

Зборник радова са II научног скупа младих филолога
Србије одржаног 6. марта 2010. године на
Филолошко-уметничком факултету у Крагујевцу

САВРЕМЕНА ПРОУЧАВАЊА ЈЕЗИКА И КЊИЖЕВНОСТИ

Година II / књ. 1

Крагујевац, 2011.

Филолошко-уметнички факултет у Крагујевцу

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Година II / Књ. 1

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За издавача

проф. Слободан Штетић,
декан ФИЛУМ-а

Технички уредник

Ненад Захар

Штампа

Графостил, Крагујевац

Тираж

250 примерака

ISBN 978-86-85991-30-1

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COGNITIVE SEMANTIC ASPECTS OF ANIMAL SIMILES IN ENGLISH

The main goal of this paper is to attempt to apply some of the key constructs of cognitive semantics to the analysis of conventionalized English animal similes. It will combine *Conceptual Metaphor Theory* (CMT) and the *Theory of Conceptual Blending* (BT) in the analysis of 48 examples (similes or groups of similes) from English, belonging to the corpus compiled from the major dictionaries of idioms. The examples will be divided into three main groups, based on their sources, motivation and the level of objectivity and the analysis will try to prove that the understanding of each of these groups will employ a different set-up of cognitive mechanisms.

Key words: cognitive semantics, simile, animals, conceptual metaphor, conceptual blending

1. Introduction

The introduction contains the description of the main aims of the paper, as well as the theoretical framework that will allow the analysis of the corpus in the third section.

1. 1. Aims

The main aim of the paper is to present the ways in which some of the theoretical constructs coming from the field of cognitive semantics can help us comprehend the mechanisms behind the creation and understanding of animal similes and similes on the whole. Similes are frequently neglected in cognitive linguistics, although they are products of the same human imaginative processes that allow metaphor and metonymy. The analysis will be focused not only on the sources, but also on the application of similes in everyday language usage.

1. 2. Similes

Similes are defined as expressions which employ conjunctions in order to compare two concepts. Its main function is to intensify certain features already attributed to entities. The features of less known entities are usually compared to the features of better known entities.

All the similes described and analysed in this paper will be adjectival similes (as classified by Ivandekić 2009: 44-53) that share the following form:

(N1 is) as ADJ as N2.

In **conventionalized similes** (as classified by Bredin 1998 and Pierini 2002)¹, N1 is the only flexible element, while ADJ and N2, as well as the conjunctions, represent the fixed or conventionalized part. In this structure, we will have to approach two important

¹ The other type of similes in this classification is labelled as **creative** – these similes are created 'on the spot', usually in creative writing.

links: (1) **the primary link** is the one that deals with the creation of the similes – the link between ADJ and N2 (this link may be treated as at least partially diachronic); (2) **the secondary link** is the one between N1 and ADJ – this one is connected to the usage of a simile and is most frequently created *ad hoc*, in everyday conversation, in writing or in other forms of communication.

1. 3. The Sources of Animal Similes

Before we discuss any of the theoretical issues that will help our understanding of similes, we may try to divide them into groups that will aid the analysis in the third section of the paper. Starting from the motivation for their creation, we may establish at least four groups:

(a) **Relatively objective:** This group includes those similes that are motivated by an objective feature of an animal, usually the feature that is culturally perceived as the most important or at least the most obvious for the species in question. This group includes similes such as *as slow as a snail*, *as fat as a pig* or *as strong as an ox*. These features are still marked as relative, because they are considered in relation to humans and to other animals – snails are slow when compared to deer or hares, oxen are strong when compared to sheep or even donkeys, and pigs are fat when compared to goats and poultry. None of these species have the possibility to choose their pace, strength or looks – all of these are just innate parts of what they are. The adjectives that are found in the similes which belong to this group are usually those that describe physical properties, such as size, colours, speed, strength or shape.

(b) **Relatively objective and culture-influenced:** This group is comprised of the similes that are partially based on various relatively objective features. However, these similes include the adjectives that describe features which are more complex than the ones included in the previous group (the physical ones), so, in them, we can trace a much stronger cultural influence. This group includes similes such as *as greedy as a pig*, *as free as a bird* or *as naked as a jaybird*. Although similes such as these were influenced by some objective features (eating habits, flying or the colour of feathers), greed, freedom and nakedness are features that are more related to humans than to animals. This means that the greatest portion of meaning attributed to these similes will depend on our capability to recognize the link between the objective feature and the feature conventionalized within the similes.

(c) **Culture-influenced:** This group includes the similes in which the links between animal species and features were motivated by cultural products. In this group, we face the phenomenon of culturally imposed and supposed (usually non-diagnostic) features (Prčić 2008: 53-54). The adjectives present in the similes belonging to this group generally denote exclusively human character traits. Some of the examples of these are *as cunning as a fox*, *as silly as a goose* or *as vain as a peacock*. Cunning, stupidity or vanity, as well as the majority of adjectives that we will face in this group, seem to be too complex to characterize animals, whose mental abilities are too limited. These similes have emerged from various spheres of cultural life, such as religion, storytelling, legends, traditional beliefs, other forms of fiction and experience in general (Oswald 1995: 135-143). The creation

of some of them seems to be the result of many factors, so it becomes almost impossible to (historically) trace their exact sources.

(d) **Motivated by other mechanisms:** Although the similes belonging to this group may be linked to objective features as well as to cultural influences, they all reflect the influence of some other mechanisms that played part in their creation. These mechanisms include irony, metonymy, alliteration and assonance. The representatives of this group include *as dead as the dodo*, *as fast as a snail* and *as frisky as a ferret*. The impact of these mechanisms is more frequent in similes which do not involve the names of animal species.

When we come to the structure of the linguistic fauna of similes, we may consult Rakusan's paper entitled "Cultural Diversity in Crossing the Boundaries Between Human and Animal in Language – Germanic and Slavic Similes and Metaphors." Rakusan (2004: 172-177) studies both similes and metaphor and, according to her, similes and metaphors in English most frequently include farm animals and farm birds, pets and wild birds – those species that were predominantly present in an average Englishman's everyday life and in their farming and hunting habits. They are followed by large wild animals, small wild animals, insects, amphibians and water animals respectively. Very frequently, similes are based on what authors (Fillmore 1982, Lakoff 1987) name folk theories or knowledge, which are to some degree different from (or even opposed to) encyclopaedic knowledge and frequently exclude its scientific aspects.

1. 4. Similes and Metaphors

The similarities and differences between similes and metaphors have been explored in a number of papers by Chiappe, Kennedy and Smykowski (2003; Chiappe and Kennedy 2001). Both **similes** and **metaphors** are rooted in our inborn imaginative capacities, which are integral parts of our cognitive apparatus. However, Chiappe, Kennedy and Smykowski claim that metaphors are claims about categories, whereas similes are considered to be claims about similarities. Basically, similes are used for a smaller number of features being transferred from one domain into another, i.e. for simple mappings. For instance, in *as slow as a snail*, we are talking about pace only; in *as innocent as a lamb*, we are facing a more complex feature, innocence, which is comprised of a number of sub-features, but in none of them we find the level of organization present in metaphors. Metaphors are far more systematic, they include a greater number of features structurally linked, the mappings between the two domains are more complex and thorough (Stamenković 2010: 2). Both similes and metaphors are characterized by the feature of asymmetry, unlike direct comparison, in which A is like B means that B is like A (She is like her mother means that Her mother is like her) (Ivandekić 2009: 29-31).

1. 5. Similes in a Cognitive Semantic Frame

What comprises the cognitive semantic frame within which the corpus will be analyzed is a combination of **Conceptual Metaphor Theory** (CMT) and the **Theory of Conceptual Blending** (BT). It is obvious that the use of animal similes (the creation of the secondary link (N1-ADJ)) depends on the humans are animals metaphor, which means that the emergence of this link directly employs CMT. On the other hand, BT is important for the understanding of the establishment of the primary link (ADJ-N2), especially in those similes which are based on fiction (Turner 1996, 2007) and principally

in fables (Stamenković 2009). However, they will not be used separately, but rather joined, in the manner proposed by Grady, Oakley and Coulson (1999). They admit that CMT addresses recurring patterns in figurative language, while BT seems to focus on the particulars of individual cases, which means that they focus on different problems rather than being too much incompatible with one another. The authors note that although CMT posits projection between two mental representations, while BT allows more and although CMT has defined metaphor as a strictly directional phenomenon, while BT has not, these two theories can still be considered as **complementary**. In this view, mental spaces are not equivalent to domains, but they rather depend on them. Mental spaces represent particular scenarios which are structured by given domains (Grady, Oakley and Coulson 1999). This view is very suitable for the analysis of similes – as we can see that all of them have two aspects – one that is fixed and thus connected to recurring patterns in figurative language and the other that is flexible and focused on focus on the particulars of individual cases. If we want to have a coherent analysis of animal similes (or, in fact, similes in general), we would have to review both 'sides'.

2. Corpus and Methodology

The corpus, containing 48 examples of animal similes (or groups of animal similes) from English, was compiled using several sources (Walter 2006; Ivandekić 2009; Cowie, Mackin & McCaig 1985; Seidl & McMordie 1988; Harper 2001; *English Daily*; *The Phrase Finder* and *WordNet*). The corpus will be divided into four groups based on the division from the section 1. 3. The selected examples contain conventional and contemporary similes.

3. Analysis

The analysis will be performed group by group, starting from the general features shared by all the members of the group, moving on to explore all the important particularities and additional features of individual animal similes.

3. 1. Group A – Relatively objective

In this group, we can expect that it will be quite easy to identify the reasons why the primary links between the animal names and the adjectives in question were created. Almost all of the features linked to these animals can be directly perceived by one of our senses. Many of them can be considered to be diagnostic features, as the stressed characteristics seem to be (at least partially) what makes these animals differ from other animals. There are fifteen animal similes in this group:

- | | |
|---|--|
| (1) as big as an <i>elephant</i> | (9) as slow as a <i>snail/tortoise</i> |
| (2) as blind as a <i>bat/kittens/mole</i> | (10) as sour as a <i>crab</i> |
| (3) as dirty as a <i>hog/pig</i> | (11) as strong as an <i>ox/horse</i> |
| (4) as fat as a <i>pig</i> | (12) as tall as a <i>giraffe</i> |
| (5) as lively as a <i>cricket</i> | (13) as weak as a <i>kitten</i> |
| (6) as quiet as a <i>mouse</i> | (14) as hoarse as a <i>crow</i> |
| (7) as red as a <i>turkey-cock</i> | (15) as agile as a <i>monkey</i> |
| (8) as slippery as an <i>eel</i> | |

The features found in these similes can be labelled simple, physical and natural. Their prominence is derived from the relation between the animals which possess

them and other animals (or humans). In the similes (1) and (12) we find two large land mammals, the *elephant* and the *giraffe*, which stand out in regards to their size. The elephant is linked to size in general, while the giraffe is linked with tallness, due to the length of its neck. These two similes are likely to have entered English during the beginnings of the colonial period, these animals being undoubtedly larger than any animal native to Britain. The example (3) contains three similes that are most probably older than the ones from the first and the tenth example. Linking blindness to *bats*, *kittens* and *moles* is at least partially objective – bats are not really blind, but the eyes of most bat species are small and poorly developed, leading to poor visual acuity. Moreover, the fact that they are active at dusk and night contributes to our belief that they are actually blind. Young kittens indeed have no visual ability, while moles have small or covered eyes and can probably still tell night from day, although they are otherwise blind (Hutterer 2005: 300-11).

The fact that *hogs* and *pigs* in the examples (3) and (4) are linked to dirtiness and fatness should also be regarded as relatively objective – these features are relative because pigs are not fat and dirty *per se*, but in comparison to other animals. Furthermore, due to these two features, pigs and hogs are associated with strong negative connotations, which can be seen in metaphors involving them. An example of the people are animals metaphor, people are pigs would be classified as one of those having highly negative associations. In the example (5), liveliness is linked with *crickets*, most probably due to the fact that they move very fast and in a jumping manner. Linking *mice* with quietness and calmness in the sixth example is again related to their size – the pitch of the sounds they are making is probably quite high for other mice, but in our world, they are hard to notice and thus connected to the mentioned features.

In the example (7), redness is logically connected to the *turkey-cock*, owing to the striking colour of its head. What is stressed in the eighth example is the dominant quality of the *eel's* skin. There are, of course other animals with slippery skin, but eels seem to be prototypically regarded as the most squirming of all of them. In the ninth example, *snail* and *tortoise* are connected to slow pace. Snails move at 0.013 m/s (*The World Almanac and Book of Facts*: 572), while turtles' and tortoises' walking speed is 0.058–0.133 m/s (*The Physics Factbook*), both of which are figures which make them slower than most animal species that we encounter in everyday life. When we come to sourness and its relatedness to *crabs* in the tenth example, we need to note that it is not connected to crabs as a species or live crabs at all – it refers to *sour crabs*, a popular dish in Britain. Strength, in the eleventh example is, naturally, connected to the two animal species which were frequently employed in tasks demanding physical (traction) power, such as draft and ploughing – *oxen* and *horses*. In the example (13), weakness is linked with *kittens* – it could have been linked with any young of a small animal, but kittens were probably chosen because they are frequently present in the human environment. In the example (14), *crows'* vocalization is perceived as hoarse, based on the obvious nature of the sounds which they make. In the last example in this section, *monkeys* are linked with agility, due to the fact that they move around quickly and easily.

We could see that the primary links were quite easy to identify in all the examples from this group. The creation of the secondary links in the usage of these similes is not too complex either. Every usage of the similes involving simple physical features would result in a conceptual blend in which the blended space would contain a human with one intensified feature and linked with connotations coming from the animal in question. There is usually only one common feature in the generic space as well, and it allows for one feature to be transferred from one domain into another.

3. 2. Group B – Relatively objective and culture-influenced

In Group B, we might encounter more difficulties in the process of analysis, as the similes which constitute it reflect cultural interpretations of different animal features. These features, though rooted in reality, are more complex than the ones from the previous group, being typically linked with human, not with animal behaviour. Most of them cannot be classified as diagnostic features, as they are not animal features at all. There are fifteen examples of animal similes that can be simultaneously considered to be relatively objective and culture-influenced:

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| (16) as bald as a <i>coot</i> | (24) as nervous as a <i>cat/kitten</i> |
| (17) as busy as a <i>bee/beaver</i> | (25) as timid as a <i>mouse/rabbit</i> |
| (18) as free as a <i>bird</i> | (26) as crazy as a <i>bedbug</i> |
| (19) as greedy as a <i>pig</i> | (27) as mad as a <i>hornet</i> |
| (20) as hungry as a <i>bear/wolf</i> | (28) as faithful as the <i>dog</i> |
| (21) as lazy as a <i>pig</i> | (29) as happy/gay as a <i>lark</i> |
| (22) as lowly as a <i>worm</i> | (30) as dull as a <i>fish</i> |
| (23) as naked as a <i>jaybird</i> | |

In many examples in this group, we will encounter the phenomenon which can be labelled the cultural upgrading or reinterpretation of certain features. In the first example in this section (16) the large white feather mark the *coot's* head is interpreted as a bald spot on the human head. In the next example (17) two animal species, *bees* and *beavers*, who seem to be constantly engaged in some sort of work are associated with business or being busy. Freedom in the example (18) is associated with *birds* because of their ability to fly – this makes them hard to captivate. This simile can be connected to the one from the example (29), in which the *lark's* manner of flying is seen as something that can be related to happiness. In the example (19) *pigs* are linked to greediness, again a typically human feature, most likely because of the fact that they are omnivores and eat relatively large amounts of food. A similar feature, hunger, in the next example (20) is attributed to *bears* and *wolves*, animal species present in Britain and normally considered to be predators.

In the example (21), *pigs* are once again associated with a negative feature – laziness. Pigs are considered lazy due to the fact that they look fat and do not move as much as some other domestic animals do. In the following example (22), the fact that *worms* are small and live underground motivated their link to the adjective *lowly*, which means 'low in status and importance.' In the example (23) the front part of *jaybirds'* feather, having skin colour, is connected with nakedness, which is not characteristic of jaybirds at all. In the next example (24), *cats* and *kittens* and their movement and behaviour are associated with nervousness, while in the example (25) timidity is linked with *mice* and *rabbits*, animals of a fragile look that make little noise and usually get easily scared. In the following two examples, (26) and (27), craziness and madness are linked with *bedbugs* and *hornets*, based on the way in which they naturally move. *Dogs'* habit (28) to stick to their owners is interpreted as faithfulness. In the last example in this section, due to the fact that they do not produce sounds, *fish* are linked with dullness.

The primary links between the animal names and the adjectives in this group were all based on some objective characteristic feature of an animal, but in each of them we faced some degree of the cultural upgrade of a simpler feature. As for the secondary link, it is created on the spot. The feature that already exists in both input spaces is again intensified in the blended space. In the generic space, we have to have a feature

that is more general than the ones in the previous section, as we are now dealing with the features that are not typically connected to animals. Furthermore, this triggers the two-fold procedure related to the use of the similes from this group – a speaker first has to invoke the original link in one instance of conceptual blending and then use it in the one that follows (the one which results in our understanding of a simile).

3. 3. Group C – Culture-influenced

Group C contains the similes in which, in the primary link, various, exclusively human, features are attributed to animals. Unlike in the previous group, the reasons why these features are linked with these animals are not directly derived from any objective or relatively objective characteristics of the animals. If there are some similarities between the imposed and the real features, they result from the cultural reinterpretation of an animal's behaviour. We can find the basis of the primary links at various places (section 1. 3.); some of them are religion, storytelling, legends and traditional beliefs. There are fifteen similes belonging to this group:

- | | |
|--|---|
| (31) as bold/brave as a <i>lion</i> | (39) as sick as a <i>dog/parrot/pig</i> |
| (32) as cunning/sly as a <i>fox</i> | (40) as silly as a <i>goose</i> |
| (33) as innocent as a <i>lamb</i> | (41) as smart as a <i>fox</i> |
| (34) as gentle as a <i>dove/lamb</i> | (42) as solemn as an <i>owl</i> |
| (35) as meek as a <i>lamb</i> | (43) as stubborn/obstinate as a <i>mule</i> |
| (36) as mad as a wet <i>hen</i> /March hare | (44) as stupid as an <i>owl</i> |
| (37) as poor as a church <i>mouse</i> | (45) as wise as an <i>owl</i> |
| (38) as proud/vain as a <i>peacock/peafowl</i> | |

Religious similes can be found in the examples (33), (34) and (35) – in the centre of all of them is the *lamb*, a common Christian symbol. Christians are collectively referred to as a flock, with Christ as the Good Shepherd, and sheep are an element in the Christian iconography of the birth of Jesus Christ, who is also portrayed as the Sacrificial lamb of God. Therefore, this animal is connected with innocence, meekness and gentleness. Gentleness is associated with *doves*, probably due to their delicate looks. A number of similes in this section is unquestionably derived from various fables and ancient stories – *foxes* are usually related to cunningness, slyness and smartness (32, 41); the *lion* is considered to be bold and brave (31); the *peacock* and *peafowl* are proud and vain (38); *mules* are usually stubborn and obstinate (43), while *geese* tend to be connected with silliness and stupidity (40).

Owls seem to be in the most complex position of all the animals analysed so far – we find them in three similes, one of which (44) contradicts the other two (42, 45). While the connection between the owl and wisdom and solemnity can be traced in fables, it is impossible to find the source of the link between this species and stupidity. In the example (36), madness is linked to the wet *hen* and *March hare*. The source of the former simile is unknown, while the latter originates from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Some try to link the simile as *poor as a church mouse* to Lewis Carroll as well, but this simile can be found in other languages and in periods prior to Lewis Carroll's works (Stamenković 2010: 10). In the last set of similes (39) to be analysed in this section, we find three animal species linked with sickness – *dogs*, *pigs* and *parrots*. In all these cases, it is difficult to find the reasons these animals were picked out as the ones denoting sickness. These similes do not have the same

meaning – *as sick as a dog* or *pig* means 'very sick,' while *as sick as a parrot* means 'very disappointed.'

In order to understand these similes and to be able to apply them, a speaker has to know them, as the link between the stressed features and objectivity is now completely missing. They are usually acquired by growing up in a particular culture (in this case the British one). Otherwise, these similes have to be encountered and learnt prior to their usage. Different human features, culturally linked with various animals and already modified (intensified), enter the process of conceptual blending and map themselves to humans through the secondary link. The secondary procedure is simpler than the one we encountered in Group B, but prior knowledge is required.

3. 4. Group D – Motivated by other mechanisms

Group D is comprised of the three similes in which the primary link was created by other mechanisms, although all of them essentially belong to either Group A or B, as all the features seem to be objective to a certain degree.

(46) as dead as a/the *dodo*

(47) as fast as a *snail*

(48) as frisky as a *ferret*

The similes in the examples (46) and (48) were created in the process of alliteration, but both of them reflect reality – the *dodo* really is an extinct species, while *ferrets* are indeed frisky, lively and energetic. They were chosen over other extinct species and frisky animals simply because of their names. The simile in the example (47) was created through irony, as *snails* are all but fast in our perception of speed. This means that the understanding of the former two similes would employ the mechanism we faced in Group A, while the snail simile would require the mechanism of Group B.

4. Conclusions

Although one would expect that the understanding of all the similes is based on the same principles, we could see that different kinds of similes engage different sorts of cognitive procedures. The procedures vary in complexity and structure, but they are all based on our innate imaginative powers. We could divide the similes into three important groups. The similes belonging to the first one, labelled *relatively objective*, seem to be quite independent of the culture of the UK and the USA and relatively easy to understand, as they employ a simple mapping between the animal and the human domain. The second group, described as *relatively objective and culture-influenced*, contains those similes which can still be understood without belonging to British culture as they are relatively objective. They, however, demand more complex mental processes and at least two instances of conceptual blending. The third group, named *culture-influenced*, is comprised of the similes that have to be learned in order to be understood and applied. All things considered, this division between various types of similes sheds new light on their usage and the differences in their conceptualization. English seems to be particularly rich in similes of this kind, so the compiled corpus was large enough to illustrate these differences. Some possible future investigations into this matter could concentrate on similes coming from other languages in order to see whether these groups can be extended and whether some new groups, demanding different mental processes in the course of interpretation, might emerge.

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Note: This paper is an offshoot of the larger paper entitled „Uloga kognitivne semantike u izučavanju prozne književnosti: konceptualno stapanje u basnama“, written within the doctoral course named *Contrastive Lexicology* and supervised by prof. dr Tvrtko Prčić, Faculty of Philosophy – Novi Sad. The 'parent' paper has been submitted to *Zbornik Matice srpske za filologiju i lingvistiku* on 28 January 2010.

КОГНИТИВНОСЕМАНТИЧКИ АСПЕКТИ ПОРЕДБИ СА НАЗИВИМА ЖИВОТИЊА У ЕНГЛЕСКОМ ЈЕЗИКУ

Резиме

Основни задата овог рада је да покуша да неке од главних поставки когнитивне семантике примени на анализу конвенционализованих придевских поредби са називима животиња из енглеског језика. Он ће се заснивати на комбинацији теорије концептуалне метафоре (СМТ) и теорије концептуалног стапања (ВТ) у анализи 48 примера (поредби или скупова поредби) из корпуса који је састављен на основу најкоришћенијих речник идиома. Примери ће бити подељени у три веће групе на основу порекла, мотивације и степена објективности, а анализа ће да покуша да покаже да је за разумевање сваке од група потребна другачија поставка когнитивних механизма.

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