

# SEMIOTICS OF SIMILES IN ENGLISH POETIC TEXTS OF CANADIAN POETRY

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The article reveals linguistic, cognitive and semiotic characteristics of simile in English poetic texts of Canadian poetry. Cognitive peculiarities of simile are defined via cognitive and semiotic operation of comparison and reconstruction of concepts and conceptual metaphors which underlie it. The cognitive operation of comparison is aimed at obtaining new knowledge as a result of matching homogeneous or heterogeneous comparable entities. Linguocognitive operations of analogical and narrative mapping are derived from the basic cognitive operation of comparison. Linguocognitive operations of attributive, relational, systems mapping are aimed at clarifying the basis of comparison, which establishes the similarity between subject and object of the simile. Semiotic peculiarities are clarified via identification of cultural codes and word-symbols which are represented in subjective and objective parts of similes. Thus, I view simile as a multifunctional linguistic and semiotic construal representing verbal patterns of form and semantic function. Linguistic and semiotic analysis of similes enables their classification into iconic, indexical and symbolic ones. The semiotic classification of similes is premised on the type of semiotic relation that exists between a “sign vehicle” and its meaning. Iconic similes are based on similarity between a sign and its referent, while indexical similes show relations of contiguity. Symbolic similes are differentiated on the basis of conventional pairing of a signified and a signifier within a simile.

**Keywords:** cognitive and semiotic operation of comparison, simile, iconic simile, indexical simile, symbolic simile

## **1. Introduction**

Comparison is a fundamental cognitive operation of almost all mental processes in human mind [1]. Comparison as a multiple-aspect phenomenon has drawn much attention of philosophers and psychologists. Its verbal representation has been studied in multiple research papers on historical poetics, theoretical poetics, formal poetics, structural and semiotic linguistics, linguopoetics, cognitive linguistics and cognitive poetics.

Modern linguistic studies are focused on defining the character of interconnection between the language and human mind. This tendency requires studying simile as a cognitive and semiotic construct which has two planes – cognitive and semiotic (verbal). Comparison as a cognitive mechanism of coding and structuring knowledge underlies the cognitive plane of simile.

The fusion of linguocognitive and linguosemiotic approaches enables comprehensive analysis of simile according to three semiotic branches – semantics, syntactics and pragmatics – in order to establish cognitive and semiotic peculiarities of its formation and functioning in English poetic texts of Canadian poetry. Consequently, a complex cognitive and semiotic approach allows exploring simile as a multifunctional linguosemiotic construal so as to comprehend and interpret it from a new perspective. Aforesaid explains the *topicality* of the present study.

The *object* of the analysis is similes in Canadian English poetic texts. The *subject matter* of the article is cognitive and semiotic peculiarities of similes functioning in poetic texts of Canadian poetry. The article is *aimed* at identifying features of comparison as a cognitive-semiotic operation and the ways and means of its representation in English poetic texts of Canadian poetry.

### 3. Material and Methods

Comparison as a cognitive operation occurs in accordance with a number of consecutive stages of cognitive processing of information despite uncontrolled and non-purposeful nature of this action. The result of the cognitive operation of comparison is not just a formal inventory of common and distinctive features of two or more subjects, but an acquisition of new knowledge, i.e. inferences [2]. The cognitive operation of comparison as the basic mental action [1] is the basis for linguocognitive operations of analogical and narrative mapping that are verbalized in poetic texts by means of similes.

Linguocognitive operations of analogical and narrative mapping allow projecting a partial structure or features of a source domain (which is the objective part or object of simile) onto partial structure or features of a target domain (which is the subjective part or subject of simile) [3]. This projection can be motivated by real or imaginary similarity of the things being compared which is the result of parabolic [4] and analogical reasoning of the external world [1]. Analogical mapping includes three cognitive subprocesses such as attribute mapping, relational and systems mapping [5], whereas narrative mapping is realized through the procedure of intertextualization [4]. The aforementioned cognitive subskills are aimed at specifying of similarities of the subject and the object of similes. Attribute mapping is aimed to create similarity between the subject and the object of simile on the basis of an attribute of the object: “...*patience / Is longer than the lives of glaciers*” (A. Milton “The natural history of elephants”) [6].

This type of the mappings is “an analogy of the very simplest form” [2] as it allows singling out a particular attribute which is common both to the subject and the object of simile, moreover, the basis of the comparison is shown explicitly (*longer than*). Therefore the process of interpretation is relatively simple and straightforward. It does not require any additional mental effort of the recipient/addressee. Successful interpretation lies in the matching attributes.

Here, we need to capture the fact that many statements of similarity (i.e. similes) depend on some structural or relational isomorphism between the knowledge associated with the two concepts rather than on merely a match of simple attributes. So, relational mapping “plays an important role in structuring our knowledge base

and provides means of identifying elements of one domain via their counterparts in the other.” [3]. According to L.I. Belekova [4] relational mapping should be understood as a projection of similar functions from the object onto the subject of simile, so that both show or evoke similar actions, states and emotions.

Systems mappings or schema mappings (in terms of G. Fauconnier) “operate when a general schema, frame or model is used to structure a situation in context” [3], in other words, some situations or events are projected from the source domain/the object of the simile onto the target domain/the subject.

Semiotic nature of simile is realized concurrently in the semantic, syntactic and pragmatic aspect of semiosis (Yu. S. Stepanov). From the standpoint of the *semantic aspect*, simile is a verbal sign within which a signifier and a signified are united by a certain type of semiotic connection. The type of semiotic connection is determined by the type of relationship that is established between a linguistic sign and its referent. Three types of semiotic connection are discriminated, they are as follows: the relation of similarity (iconic connection), the relation of contiguity (indexical connection) and the relation of conventionality (symbolic connection). The iconic connection between the surface and the inner (conceptual) structure of simile is determined by the relation of similarity. Whereas, the relation of contiguity underlies indexical connection between a verbal sign and its denotatum and symbolic semiotic connection is characterized by the relation of conventionality (by Ch.S. Peirce) which is established between the content of a linguistic sign and its verbal representation.

Simile as a multifunctional linguosemiotic construal may display iconic, indexical and symbolic characteristics based on the relations between a linguistic sign and an object of the conceptualized real world. But the degree of their actualization is varying. According to Ch.S. Peirce’s theory of the sign “icon, index, and symbol mark the scalar movement of the sign from concrete to abstract. ... All three forms participate and interact in the language sign.” [7]. Hence the dominant type of semiotic connection enables to distinguish three types of similes functioning in poetic texts of Canadian poetry: iconic similes, indexical similes and symbolic similes.

#### 4. Result

In the given study there will be given a detailed description of semiotic classification of similes in accordance with the semantic aspect of semiosis. *Iconic similes* are similes in the structure of which a signifier and a signified correlate on the basis of their material, structural or visual similarities [8]. The data analyzed are English poetic texts of Canadian poetry.

Poetry is said to be inherently iconic [7], that is, there is an immediate and close relationship based on similarity between the linguistic structure of a poetic text, and simile in particular, and its meaning. The relation of similarity is crucial in poetry as “in poetry, similarity relations in form are used as cues to the meaning of the poem through poetic devices such as rhyme, semi-rhyme, alliteration, assonance, meter; general repetitions of sounds, syllables, words ... . Far from being subordinated to meaning (as is usually the case in ordinary use of language), in poetry a sound *plays a leading role, operates in full partnership with meaning, and even helps to create meaning*” (Italics mine) [9].

Peculiarities of manifestation of iconic similes depend on the level on which they occur [10]. At the phonetic level iconic similes are discussed in terms of either onomatopoeia or sound symbolism [11], and the iconic sign is taken “to represent its object by imagic similarity to it” [12]. Thus, by inspecting the sign we may gain knowledge of the object.

*Phonetic iconicity* can be either motivated by a sound or by a non-sound. Here it is claimed that there are definite correlations between “certain types of sounds and certain categories of meaning, such as size, movement, feelings and distances” [13]. Phonetic iconicity “then, provides a means for expressing the world of the senses before the conceptualizing mind moves us toward abstraction” [7].

The second type of iconicity – *diagrammatic* – is actualized at the morphological level. According to Peirce, a diagram is a complex sign, representing a complex concept. The essence of a diagram is that the relationship between the parts of a complex sign resembles the relationship between the parts of the concept which it represents [12]. Consequently diagrammatic iconicity consists in a correspondence between morphological and semantic markedness. According to Haiman, “categories that are marked morphologically ... are also marked semantically” [14]. Thus diagrammatic iconicity results from the general “more-form-more-meaning” principle [12].

*Syntactical iconicity* is defined according to three principles recognized by T. Givon [15] and many others [16;4;17]: (1) the quantity principle, (2) the distance principle and (3) the principle of linear order.

Alluding to Peirce an *index* can only indicate its object but it cannot convey any information about its qualities since it “forces the attention to the particular object intended without describing it” [18]. A distinctive feature of the index is its ability to establish a relation of contiguity between an object and a linguistic sign that point to it.

*Indexical simile* is defined as a construal with an index/indices functioning in its structure. To decode indexical similes both linguistic and extralinguistic contexts are required as indices are context sensitive linguistic units whose meaning stable while their reference shifts from utterance to utterance [19]. Their indexical (indicative) function is to regulate correlation of a poetic text including similes with the external world [20].

In the present study we differentiate *pronominal*, *temporal* and *spatial* indexical similes. Pronouns in pronominal indexical similes draw attention of the addressee towards the communicants of the indirect communicative situation, i.e. the poetic text while temporal and spatial indexical similes inform the recipient about time and place parameters of communication.

The third type of signs presented in Peirce’s trichotomy is symbol which is claimed as “the general name or description which signifies its object by means of an association of ideas or habitual connection between the name and the character signified” [18]. It means that the principle of symbolicity refers to the conventional pairing of form and meaning.

In the present study we define *symbolic similes* as verbal complex signs that incorporate three semiotic characteristics – iconicity, indexicality and symbolicity (conventionality) where symbolicity predominates. Symbolic similes should be treated as linguosemiotic construals which contain symbol signs in their structure and

cultural codes are found out in their subjective or objective parts. The analysis of the corpus allowed distinguishing ten cultural codes that are manifested both in the subjective and the objective parts of similes: anthropomorphic, somatic, spiritual, biomorphic, subject (physical), temporal, spatial, astral, color (chromatic) and mythological. The identification of cultural codes makes it possible to study the worldview of the English-speaking Canadian community, which is reflected in the poetic texts by means of similes.

As a result of linguosemiotic analysis we arrive at the conclusion that the dominant cultural codes of the subjective part of symbolic similes are biomorphic, anthropomorphic, spiritual, subject (physical) and somatic. Whereas biomorphic, subject (physical), spiritual and anthropomorphic are the most frequently used cultural codes in the objective part of the similes.

#### **4. Discussion**

Taking into consideration the latest scientific researches in the field of semiotics we underline a unique nature of simile as a linguistic sign. Its singularity lies in a wide range of means of its verbalization. It may occur in the poetic text as a single word, a word combination or even as a whole sentence. This thesis varies from Ch. Pierce's conception which is focused on words as signs and also from R. Langacker's statement that only sentences are true iconic signs. Thus simile is studied as a multifunctional linguosemiotic construal in accordance with three aspects of semiosis – semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic. The semantic aspect of semiosis involves identifying the features of the interaction between the content side and the expression side within a simile as *a complex linguistic sign*. This interaction may be based on the iconic, indexical or symbolic connection.

This profound research of coding of the content side of similes pursuant to semiotic principles enabled us to develop the three-dimensional classification of similes based on the dominant type of the semiotic connection (i.e. iconic, index, symbolic). Owing to this classification it is possible to study peculiarities of addressor's perception of the actual world and the addressee's innate ability to decode it while reading poetic texts.

The identification of cultural codes which are verbalized in the subjects and objects of similes makes it possible to investigate the worldview of English-speaking part of Canadian population and define their national character.

The prospect of the subsequent research is viewed in the study of peculiarities of reflecting Australian worldview in poetic texts.

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