *et al*, 2004: 130). A simile that at first seems unapt may be elaborated upon via the tertium, thus creating the necessary aptness.

- (25) a. She is sugar.
 b. She is like sugar.
 c. She is sweet like sugar.

In these examples, none may be exactly ‘failed’ and can probably all communicate the idea that she is sweet, a salient property of sugar, but (25c) is best able to convey the idea, through its use of the tertium *sweet*. Of the three forms, (a), the metaphor, is probably the worst form, while (b), the plain simile, is slightly better.

As comparisons require at least some kind of semantic aptness in order to be valid, the fact that similes and metaphors also require such aptness would make sense if the first model was the case. The fact that metaphors require a greater semantic aptness than similes to avoid failure is not captured so well in this model, which would have them acting in the same manner.

Categorical assertions require an even greater amount of semantic aptness than comparisons because topic and vehicle must fit together within some category, which would be impossible if they were too semantically different, and so the second model is also able to explain why aptness is required in similes and metaphors. If the vehicle is not apt, or not a good prototype of the category, then it cannot act to define the category of the grounds. However, once again, this model cannot well explain why metaphors are more likely than similes to fail

when an unapt relation is asserted.

If similes were to be considered comparison statements, and metaphors categorical assertions, as in the third model, it would explain why both require at least some semantic aptness, but also why metaphors are more sensitive.

While any of the three models could explain why semantic aptness is a requirement in similes and metaphors, the differences between them seem to be best explained, as in reversals, by the third, mixed model.

There are three main exceptions where semantic aptness seems not to be required in the understanding of similes and metaphors: alliterations and rhymes, stereotypes and mythology, and irony.

- (26) a. Cool as a cucumber.
 b. Right as rain.
 c. Fine as wine.
 d. Awesome as a possum.

The examples in (26) seem to have very little semantic aptness as vehicles for the similes. It could be argued that cucumbers are, in fact, cool enough to be considered prototypical of ‘coolness,’ but it is much more difficult to see what is particularly ‘right’ about rain, why wine would be ‘fine,’ and what’s so ‘awesome’ about a possum, but (a)-(c), at least, are used regularly. Does this, then, indicate that semantic aptness is not always necessary in effective figurative speech? With even a brief inspection, an obvious pattern emerges in the above examples. (a) and (b) are both examples of alliteration, with the repetition of the [k] and [r] sounds, while (c) and (d) both utilize rhymes, the [ajn] sound in fine and wine, and the [ɑwsʌm] sound in awesome

and possum. Therefore, although they take the form of similes, they are not examples of true figurative speech, but rather instances of wordplay that in some cases has been idiomized (Israel *et al*, 2004: 127). The fact that they take the form of similes rather than metaphors may arise from the preference for similes in less apt comparisons, but otherwise they are not very useful for making generalizations about figurative speech.

(27) a. Richard is a gorilla. (Searle, 1979: 102)

b. Man is a wolf.

Figurative speech often relies upon stereotypes and mythology that may not be true to reality. The metaphor in (27a) is most likely taken to mean that Richard is “fierce, nasty, prone to violence, and so forth,” which is based on the belief the gorillas are “fierce, nasty, prone to violence, and so forth.” However, it has come to be understood that gorillas are “in fact shy, sensitive creatures, given to bouts of sentimentality,” which hardly makes the metaphor an apt one, unless Richard was being seen as shy and sensitive (Ibid). Similarly, example (b) seems to be based on the assumption that wolves are cruel and vicious, but these animals, like gorillas, are misunderstood, and not necessarily the monsters they are made out to be in fables. Both metaphors can still hold, however, even knowing the true facts of the matter, for, as Morgan states,

“metaphor can be built on mythical similarities that everybody knows are not really true... Foxes are clever, snakes are sneaky and so on. Metaphors, or at least stored metaphors, can be built on such myths, inasmuch as everybody knows the myths, even though everybody knows, further, that nobody *believes* the myths.” (Morgan, 1979: 143)

Similes and metaphors do not have to be apt in reality, so long as they are apt in some way the speaker and listener are both aware of, even if that way lies in stereotype and mythology.

(28) a. As clear as mud.

b. Sharp as a spoon.

A final possible exception to the requirement of semantic aptness comes in the form of irony, another type of figurative device, which may be separate from or work together with simile and metaphor. Mud is not a prototypically clear substance as (28a) seems to imply—rather the opposite—and spoons are decidedly blunt, not sharp. The purpose of irony being, however, to express the opposite of what is said—often but not always marked by a certain tone of voice—the vehicles of these similes are not understood as having ‘clearness’ or ‘sharpness’ as salient features, but as prototypes of the opposite attributes, ‘unclearness’ and ‘bluntness,’ and so the similes are understood as meaning the opposite of what they would usually be taken to mean.

Again, it is possible to reasonably explain the exceptions where semantic aptness is not required without affecting the analysis.

4.2.3 Literal Comparisons

Another way to possibly distinguish between similes and metaphors is to compare them to literal comparisons. By definition, similes and metaphors are not literal, but figurative, because they make a comparison or draw attention to some similarity that is surprising, or not something commonly thought of. However, the distinction is not always an easy one to make, which is why it has been an issue in previous studies.

Because they take the form of literal comparisons, it is often difficult to differentiate between similes and true literal comparisons. Some comparisons may have both literal and

figurative readings, and so the difference often seems to be more a matter of degree than something truly significant.

(29) a. His face was like a beet.

b. His face was red like a beet. (Ortony, 1979: 194)

Both (29a) and (b) make the same comparison, that of a face with a beet, but (a) reads more like a simile, and (b), with the addition of the tertium *red*, seems more like a literal comparison because both faces and beets can literally be red. The increased attention drawn to the compared predicate, redness, causes increased salience (Ibid). Where exactly the figurative ends and the literal begins is difficult to distinguish. Sometimes, similes can be understood as literal comparisons, and literal comparisons can be understood as similes, but neither necessarily leads to failure.

Literal comparisons, however, do not seem to be able to convert into metaphors with the same ease as they do to similes.

(30) a. Barracudas are like sharks.

#b. Barracudas are sharks. (Glucksberg, 1998: 41)

The distinction between literal comparisons and metaphors is much more clear, and does not always have the same sense of continuum as do similes and literal comparisons. Example (30a) is a literal comparison: barracudas really *are* like sharks, as both are predators of the ocean waters. Even though the shark may be a more prototypical ocean predator, nothing is revealed by converting the statement to a metaphor. Example (b) fails because even though barracudas are *like* sharks, they are not actually sharks; the topic and vehicle are too closely related to make a metaphor. Whether or not a simile could be taken from (a) is not clear; it may be too literal to

see any level of figurative meaning, but there is not the clear distinction as there seems to be between literal comparisons and metaphors.

In the first model, it is expected that the similes and metaphors, both figurative comparison statements, should act very much like literal comparison statements, and it may therefore sometimes be difficult to make the distinction. The difficulty in separating some similes from literal comparisons shows a close relationship between the two forms, as predicted. The fact that metaphors, however, don't seem to follow this pattern and are more distinct from the literal comparisons, is detrimental to this model.

In the second model, similes and metaphors, as figurative categorical assertions, should not act like literal comparison statements, and should remain distinct. This can be seen in the case of metaphors; a literal comparison, such as *barracudas are like sharks* cannot become *barracudas are sharks* because it is a comparison, not a categorical assertion, and the vehicle cannot create some category of which it is far more prototypical than the topic. Similes, however, are at times difficult to distinguish from literal comparisons, which they should not be if they are implicit categorical assertions.

Because it is sometimes more difficult to distinguish where a literal statement ends and a simile begins, while metaphors are more distinct, the third model is better able to explain these facts by having similes act like comparison statements and metaphors as categorical assertions. If similes and metaphors were the same, then it should be difficult to distinguish both from literal comparisons, but the fact that metaphors are quite distinct from literal comparisons while similes are not seems to indicate that similes are more formally like literal comparisons, while metaphors are more formally like categorical assertions, a fact, again, supported by this model.

The evidence provided in this section is not as strong as that of reversal and semantic aptness, and the relationship between literal and figurative aspects of comparison need to be looked at in greater depth. However, the *as* in the previous sections, the third model is favoured here as well, and is therefore consistent with the analysis so far.

4.2.4 Identity Statements

A final possibility for failure follows closely from the previously examined literal comparisons, in the form of identity statements. In literal speech, it is possible and common to compare specific individuals to something or someone else, or compare something or someone to them, so they may in essence take the position of the topic or the vehicle. This does not seem to be the case in figurative speech, as there seems to be a restriction on just where a proper name or specific individual can occur in similes and metaphors.

(31) a. Richard is a gorilla. (Searle, 1979: 102)

b. Margaret Thatcher is like a bulldozer. (Israel *et al*, 2004: 131)

As shown in (31), it is possible for specific individuals to be the topic in both similes and metaphors and act as the object of comparison. However, a problem may arise when a specific individual is used as the vehicle.

(32) a. John is like my father.

#b. John is my father. (Morgan, 1979: 145)

Example (32b) is a perfectly valid literal statement, if the speaker's father happens to be named John, making it not a metaphor, but an actual statement of identity. Metaphorical use of the same statement, however, leads to failure. If the speaker's father in example (b) is a machinist, and this is a very important part of his life and a salient property for those who know him, (b) still

cannot be used metaphorically to convey that John (a separate individual who is not the speaker's father) is a machinist (Ibid). In some very restricted contexts, it may be possible to use (b) as a metaphor, perhaps if John has been more fatherly to the speaker than his own father, but this is an exception perhaps due to the meaning surrounding *father* being more than just the individual. Had the speaker's father's proper name been used, there would be a very definite failure, as in *#John is Herbert*, which would sound very strange.

Example (32a) is an acceptable sentence where (b) is not, and, used as a literal comparison, would convey that John is like the speaker's father in some literal way, such as being a machinist. Whether or not it could act as a simile as well is difficult to say, which, as in the previous section, demonstrates the difficulty in sometimes distinguishing between the literal comparisons and similes. If (a) is used to mean that both John and the speaker's father are machinists, then the comparison is more literal than figurative. However, there are other interpretations the sentence could take on, perhaps in reference to John's fatherly ways, or some other similarity, which would not cause the simile to fail in the way of the metaphor.

The first model has difficulty explaining why there would be such a restriction on what can be used as a metaphor vehicle if it is no more than a comparison. So long as the vehicle has some kind of salient feature (e.g. machinist), the prediction would be that it should be able to act as the vehicle without failure. Similes do not seem to exhibit this same restriction, as they are so similar to literal comparisons, which fits with this model.

The second model is more successful in explaining these restrictions in that a categorical assertion requires something more prototypical to be able to define a category, which salience alone cannot always do. Even if being a machinist is a very salient feature of the father in

question, it is likely not strong enough to make him the prototype of some category of machinists. There is difficulty in creating a categorical superordinate-subordinate relation between two specific individuals. However, this model cannot explain why similes would behave in a different manner and be more permitting of such forms.

The third model seems to be able to explain the facts. With similes as comparison statements, it is expected that there would not be strict restrictions on what can act as topic and vehicle, providing the vehicle has some salient feature. With metaphors as categorical assertions, it is not surprising that there would be some trouble in creating a category from a specific individual. Any attempt to make a metaphor from such a case sounds too much like a statement of identity to be acceptable.

Once again, there does seem to be a difference between the behaviour of similes and metaphors, making the third model the best option. As with the previous section regarding literal comparisons, this particular evidence is not as strong as some of the others, and represents more a trend than a rule regarding similes and metaphors. However, it is something that can generally be explained by reference to the third model and not the others, and so supports the findings of the other sections.

There are some exceptions that arise in the fact that there are cases where it is possible to use specific individuals as the vehicles for metaphors in perfectly acceptable utterances.

- (33) a. John is Einstein.
 b. Catherine is a regular Attila the Hun.
 c. Trisha is Sherlock Holmes.

In all the cases in (33), the individuals used as the metaphor vehicles are famous for some

attribute to such an extent that they are no longer just salient instances of it, but they have become the prototype for that attribute. Einstein is the prototypical brilliant scientist, or just plain genius. Attila the Hun has an automatic association with brutality. Even the fictional Sherlock Holmes is strongly associated with detectives or logic enough to act as a prototype. In each case, there is something about the individuals used as vehicles that makes them act as something stronger than just names for specific individuals. This is supported by the fact that they may be referred to sometimes with the definite article, as in *John is an Einstein*, which shows that the name *Einstein* is being used not as a unique individual, but as the reference for a group of individuals, which may be used as a category. The exceptions are able to act as metaphor vehicles because of their status as strong prototypes for some attribute, something that even a strong salience, as in the case of the machinist, cannot replicate.

In this final case, the exceptions can be explained, and, once again, the third model is able to best demonstrate what may be occurring in the making and failing of the figurative forms.

5.0 Conclusion

In the end, similes and metaphors often behave in the same manner, in many cases failing in the same or similar circumstances, and not failing in others. However, there does seem to be some level of difference between them that cannot be easily explained if they are simply orthographic variations of the same linguistic phenomenon. Metaphors tend to fail more easily than similes in the same circumstances, and, when they both fail, metaphors seem somehow ‘worse,’ even to the point that they cannot be understood at all.

When reversed, though both similes and metaphors become anomalous, similes tend to be treated as odd, but understandable, while metaphors are sometimes incomprehensible to such a degree that they must be re-reversed to be understood, or not understood at all. Both similes and metaphors require some degree of semantic aptness in order to make the comparison between the topic and vehicle, but the less apt the relation, the more likely it will be for a metaphor to fail, while a simile may be less apt to a greater degree before failing. Literal comparison statements generally cannot be converted to meaningful metaphors, while there is often difficulty in distinguishing between similes and literal comparisons. Except with strongly prototyped individuals, a specific individual usually cannot be used as a metaphor vehicle; when used as the vehicle of a simile form, it is again difficult to make the distinction between the literal and figurative.

For these cases of failure, the three models each have some advantages over the others in way of explanations. However, because metaphors generally display a greater sensitivity than similes to the processes that cause failure, and have a stronger reliance on prototypes, it is the third model that seems to best be able to capture their true representation, or at least comes closer

to what may be their representation than either the first or second models. Similes, because they take a form very much like and are sometimes difficult to distinguish from literal comparisons, seem to be well represented in the form of comparison statements. Metaphors, because they seem to be making assertions about their topic much like literal categorical assertions, can be understood as a type of categorical assertion, though literal categorical assertions do not necessarily rely on prototypes as much as metaphors seem to.

The third model is not perfect, however, and the first problem is regarding the representation of similes: in some cases, as in reversal, they still fail where, as comparison statements, they would not be expected to. The differences that still exist between similes and literal comparisons may indicate that similes need another type of representation that none of the three models can provide. However, it could also be understood that the figurative nature of similes and greater reliance on salience is the reason for these differences, as well as the fact that some literal comparisons also don't work well when reversed, showing that similes are at least formally like literal comparisons, despite some differences. Either way, a closer look at the differences between literal and figurative comparisons may help to resolve the matter.

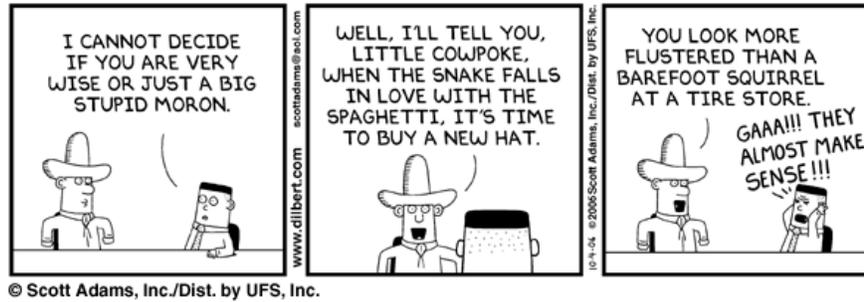
A second issue that argues against the mixed model is the fact that similes and metaphors can often be interchanged with seemingly little or no loss of meaning, which, if they were represented differently, would not seem possible. However, the fact that they can be interchanged does not necessarily mean they cannot have different representations. Both forms are used to express some type of comparison between two unlike objects, and therefore would be expected to be similar. In many figurative cases, both hold just as well— a lawyer may be like a shark in some unspecified ways, and a lawyer may be understood as belonging to a category

predator of which *shark* is a prototype– but what is being said by each is not necessarily the same. The differences may sometimes be so subtle that they don't seem important, but that does not mean that they do not exist, or that they aren't important.

The third model does have some issues that may need to be examined at a greater depth, but all in all does the best job of accounting for the facts and providing an overall explanation for the behaviour of similes and metaphors.

It is further interesting to note that almost all 'real life' cases of failure– whether in comics, movies, television, or email– seem to be in simile form. Ogres are *like* onions; John and Mary were *like* hummingbirds; disease and deprivation are *like* some giant stalking thing; Jesus is *like* a mischievous badger, ninja, interpretive ice dancer, and so on. This could be due to the fact that failed similes, although nonsensical and odd enough to be humorous, are still more comprehensible than failed metaphors, which may be just too strange to even be funny. It seems that the closer a failed figure of speech is to actually meaning something, or to being what is expected of it, the funnier it is. It is possible to make a horribly failed simile or metaphor by coupling any two nouns, but it may take more skill to combine the words in such a way that the meaning is still present, or it is clear what it is supposed to have meant, and therein may lie the source of humour. As this is best done in similes, they may lend themselves more to the process. This supports the conclusion that similes and metaphors, although similar in many ways, are still different in some important ways. In Figure 5, another *Dilbert* comic, this difficulty in determining the meaning of a failed utterance is illustrated.

Figure 5: Trying to find meaning in ‘failed’ forms.



Despite the relative rarity of their occurrence in normal speech, failed similes and metaphors are interesting beyond the humour they may provide and can be used to discover something about the nature of these instances of figurative language.

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