

# CAN WE CONSTRUCT A LANGUAGE WITHOUT METAPHORS?

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**ABSTRACT** • Metaphors are ubiquitous in natural language; in fact, no language without metaphors is known. But can we construct a language without metaphors? An issue that is particularly relevant to this question is the relation between metaphor and simile. Some argue that metaphors are a type of (elided) simile, whereas others claim that the two phenomena differ in kind. Ideally, a way to settle the dispute would be to find a language that contains similes but not metaphors. There is no such *actual* language. But two science fiction authors have attempted to conceive of and describe just such a language. David Brin, in *The Uplift War*, creates birdlike aliens, whose language is claimed to have similes but not metaphors. However, Brin reproduces utterances of these aliens, in which he reflects their avian nature; and he often does so by metaphor. China Miéville, in *Embassytown*, also creates aliens whose language is claimed to have similes but not metaphors. However, these similes are frozen, and are actually idioms: they have a fixed, conventional meaning. Later on, the aliens acquire metaphors, and only then do they begin to have, in addition, novel similes. Hence, both Brin and Miéville fail: the former constructs a language that has both similes and metaphors, whereas the other constructs a language that initially has neither, and later acquires both simultaneously. Science fiction authors are, after all, humans, and are bound by the constraints of human languages. Hence, their failure to construct a language that contains similes but not metaphors tells us that the two phenomena are fundamentally very close. To the extent that it is possible to construct a language without metaphors, it appears that it would have to do without similes too.

**KEYWORDS** • Metaphor; Simile; Science Fiction; David Brin; The Uplift War; China Miéville; Embassytown.

## 1. Metaphors and similes

Metaphors are ubiquitous in natural language: no language without metaphors is known. But is such a language even *conceivable*? Can we imagine a natural language without metaphors? And, more to the point of Constructed Languages, can we construct such a language?

As my starting point of this discussion, I wish to consider a very similar figure of speech: simile. Intuitively, similes and metaphors are closely related: (1a), which demonstrates a metaphor, appears to mean more or less the same as (1b), which uses a simile.

- (1) a. John is a snake.
- b. John is like a snake.

But perhaps metaphors and similes are actually rather different; and then, perhaps, we can construct a language with only similes, but without metaphors.

Of course, this depends on the question of whether metaphors and similes mean different things. This issue has been under debate since at least the times of Aristotle.

Aristotle believed that a simile is a metaphor. He wrote:

A simile is also a metaphor; for there is little difference: when the poet says, "He rushed as a lion," it is a simile, but "The lion rushed" [with the lion referring to Achilles] would be a metaphor; since both are brave, he used a metaphor and spoke of Achilles as a lion... [Similes] should be brought in like metaphors; for they are metaphors differing in the form of expression (On Rhetoric).

Many modern linguists (Bergmann 1979; Miller 1993; van Genabith 2001) essentially accept this view, and argue that a metaphor is an (elliptical) simile. But one doesn't have to subscribe to this extreme position to accept that similes and metaphors are related.

Yet, many argue that metaphors and similes differ in kind. In this paper I will concentrate on two arguments for this move, inspired by Davidson (1978). One argument uses the fact that, literally, metaphors are (usually) false but similes are true.<sup>1</sup> Davidson writes:

The most obvious semantic difference between simile and metaphor is that all similes are true and most metaphors are false. The earth is like a floor, the Assyrian did come down like a wolf on the fold, because everything is like everything. But turn these sentences into metaphors, and you turn them false; the earth is like a floor, but it is not a floor; Tolstoy, grown up, was like an infant, but he wasn't one. (p. 41)

Of course, metaphors are true on a "deeper", figurative level; but they are false under the literal reading. It is important to note that, according to Davidson, the literal meaning is the only semantic meaning they have, and the figurative interpretation is provided by pragmatics.

The second difference between metaphors and similes involves their figurative meaning: figuratively, metaphors are indexical but similes are not.

It must be admitted that Davidson does not make this point explicitly. This is what he actually writes: "The simile says there is a likeness and leaves it to us to pick out some common feature or features; the metaphor does not explicitly assert a likeness, but *if we accept it as a metaphor*, we are again led to seek common features" (p. 40, my emphasis).

It is not entirely clear what Davidson means by this, but Stern (1991) interprets Davidson's observation to conclude that metaphors are like demonstratives and indexicals:

[W]hereas Davidson... draws from this the conclusion that metaphor must be a matter of use and not meaning, a subject for pragmatics rather than semantics, I argue that we can give a semantics for metaphor precisely by embracing it as a kind of context-dependent expression on the order of the demonstratives and indexicals. (p. 14-15).

Let us formulate this difference as follows. Both similes and metaphors relate to a feature that is common to tenor and vehicle. A simile declares the *existence* of such a feature: the simile (2a) is interpreted as (2b).

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<sup>1</sup> I say *usually* false, because if a metaphor is negated, as in *No man is an island*, then it's a negation of a falsehood and therefore obviously true: indeed, no man is (literally) an island.

- (2) a. A is like B.  
b. There is a feature common to A and B.

In contrast, a metaphor refers to such a feature like a demonstrative: the metaphor (3a) is interpreted as (3b).

- (3) a. A is B  
b. *This* is a feature common to A and B.

The nature of this feature is assumed to be recoverable from the context.

Clearly, under this theory, the meanings of metaphor and simile are close, but not identical. The relation between them is like the relation between existentials and demonstratives: the meanings of (4a) and (4b) are, analogously, similar but not identical:

- (4) a. Some cabinet minister is a traitor.  
b. This cabinet minister is a traitor.

## 2. The relevance of ConLangs

The claim we are considering is the following:

Literally, a metaphor is false but a simile is true

Figuratively, a metaphor is demonstrative but a simile is existential

How can we test this? One may suggest the following thought experiment.

The research hypotheses are:

The literal reading of metaphors requires falsity

The figurative reading of metaphors requires demonstratives

Similes require neither of these things

The “method”:

Construct a language without falsehoods and demonstratives

See if it has similes and/or metaphors

Now add lies and demonstratives to it

See if it has similes and/or metaphors now

Of course, such an experiment has not actually been conducted, and probably cannot be conducted. But, although not actually stated as such, two science fiction novels can be seen as attempts to perform this experiment.

But before discussing these novels, we may want to consider the question of their significance. What, if anything, is the relevance of made-up, fictional languages, to the study of real human languages?

The answer is that science fiction authors, even when they construct an alien language, are still human themselves: they are bound by the constraints of their human language, sometimes to a surprisingly high extent. Consequently, when they attempt to construct a language that is fundamentally different from a human language, they often fail. These failures, therefore, tell us a great deal about the properties that are fundamental to human languages.

### 3. *The Uplift War*

David Brin, in *The Uplift War* (Bantam 1987) tries to imagine a family of languages that he calls *Galactic languages*: alien languages that have similes but no metaphors. It should be noted that he doesn't actually construct such languages, but he does describe their properties: "Unlike similes, which compared two objects, metaphors seemed to declare, against all logic, that unlike things were the same! No Galactic language allowed such nonsense (p. 47)."

So, Brin is attempting to imagine a language that has similes but not metaphors. But is he successful?

Brin creates birdlike aliens, the *Gubru*, and describes their thoughts and utterances. He does so in a way that highlights their alien, avian nature. And it turns out that, to this end, the device Brin chooses is precisely the type of expression that he claims is absent from this language: metaphor! Consider the following examples:

- (5) a. [T]he eggs of the Earthlings' defeat had been laid so many years before. (p. 204).  
 b. This planet was a minor, if important, nut to shell with a quick, efficient bill thrust. (p. 254)  
 c. Of course, the more closely ancient procedures were adhered to, the more brilliant would be the plumage of the Gubru when the Progenitors returned. (p. 255)

All these are examples of metaphors; and they are clearly meant to be a literal translation from the alien language, since these metaphors would make no sense to humans, which don't have eggs, bills, or plumage.

We must conclude that Brin failed in his attempt to construct a language with similes but no metaphors. However, it must be noted that the issue of metaphor was not a major topic of the novel, and Brin may have given up the attempt to eliminate metaphors in order to achieve a more powerful literary effect.<sup>2</sup> But would an author who takes the simile/metaphor distinction to be the main topic of their work do any better?

### 4. *Embassytown*

#### 4.1 *Properties of the alien language*

Such a novel is *Embassytown* by China Miéville (Del Rey 2012). The author introduces aliens called *Ariekei*, which the humans refer to as The Hosts, since they host a human embassy, and a small town surrounding it, on their planet.

Like Brin, Miéville doesn't actually construct the alien language, but he describes it in some detail. The Hosts' language has many remarkable properties, only some of which I will discuss. But before I do so, a methodological point is in order.

For the purposes of this paper, I will treat the Hosts' language as if it were real, and could be the object of study. I take the author to be a field researcher, describing the language. Like any field researcher, he may make mistakes; such mistakes will show where the properties of his (and

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<sup>2</sup> Brin also introduces animals that are genetically upgraded to have humanlike qualities, specifically, use language. A reviewer makes the interesting suggestion that perhaps the humanlike language of the aliens is meant to create the effect of "downgrading" the aliens as a sort of counterpart to the upgraded animals.

our) human language override his imagination. Hence, both the author's successes and, even more so, his failures, can tell us a great deal about human language.

One of the extraordinary properties of the Hosts' language is that there are no lies in it. In fact, lying is psychologically impossible for the Hosts: "For Hosts, speech was thought. It was as nonsensical to them that a speaker could say, could claim, something it knew to be untrue as, to me, that I could believe something I knew to be untrue" (p.83).

The impossibility of lying in the Hosts' language is reminiscent of the celebrated Moore's paradox: although it is quite impossible that some proposition *P* is true and yet I don't believe it, still I couldn't felicitously utter:

(6) *P* is true but I don't believe *P*.

Another interesting property of the Hosts' language is that it has no demonstratives:

"How do you say 'that' in Language [the Hosts's language]?" I asked Bren. "Like *that* one." I pointed. "Which glass do you want? *That* one."

...

Pointing. "Or *that* one." Moving my hand. "Thatness."

"There's nothing."

...

"You'd say 'the glass in front of the apple and the glass with a flaw in its base and the glass with a residue of wine left in it.'" (p. 285)

Miéville doesn't explain why that is so, but a probable reason suggests itself: the Hosts' language expresses speaker's thoughts directly, and thoughts are closed propositions, hence not indexical.

The Hosts' language is very precise and verbose: "Host pronouncements... have... precise and nuanced exactnesses" (p. 140). This fact can be demonstrated clearly by the following example: "The Host spoke... 'It's asking if the boy'll be alright,' the man said. He rubbed his mouth. 'Colloquially, something like, will he run later or will he cool?'" (p. 14)

This fact is relevant to our purposes for the following reason. Roberts and Kreuz (1994) asked participants for the reasons why they used various figures of speech. Most participants (94% and 82%, respectively) reported they used simile and metaphor to clarify their meaning.

Since clarity of meaning is apparently very important to the Hosts, we therefore expect the Hosts' language to be under pressure to use figurative language: if they can have figures of speech, they will.

And, indeed, this appears to be the case: "They're having a debate. A few of them are convinced they can make their point clearly by... a simile" (p. 23-24).

#### 4.2 Similes

Miéville claims that the Hosts' language has similes but not metaphors. He claims that the reason is that similes are true but metaphors are false, but the Hosts' language has no lies, hence cannot express metaphors:

"A simile," he said, "is true because you say so. It's a persuasion: this is like that... Simile spells an argument out: it's ongoing, explicit, truth-making... You don't need to... to link incommensurables. Unlike if you claim: 'This is that.' When it patently is not. That's what we do. That's what we call 'reason,' that exchange, metaphor. That *lying*." (p. 141)

However, it turns out that similes may sometimes be false after all. Blumson (2011) makes the following point: “‘Margie is like an iron lady’ is false, since for it to be true there would have to be an iron lady who Margie is like, but there is no such iron lady. Similes cannot be true without likening their subjects to existents.”<sup>3</sup>

For the Hosts, this is, in fact, a real problem, because, as we have seen, anything they say must be true. They solve this problem in a remarkable way:

there was a house in Embassytown out of which, many years before, the Hosts had taken all the furniture, then put it back, to allow some figure of speech. The split stone, made so they could speak the thought, *it's like the stone that was split and put together again*. Most [similes], though, were Terre men and women (p. 105-106)

Note, for example, the description of this human, whose job is to “act out” a simile:

*It's like the man who swims with fishes every week*, the Hosts might want to say, to make whatever obscure point it was, and to allow them that, it had to be true that he did. Hence his duty. “There’s a marble bath in Staff quarters... I swim every Overday” (p. 106)

#### 4.3 *Dead or alive?*

But are these really examples of similes? Human similes can, in general, be interpreted contextually. But, in contrast, these constructions in the Hosts’ language appear to have a fixed meaning.

For example, as a little girl, the protagonist was made to eat what was given her to create a simile. She describes its meaning as follows: “Years, thousands of hours after I acted it, I finally had it sort-of explained to me. It was a crude rendering, of course, but it is I think more or less an expression intended to invoke surprise and irony, a kind of resentful fatalism” (p. 26).

Unlike human similes, then, the meaning of (what Miéville calls) a simile in the Hosts’ language cannot change depending on context or communicative goals. If the aliens want to change the meaning, the only way is to make up a new simile, which entails having the protagonist do something else:

There were those Hosts who thought something better could have been said and better thoughts therefore thought, had I only been made to do other things than I had. That I could have been a better simile for those in need of one to speak precisely; to speak about those somethings other than me that I was—they would have asserted—like. But those critics of course couldn’t say what those thoughts would have been, because they could not have them. (p. 98)

Therefore, it seems that these are not live similes, but dead similes: idioms. And dead similes are not similes. Bredin (1998) puts it very clearly:

There are dead similes... white as a sheet, green as grass, old as Methusaleh, quick as lightning, as stale as yesterday’s news, like two turtle-doves, as clean as a new pin, as sweet as honey, and so on and so forth. To say that these are ‘dead’ similes is to say that they have lost their figurativeness and

<sup>3</sup> See also Tirrell (1991).

have become literal. That is, they have become both conventional and univocal... Once the predicate ceases to carry out its descriptive function, it turns into an empty rhetorical form. We can observe... that it once was a simile: but we know also that it is a simile no longer. (p. 77)

#### 4.4 Putting (live) similes are metaphors back in

As the novel moves towards its climax, the protagonist teaches metaphors and (live) similes to some “gifted” Hosts:

I shone a torch on myself. “I glow in the night, I’m like the moon. I am the moon... I’m so tired I lie as still as the dead, I’m like the dead. I’m so tired I *am* dead. See?”

...

There were humans a long time ago who wore clothes that were black and red like your markings. Spanish dancers... You’re like, you *are* a Spanish dancer.” (p. 308)

And the Host, whose markings resembles a Spanish dancer, understands this meaning: “I have markings. I’m a Spanish dancer.” (p. 309)

These Hosts, who were made to understand the concepts of live similes and metaphors, can now point and understand pointing: “When they did make communication—something ridiculous, Spanish [Dancer] throwing a pulpy bud then pointing into the muttering wildlife where it lay, and the [other Host] picking it up—their euphoria, even alien, was palpable” (p. 315).

And they can understand demonstratives: “With the point they’d conceived a *that*” (p. 295).

Remarkably, together with all these new capabilities, the Hosts can now lie. At this point in the story, a war has broken out, and the only way for the protagonist’s side to win it is for some Hosts to tell a lie to the enemy: “They understood the mission we gave them. They wouldn’t have done a few days before... It couldn’t occur to [the enemies] that they were being lied to... How could it? They would, after all, hear it from Ariekei” (p. 325).

At this point, we can say that the Hosts a full-edged language. This is demonstrated by a remarkable speech made by Spanish Dancer to his people:

We were like hunters. We were like plants eating light. The humans made their town in our town like a star in a circle. They made their place like a filament in a flower. We spoke the name of their place, but we know it had another name, sitting in the city like an organ in a body, like a tongue in a mouth. Before the humans came... we’ve been like the animals over Embassytown in the direction of which I raise my giftwing [“hand”], which is a speaking you’ll come to understand. We... were the birds eating in mindlessness, we were the girl in darkness... We speak now or I do, and others do. You’ve never spoken before. You will. You’ll be able to say how the city is a pit and a hill and a standard and an animal that hunts and a vessel on the sea and the sea and how we are fish in it, not like the man who swims weekly with fish but the fish with which he swims, the water, the pool. I love you, you light me, warm me, you are suns. You have never spoken before. (p. 335-336)

Note how this speech involves both live similes and metaphors, and refers to demonstrative pointing.

All these changes came about when the protagonist taught the Hosts both similes and metaphors simultaneously. This indicates that both similes and metaphors can be false, and both are like demonstratives. Hence, we must conclude that the experiment failed: similes and metaphors are more closely related than Davidson (or Miéville) thought. It is not possible to have one without the other.

## 5. Conclusions

We must remember that Constructed Languages cannot prove or disprove theories. But they can serve as thought experiments, and make a theory sound more plausible or less plausible. *The Uplift War* attempts to describe languages with similes and no metaphors, but fails; and *Embassytown* shows, against its author's intentions, that it is plausible to treat metaphors and similes as related, and, specifically, that both can be false and both are demonstrative. Therefore, the author's attempt to create a language with only similes but no metaphors also fails.

We have seen that two science fiction authors tried to construct a language without metaphors, but failed. Apparently, the task is more difficult than one would have thought, perhaps impossible.

But recall that ConLangs are fictional, and like Balzac famously said, "fiction is a dignified form of lies". Hence, we must maintain a healthy feeling of doubt: everything written here might be wrong. Yet let me conclude with one last quote from *Embassytown*: "A scholar can never let mere wrongness get in the way of the theory" (p. 37).

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