Ewa Wałaszewska

Simile in Relevance Theory: Towards an Alternative Account

0. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to discuss the relevance-theoretic treatment of simile proposed by Robyn Carston (2002) with a view to showing certain faults and weaknesses in her argument. Additionally, I will suggest possible directions of research in which an alternative relevance-theoretic account of simile may go, such as the relationship between similes (metaphoric comparisons) and literal comparisons or similarities and differences between similes and metaphors with respect to the lexical pragmatic processes of ad hoc concept formation. Unlike Carston, I will argue that the understanding of a simile is more like the understanding of a metaphor than of a literal comparison, since the understanding of both metaphors and similes involves the construction of an ad hoc concept based on the lexically-encoded concept. The paper starts by discussing basic assumptions of relevance theory as well as its view on lexical meaning and different ways it gets modified in use.

1. Basics of relevance theory

Relevance theory, developed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson and first fully described in their 1986/1995 book, is a pragmatic approach to human communication based on cognition. The key notion of relevance is understood as a property of inputs (e.g. an utterance), and defined in terms of positive cognitive effects (e.g. modifications of existing assumptions) and processing effort (e.g. representing the input mentally) expended to achieve these effects. Basically, the greater the positive cognitive effects, the greater the relevance of an input, and the smaller the processing effort, the greater the relevance. According to relevance theory, human cognition is so organised as to maximise relevance, which is what one of the two principles of relevance, the Cognitive Principle, claims. The other principle, the Communicative Principle of Relevance, states that every act of communication conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance – in other words, by using a certain utterance, the speaker communicates that his utterance is the most relevant, taking into account his abilities and preferences, and that it is sufficiently relevant to be worth the hearer's processing effort (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995). Since on this approach to utterance meaning, the linguistically-encoded meaning serves only as a clue to the speaker-intended meaning, understanding any utterance, be it literal or metaphorical, amounts to seeing its relevance. This is captured by the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure:

a) Follow a path of least effort in deriving positive cognitive effects (test interpretive hypotheses in order of their accessibility)
b) Stop when your expectations of relevance are satisfied (or abandoned)

(e.g. Vega Moreno 2007: 35, Wilson and Carston 2007: 245).

2. Lexical meaning in relevance theory

It has to be emphasised that, on the relevance-theoretic approach, there is no substantial difference between sentence interpretation and word interpretation, since both are guided by expectations of relevance (Wilson and Carston 2007: 244) and neither follows the presumption of literalness. This, in a sense, shows that relevance theory can be easily applied in the field of lexical pragmatics, whose goal is to explain "the processes by which linguistically-specified ('literal') word meanings are modified in use" (Wilson 2004: 343). In relevance theory, the meaning encoded by a word is a concept, which consists of an address in memory, making accessible different types of information. These types of information are stored in three kinds of entry:

a) lexical entry, which contains lexical information such as the phonetic and grammatical properties of a word corresponding to a certain concept (Carston 2002: 321-322),
b) logical entry, which specifies (one-way) logical relations a given concept has with other concepts, e.g. the concept BIRD is related to ANIMAL, since any bird is an animal (Vega Moreno 2007: 46),
c) encyclopaedic entry, which contains information about the denotation/extension of the concept, general and/or scientific knowledge, personal experiences, images, etc; for example, most birds can fly or certain birds are timid.

It seems that while natural-kind terms such as *bird* encode fully-fledged concepts (Carston 2002: 362), certain verbs (e.g. *put, take, make, open*) or adjectives (e.g. *long*) (see Sperber and Wilson 1998: 185, Vega Moreno 2007: 206) are more likely to encode pro-concepts or concept schemas, which are more general and abstract than fully-fledged concepts. Pro-concepts or concept schemas are understood "as pointers to a conceptual space" (Carston 2002: 360) or to indefinitely many more specific concepts (Sperber and Wilson 1998: 197) and as such, on every occasion of use, require pragmatic inferencing to become fully-fledged concepts.

There are also words which encode neither concepts nor concept schemas, but so-called procedures or inferential constraints. Procedures are viewed as constraints on pragmatic inferencing which is involved in the interpretation of an utterance (Carston 2002: 57, Blakemore 2007: 45). A typical example of procedural encoding is the conjunction *but*, whose meaning guides the hearer through the comprehension process of the utterance in which it is present, by signalling the concept of contrast between the coordinated elements (Blakemore 2002: 90-91).

It is worth pointing out that relevance theory assumes that there are concepts that do not have corresponding words (Sperber and Wilson 1998: 186), that is they lack a lexical entry, for instance, a concept UNCLE-OR-AUNT can be linguistically realised only by a phrase (Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995). There seem to be two types of unlexicalised concepts: (1) those which have a stable permanent address in our memory, e.g. a stable conceptual representation for a particular state of mind, a type of pain, etc. (Vega Moreno 2007: 46, see also Sperber and Wilson 1998) and (2) those "which do not have a stable conceptual address in memory but are constructed in our minds at a moment's notice using stable concepts as templates" (Vega Moreno 2007: 46), e.g. occasion-dependent different conceptual representations for pain, states of tiredness, etc. This shows that there are many more concepts in the mind than there are corresponding words in a language. This also implies that,

to communicate unlexicalised concepts, speakers will readily use the existing vocabulary; more precisely, they will use words encoding certain concepts to communicate different unlexicalised concepts on the basis of some resemblances between lexicalised and unlexicalised concepts with respect to their logical and encyclopaedic properties. Such communicated unlexicalised concepts, constructed pragmatically by hearers in the process of utterance comprehension, are referred to as ad hoc concepts.

An ad hoc concept, constructed pragmatically by the hearer may be narrower than the lexically-encoded concept used for its communication, as illustrated by the use of *bird* in (1) and (2) below.

1) While I looked round the room, the bird returned to its cage.
2) Suddenly, a large bird caught a mouse with its talons. (examples from Wałaszewska 2008)

In both examples, the concept BIRD is used to convey more specific ad hoc concepts: in (1) the ad hoc concept BIRD* denotes those birds which are kept in cages as pets and in (2) the ad hoc concept BIRD** denotes only birds of prey. Such ad hoc concepts are the result of the lexical pragmatic process of narrowing, which is based on "the use of a word to convey a more specific sense than the encoded one, with a more restricted denotation ..." (Wilson and Carston 2007: 232). Interestingly, in lexical narrowing, literalness is preserved, since both pet birds and birds of prey are birds: none of the logical properties of the lexicalised concept BIRD has been dropped.

An ad hoc concept can also be broader than the lexically-encoded concept it is based on. In the lexical pragmatic process of broadening, a word is used "to convey a more general sense than the encoded one, with a consequent expansion of the linguistically-specified denotation" (Wilson and Carston 2007: 232). Unlike narrowing, broadening does not preserve literalness, which means that one or more logical properties of the lexicalised concept can be dropped. Lexical broadening is associated with such loose and non-literal uses as: approximation (ex. 3), category extension (ex. 4), hyperbole (ex. 5) and metaphor (ex. 6).

3) John has a square jaw.
4) Žižek is another Derrida. (Sperber and Wilson 2008: 93)
5) I am starving. (Vega Moreno 2007: 48)
6) Joan is an angel. (Sperber and Wilson 2008: 94)

In (3), the geometric term *square* is used loosely to convey the sense of 'approximately a square': the broadened ad hoc concept SQUARE* is based on the lexically-encoded concept SQUARE 'a shape with four sides that are all the same length and four corners that are all right angles'. In (4), the proper name *Derrida* is used as a common noun to denote a broader category of philosophers of a certain type of which he is the most salient member (Sperber and Wilson 2008: 93). In (5), the word *starving* conveys a substantially broadened ad hoc concept which includes states of extreme hunger potentially leading to death, but also states in which someone is simply very hungry. In (5), the concept ANGEL 'a spiritual being' is broadened to include very kind and good people, which means that at least one logical property for the concept ANGEL, 'lacking a corporeal existence', has been dropped in ad hoc concept formation. On the other hand, it seems that the concept ANGEL is also narrowed to exclude, e.g. avenging angels or fallen angels, who cannot be described as kind. This shows that on the relevance-theoretic approach to lexical pragmatics, metaphor may, but does not have to, involve both lexical broadening and narrowing (Carston 2002, Sperber and Wilson 2008).

3. Simile in relevance theory

In her relevance-theoretic discussion of the difference between metaphor and simile, Carston (2002: 357) argues that, even though both the metaphor in (7) and the corresponding simile in (8) implicate the same, namely, that Mary is obstinate, insensitive, refuses to be side-tracked, etc., this implicature would be arrived at in a different way in the case of metaphor and in the case of simile. This, according to Carston, shows that similes should be analysed differently from metaphors.

7) Mary is a bulldozer.
8) Mary is like a bulldozer.

Consequently, Carston suggests that while the interpretation of (7) involves ad hoc concept formation, the interpretation of (8) does not. In order to make sense of (7), one has to form an ad hoc concept based on the concept encoded by the word *bulldozer*. The derived ad hoc concept BULLDOZER* is broader than the lexically-encoded concept in that it denotes people who are obstinate and insensitive and, at the same time, narrower since it excludes pieces of machinery. This shows that the denotations of the lexically-encoded concept BULLDOZER 'a piece of machinery' and the corresponding ad hoc concept BULLDOZER* 'an obstinate and insensitive person' do not overlap (Vega Moreno 2007: 97). In other words, by being called *a bulldozer*, Mary is described as belonging to a category of BULLDOZERS* 'obstinate and insensitive people'. In example (8), however, as Carston (2002: 357-358) holds, no ad hoc concept BULLDOZER* is communicated and the word *bulldozer* is understood as conveying the concept it encodes. She explains that it does not make sense to describe Mary as being **like** a BULLDOZER* if she belongs to the category of BULLDOZERS*. On Carston's account then, the lexically-encoded concept is preserved in similes, while it is not in metaphors.

To substantiate her analysis, Carston (2002: 357) adds examples of modified class inclusion statements (9-10), with a view to showing that if a given entity belongs to a certain category, it cannot be described as being (only) like that category.

9) Mary is like a human being
10) A pear is like a fruit,

Undoubtedly, both of the above examples are unacceptable, since Mary is a human being and this precludes her being like a human and, similarly, a pear is a fruit so it contains all the properties of fruit (a 'pear' is a hyponym of 'fruit'), which makes the insertion of *like* impossible. By analogy with examples (9) and (10), Carston states that if Mary is a BULLDOZER*, she cannot be like a BULLDOZER*. I would like to show that there are some flaws in Carston's reasoning and to suggest an alternative analysis of simile in relevance theory.

The main problem with Carston's argument is that she seems to erroneously apply the term 'simile' to any statement of comparison that contains the word *like*, apparently overlooking the fact that there are two types of comparison statements: those literal (illustrated in (11)) and those non-literal (illustrated in (12)), and that only the latter can be referred to as similes (Ortony 1993, see also Levinson 1983).

11) Encyclopaedias are like dictionaries.
12) Encyclopaedias are like gold mines.

Example (11) is a literal comparison, since encyclopaedias are really like dictionaries – the comparison highlights some properties shared by encyclopaedias and dictionaries which are salient for both types of books, such as being alphabetically organised and being used for reference. On the other hand, example (12) is a non-literal comparison (simile) because encyclopaedias are not really like gold mines – the properties shared by the two types of entities seem more abstract, e.g. 'being profitable', and hardly salient (Levinson 1983: 155, Ortony 1993: 347). This shows that the type of similarity focused on in sentences like (11) is literal, whereas that exhibited by sentences like (12) is non-literal, which clearly indicates that similes are more like metaphors than literal comparisons.
Furthermore, when we compare Carston's example (8) with example (13):

8) Mary is like a bulldozer.
13) A digger is like a bulldozer.

it becomes clear that while (13) involves a literal similarity (both diggers and bulldozers are pieces of heavy machinery, e.g. used for moving earth), (8) involves a non-literal one. If we assume, after Carston, that similes revolve around lexically-encoded concepts, then the intuitive difference in interpretation between (8) and (13) will be obliterated.

Another problem with Carston's analysis stems from the fact that she uses the unacceptability of the word *like* in class inclusion statements (examples (9) and (10)) to argue against the ad hoc concept interpretation of similes. Apparently, her assumption is that an ad hoc concept, by creating a certain class or category, will change a simile into a class inclusion statement, which, by definition, is incompatible with *like*. However, this line of reasoning seems rather unmotivated since class inclusion statements based on the literal senses of the words (lexically-encoded concepts) behave differently from class inclusion statements involving metaphors (ad hoc concepts) (e.g. Glucksberg and Keysar 1990). For example, the class inclusion statement involving metaphor, and thus an ad hoc concept, illustrated in (14), has a corresponding simile (ex. 15). On the other hand, the class inclusion statement based on the literal senses of the words (ex. 16) cannot be rephrased as a simile (ex. 17):

14) Cigarettes are time bombs.
15) Cigarettes are like time bombs.
16) Pianos are musical instruments.
17) Pianos are like musical instruments. (examples based on Glucksberg and Keysar 1990: 13)

In (14), cigarettes are assigned to the superordinate category "of things that can abruptly cause serious damage at some unpredictable time in the future" (Glucksberg and Keysar 1990: 13), which is labelled after one of its members (TIME BOMBS) and which is formed as a result of ad hoc concept formation (TIME BOMBS*). It seems that the category is more based on certain encyclopaedic properties of the concept TIME BOMBS than on those logical ones. In (16), pianos and musical instruments are related by the subordinate-superordinate relationship, which means that being a member of the category of musical instruments is part of the meaning of *piano* – in relevance theory, this is a logical property of the concept PIANO.

Now, I would like to argue for what seems to be a more plausible account of simile within the relevance-theoretic framework. My claim is that, unlike literal comparisons, but similarly to metaphors, similes do involve ad hoc concept formation. Let us consider the two examples below:

18) My lawyer is a shark.
19) My lawyer is like a shark. (examples from Glucksberg 2008)

Both (18), which is a metaphor, and (19), which is a simile, are likely to be interpreted along the following lines: 'My lawyer is a violent and cruel person who is eager to gain something out of other people's weaknesses or suffering'. In order to arrive at this interpretation, it is necessary to construct an ad hoc concept based on the lexically-encoded concept SHARK, irrespective of whether the statement is a metaphor or a simile. However, the constructed ad hoc concept will be different in the case of metaphor and in the case of simile. In (18), the lexically-encoded concept SHARK will be simultaneously both broadened to include people who share with sharks such encyclopaedic properties as being vicious, predatory, merciless, aggressive, etc., and narrowed to exclude creatures having fins, sharp teeth, gills, etc., that is literal sharks. The resulting ad hoc concept SHARK* will thus denote a category of vicious, predatory, merciless and aggressive people.

In (19), the lexically-encoded concept SHARK will be broadened, just as in (18); however, there will be no narrowing. This means that the ad hoc concept thus constructed SHARK** will denote a category of both vicious, predatory, merciless and aggressive people, and literal sharks, having fins, sharp teeth and gills (which can also be described as vicious, predatory, merciless and aggressive). Moreover, in such broadenings, the literal shark will be understood as the most salient, prototypical, member of the created category, in a sense, serving as a point of reference. When analysed in this way, similes involve ad hoc concept formation based on category extension: the lexically-encoded concept SHARK serves two functions - gives a name to the whole category and provides the best exemplar of that category. Additionally, the above treatment of metaphor and simile in terms of ad hoc concepts is able to account for intuitions that metaphor, in a sense, involves a higher level of abstraction than simile.

4. Conclusions

I have argued that the existing relevance-theoretic treatment of simile suggested by Carston (2002) is not only intuitively unconvincing, but also faulty, since she seems not to differentiate between similes and literal comparisons. I have tried to show that the ad hoc concept approach to metaphor, by now well-established in relevance theory, is equally applicable to simile. Both metaphors and similes involve the pragmatic broadening of the lexically-encoded concept, which shows why corresponding metaphors and similes are felt to be similar. On the other hand, the difference between the two is due to the operation of another lexical pragmatic process only in the case of metaphors – apart from being broadened, the lexically-encoded concept in a metaphor undergoes narrowing.

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Streszczenie

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie propozycji analizy kategorii porównania przy zastosowaniu metodologii teorii relewancji D. Sperbera i D. Wilson i jej podejścia do pragmatyki leksykalnej. Propozycja ta jest odpowiedzią na analizę przeprowadzoną przez R. Carston (2002), której argumentacja wydaje się nieprzekonująca. Carston dowodzi, że w odróżnieniu od rozumienia zdań metaforycznych, które wymaga stworzenia 'pojęć ad hoc' (ukontekstowionych znaczeń słów różnych od tych zakodowanych), rozumienie porównań odbywa na poziomie znaczeń dosłownych, zakodowanych w użytych słowach. Zdaniem autorki artykułu rozumienie zarówno metafor jak i porównań związane jest z tworzeniem 'pojęć ad hoc', a intuicyjną różnicę w interpretacji metafor i porównań można wyjaśnić różnicą w typach 'pojęć ad hoc'.