



Me not a good kisser, that's like Mother Theresa, not a good mother. An Analysis of the Hyperbolic like Comparison Construction

ANDREEA ROSCA*
University of Valencia (Spain)

Received: 31/08/2023. Accepted: 28/11/2023.

ABSTRACT

Given the scarcity of research on hyperbole and simile in Cognitive Linguistics, it is important to explore these figures of speech, whose interaction has only been tangentially addressed in this field. Thus, the main aim of the study is to provide a detailed description of hyperbolic *like* comparison constructions by examining the structural and conceptual diversity of the source and target domains, as well as the characteristics of the third component of hyperbolic similes, namely the elaboration. With this objective in mind, we carried out an analysis of 120 examples of hyperbolic similes retrieved from the comedy sitcom *Friends* (1994-2004). Our findings show that the source domains of hyperbolic *like* comparison constructions are both structurally and conceptually more complex than the target domains.

KEYWORDS: Figurative Language; Hyperbole; Simile; Hyperbolic *like* Comparison Construction; Elaboration; TV series.

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite the renewed interest over the last forty years in the theories of figurative language, attention has been primarily focused on the study of the so-called master tropes such as metaphor and irony to the detriment of other figures of speech (Cano Mora, 2011: 15). Although cognitive psychologists have devoted some attention to hyperbole and simile (Gibbs & Colston, 2012; Glucksberg & Haught, 2006), there is little work by cognitive linguists on

**Address for correspondence:* Avenida Blasco Ibáñez, 32, Faculty of Philology, Translation and Communication, University of Valencia, 46010 Valencia, Valencia; e-mail: andreea.rosca@uv.es

these figures, especially in terms of their production and interpretation processes (Peña and Ruiz de Mendoza, 2022; Romano, 2017). Also, both hyperbole and simile have been examined mostly in interaction and contrast with metaphor. Even if some cognitive scholars have addressed the possibility of a relation between hyperbole and simile, the connection between both figures has not been explored in detail (Brdar, 2004; Ruiz de Mendoza, 2020).

To fill these gaps, the current study aims to analyse how hyperbole interacts with simile by providing a thorough description of hyperbolic *like* comparison constructions. This article will mainly deal with the structural and conceptual diversity of the source and target domains as well as the types of reference expressed by the targets of hyperbolic similes. The present research will also pay special attention to the context of use of these constructions by looking at the form and position of the elaboration of hyperbolic similes. To reach these goals, we have examined 120 examples of hyperbolic *like* comparison constructions retrieved from the comedy sitcom *Friends* (1994-2004). The analysis of our data is in consonance with the theoretical framework proposed by Cuenca (2015) and Romano (2017), which will be complemented with insights from Peña and Ruiz de Mendoza (2022), and Ruiz de Mendoza (2022).

We have structured the remainder of the study as follows. Section 2 reviews the previous approaches to both hyperbole and simile, as well as their characterization as constructions. Section 3 explains the data and the methodological steps. Section 4 is devoted to the analysis of the formal and conceptual properties of the sources and targets and the elaboration of hyperbolic *like* comparison constructions. Finally, we offer a summary of the results of our work in Section 5.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Previous approaches to hyperbole

Hyperbole has been studied since late antiquity within the framework of rhetoric. Most rhetoricians were mainly interested, on the one hand, in defining and classifying this trope in relation to other figures, and on the other hand, in analysing its connection to the production of persuasive speech, especially in written texts. In classical rhetoric, Aristotle viewed metaphor as the paradigm trope, which is an analogical process, including figures such as simile, metonymy, personification, and hyperbole. Also, according to Ravazzoli (1978), in modern rhetorical classifications, hyperbole responds to *immutatio*, i.e. a process of meaning change or deviation from ordinary or literal language. As Brdar (2004: 374) noted from Demetrius and Cicero's classifications of hyperbole, the relation between hyperbole and simile can be traced back to antiquity. However, the connection between both, in terms of semantic, syntactic, and discursive properties, has not been pursued in depth.

Psycholinguistic research has also discussed two dimensions of hyperbole: (i) its interaction with other figures of speech, such as irony (e.g. Filippova & Astington, 2010) or metaphor (e.g. Deamer, Pouscoulous & Breheny, 2010), and (ii) the psychological processes involved in the identification and understanding of hyperbole (e.g. Gibbs & Colston, 2012). The first dimension reveals that hyperbole has not been studied as a figure independent of other major tropes while the empirical studies focusing on the second dimension demonstrate that hyperbolic and metaphorical language are significantly distinct from the descriptive and psycholinguistic perspectives (cf. Rubio-Fernández, Wearing & Carston, 2015).

Within the field of pragmatics, various scholars have stressed that context plays a key role in the perception and identification of hyperbole (Cano Mora, 2011). Other authors have examined this figure as a deviation from Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle, which involves flouting the maxims of quantity, quality, or manner. For instance, Norrick (2004) makes a distinction between extreme case formulations, which disregard the truthfulness maxim (e.g. *We live in the greatest place ever*) and non-extreme hyperboles, which violate the quantity maxim (e.g. *I've seen this movie a million times*). However, most pragmaticians do not consider hyperbole to be deceptive as it depends on the joint acceptance between speakers and hearers of a distortion of reality and, unlike a lie, it can be easily recognisable as a semantic and pragmatic violation of literal truth (Fogelin, 1988).

A more recent treatment of hyperbole is offered by cognitive linguists such as Peña and Ruiz de Mendoza (2022), and Ruiz de Mendoza (2020), who view this figure as a cross-domain mapping, like metaphor. Thus, the source domain of the hyperbole represents an unconceivable or highly unrealistic scenario, built on the basis of upscaling a scalar concept. By contrast, the target domain contains a real-world situation, event, or object. For instance, a sentence like *These shoes are killing me* makes use of a hardly conceivable hyperbolic source domain which scales up the gradable concept of pain. The target domain describes a real-world situation in which a person complains about a pair of uncomfortable shoes, which cause them a lot of pain, but will not lead to their death as in the source domain. The mapping allows us to reason about the extent of the person's emotional reaction in terms of the hypothetical reaction in the source domain. Ruiz de Mendoza (2020: 21) has also mentioned that hyperbole can cooperate with metaphor or simile to produce an enhanced meaning impact. The example discussed by this scholar, i.e. *Susan is (like) a saint*, contains a metaphoric source domain describing a saint's behaviour, which is mapped onto a target domain representing Susan's virtuous behaviour. Ruiz de Mendoza (2020) clarifies that the hyperbolic meaning stems from perceiving the woman as if she were a saint, not from the notion of saint itself. The hyperbolic ingredient makes the mapping more powerful, while at the same time signalling the speaker's admiration for Susan.

2.2. Hyperbole as a construction

To discuss constructional hyperbole, we need to first examine previous classifications of this figure. A relatively recent taxonomy is the one provided by Claridge (2011: 49-70), whose main advantage is that it offers a fine-grained analysis of hyperbolic forms extracted from both diachronic and synchronic corpora such as the *British National Corpus (BNC)* and the *Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English (SBC)*. Seven categories of hyperbole are thus put forward:

- a) Single-word hyperbole (e.g. *She's allergic to everything*).
- b) Phrasal hyperbole (e.g. *Losing his job was the end of the world*).
- c) Clausal hyperbole (e.g. *I was the only kid who only had to walk past the bakery to gain weight*).
- d) Numerical hyperbole (e.g. *billions, millions, thousands, etc.*).
- e) Superlative-based hyperbole (e.g. *The faintest noise bothers my uncle*).
- f) Comparison-based hyperbole (e.g. *He trembled and shook like a leaf in a tornado*).
- g) Repetition-based hyperbole (e.g. *loads and loads and loads of it*).

As pointed out by Peña and Ruiz de Mendoza (2022: 190-191), Claridge's (2011) taxonomy is characterized by some weaknesses. For example, the excessive focus on the formal properties of hyperbole results in an undesirable crisscrossing of categories. Thus, the hyperbole grounded in comparison may be realized by means of phrases (e.g. the Adjectival Phrase *older than dinosaurs* as in *This game is older than dinosaurs*) or clauses (e.g. *Gambling must be avoided like the plague*). For this reason, these scholars opt for a broader classification of hyperbole which revolves around the notions of coding and inference. A distinction is made between inferential and constructional hyperbole. A sentence like *I haven't spoken to my sister since we shared a womb* is an example of the former in that the hyperbolic meaning is entirely dependent on contextual incongruity. The hyperbolic import stems from the disproportion created by setting in contrast the literal, magnified context in which two sisters have not talked since their birth with a real-world situation in which the sisters have not spoken for a long time. By contrast, in the case of a constructionally-cued hyperbole, the hyperbolic input is contributed by syntactic elements. A constructional hyperbole is defined as "a highly conventional, cognitively entrenched form-meaning pairing invariably describing a (virtually) impossible or counterfactual state of affairs based on a disproportionately magnified scalar concept" (cf. Peña & Ruiz de Mendoza, 2022: 192). Peña and Ruiz de Mendoza (2022: 192-193) propose the following inventory of common linguistic devices involved in hyperbole:

- 1) Words expressing disproportionately upscaled gradable concepts: nouns (e.g. *eternity*), verbs (e.g. *kill*), adjectives (e.g. *giant*), and adverbs (e.g. *forever*).

- 2) Quantification rendered by means of high cardinal numbers (e.g. *zillions*), amounts (e.g. *tons*), units of measurement (e.g. *gallons*), universal quantifiers (e.g. *every*), and pronouns (e.g. *everywhere*).
- 3) Comparatives displaying syntactic configurations like 'X IS AS/SO ADJECTIVE AS Y' (e.g. *His eyes were as big as saucers*), or 'X IS LIKE Y' (e.g. *The Internet is like an elephant: it never forgets!*).
- 4) Superlatives exhibiting patterns like 'X IS 'THE' ADJECTIVE_{SUP} NOUN IN/OF' (e.g. *The 80s toys were the best of all times*).

As pointed out by Peña and Ruiz de Mendoza (2017: 55), not all the expressions described in (1) to (4) have the same potential to generate constructional hyperboles. Thus, a pattern like *I have told you a million times X* is a more prototypical candidate for hyperbole than *X is as big as Y*. While the former can be easily categorized as a hyperbolic construction, the latter needs heavier textual and contextual analysis to convey hyperbolic meaning effects.

2.3. Previous studies on simile

For many years, theorists adopted the equivalence or comparison view to simile and metaphor, according to which these two figures are twin manifestations of a conceptual process of analogy (cf. Fogelin, 1988; Miller, 1993). The equivalence approach states that simile is a figurative comparison including the marker *like* whereas metaphor is an elliptical simile (e.g. *Life is like a dream* vs. *Life is a dream*).

A growing number of authors have challenged the equivalence assumption by showing that metaphor and simile are characterized by different cognitive, communicative, and discursive functions. Both Cuenca (2015: 147) and Romano (2017: 5-14) summarize the most relevant differences pinpointed in the non-equivalence literature:

- 1) Regarding the cognitive function, Glucksberg and Keysar (1990) argue that similes are assertions of similitude, while metaphors are categorization assertions. Such claim was later corroborated by experimental work carried out by Glucksberg and Haught (2006). Their study reveals that when participants are asked to associate properties to metaphor and simile, they elicit higher-level properties for metaphor and basic-level properties for simile. For a metaphorical expression like *Ideas are diamonds*, subjects listed properties related to the general category of valuable entities (e.g. brilliant, unique). By contrast, the properties associated with the simile counterpart *Ideas are like diamonds* are connected to the actual gem (e.g. rare, desirable, or bright).
- 2) Chiappe, Kennedy and Chiappe (2003) claim that the main difference between metaphor and simile is 'aptness'; i.e. metaphor is preferred when the relationship between source and target is easy to understand and simile is preferred when the

relationship is not so clear. This theory is similar to Bowdle and Gentner's (2005) 'career of metaphor hypothesis', which considers that similes are used to express novel, unfamiliar analogies and metaphors are used for more conventional or familiar sources. The open-ended potential of simile explains why it is often necessary to elaborate on it, often through a whole clause following the simile; e.g. *Trees are like children; training at an early age will influence how they develop.*

- 3) According to Peña and Ruiz de Mendoza (2022: 154), the difference between metaphor and simile lies in how the search for cross-domain similarities is constrained. In the case of metaphor, the search is based on perceptual conspicuity, while in *like* similes the search is constrained by either the context of situation or by the speaker through discourse elaboration. Thus, the metaphor in *He is a shark* is interpreted in connection with the most conspicuous feature of sharks, i.e. their predatory or aggressive nature. Conversely, the simile *He is like a shark* is more open to interpretation in that it can refer to features like voracity, physical strength, ability to swim fast, among others.

2.4. Simile as a construction

At the formal level, a simile is a construction that follows the structure of literal comparisons in that it is composed of two obligatory elements, A and B, linked by the comparison marker *like* (Romano, 2017). As Cuenca (2015: 143) notes, A, which represents the entity described by the simile, is called the target, topic or *comparandum*, whereas B, which constitutes the standard of comparison, is also labelled the source, vehicle or *comparatum*. Although a simile takes the form of a literal comparison, it differs from the latter in that the entities compared belong to different cognitive domains (e.g. literal comparison – *She is like a sister to me* vs. simile [humans and animals] - *She is like a bird*). Additionally, *like* similes may include a third element E, also called elaboration or *tertium comparationis*, which is the property that A and B have in common. Let us exemplify the elements by taking the following sentence uttered by Eleanor Roosevelt:

- (1) *Women are like teabags. We don't know our true strength until we are in hot water!*

In (1), *women* is the target (A), which is likened to the source (B) *teabags*. Given that the source of the comparison is unconventional, the interpretation of the simile can only be fully accessed by reading the elaboration which specifies the property shared by A and B (i.e. *We don't know our true strength until we are in hot water!*).

For Dancygier and Sweetser (2014: 131), similes are grammatical constructions as they are complex compositional linguistic forms which “involve not only combining the formal parts appropriately (putting nouns, verbs, and articles together into a grammatical syntactic form) but also combining the meanings of those forms in a coherent way”. The syntactic

structure 'A is like B' constitutes a grammatical construction whose figurative meaning derives not only from the meaning of the individual components but also from the construction as a whole. A prototypical *like* simile is a comparison formulated as a copula-based predicative sentence. Cuenca (2015: 149) shows that A and B can be realized by means of a noun phrase or a clause, while the elaboration may take the form of a phrase, clause in apposition, subordinate clause, or an independent sentence (or a cluster of sentences).

As the marker *like* in similes activates a comparative reading, Dancygier and Sweetser (2014) also labelled them '*like* comparison constructions', which is the term that we will use in our study. For these authors, this marker draws the interlocutor's attention to "the need to find a pattern linking the source and the target, and to construe that linking in an asymmetric way: the target domain is "compared" to the source and construed in terms of it, not the other way round" (Dancygier & Sweetser, 2014: 146-147).

Lastly, Moder (2008) introduced the distinction between narrow-scope and broad-scope similes. The former focus on specific aspects of the entity described (A) and evoke vivid or exaggerated examples of a perceptual pattern. For the sake of illustration, let us consider the sentence *There were so many children that the room buzzed like a beehive*. The common attribute between the source domain (the beehive) and target domain (the room) is noise. This element is enhanced through the mapping onto its counterpart element in the source domain, viz. the noisy beehive. It can be highlighted that the source domain evokes a more conspicuous or hyperbolic example representing the same attribute. On the other hand, the main characteristic of broad-scope similes is that they do not provide enough information to identify the aspect or attribute that is brought into focus. The nature of the mappings between the target and the source are explained by means of an elaboration that follows the simile. An example of a broad-scope simile is the sentence *Life is like a boomerang: What goes around comes around*. Lastly, it could be argued that the open-ended potential of similes seems to be inherited only by broad-scope similes whose verbal slot, realized by the verb *to be*, cannot constrain the interpretation of the simile. In the case of a narrow-scope simile like [...] *the room buzzed like a beehive*, the elaboration or the property shared by the source and target domains is already encoded in the verbal slot of the simile. The verb *buzz*, which refers to a low, continuous humming sound, like the one produced by a bee, restricts the open-ended set of features to apply to the target domain to a single one, namely that of noise.

3. METHODOLOGY: CORPUS AND DATA ANALYSIS

The main goal of the present research is to provide a description of hyperbolic *like* comparison constructions in the television sitcom *Friends* with the aim of showing the structural and conceptual diversity of the source, target domains, and the elaboration of hyperbolic similes as well as their discursive characteristics. To the best of our knowledge, there are no previous studies that have explored in depth constructions based on a combination between the figures

of hyperbole and simile. To achieve this goal, the current work examines 120 examples of hyperbolic *like* comparison constructions extracted from the ten seasons of the American TV series *Friends*, aired on NBC from 1994 to 2004. The size of the corpus of analysis consists of 876,943 words. This sitcom was chosen due to its high productivity of hyperbole in comparison with several other successful shows. The plot of the sitcom follows the lives of a tight-knit group of friends living in Manhattan: Rachel Green, Phoebe Buffay, Monica Geller, Ross Geller, Joey Tribbiani and Chandler Bing.

Also, most research scholars have been concerned with similes that take the form ‘A is like B’, where the verb slot is mainly realized by the verb *to be* (Cuenca, 2015; Romano, 2017). Our sample of examples is more comprehensive in that it also includes copular verbs, other than the verb *to be*, namely *feel*, *look*, *seem*, *sound*, or *taste* (e.g. *I felt like Gulliver around that place* [S02E22]). To ensure representativeness in the sample of hyperbolic *like* comparison constructions, we incorporated other types of verbs such as *blow up*, *bruise*, *chatter*, *follow*, *jump*, *see* or *treat*, among others (intransitive use of the verb *bruise*, e.g. *I would, but I bruise like a peach* [S09E05]). In our sample, the verbal slot can also be filled by verbs used in negative forms (e.g. *Well at least all my songs don't taste like garlic* [S09E19]) or verbs used in various tenses, not only the present tense (e.g. *It'll be like I have a wife in the fifties!* [S04E06]).

Regarding the methodology employed, searches were made using the software AntConc. AntConc is a standalone lexicographic tool suitable for linguistic analysis of texts. Although there are other concordance software packages available, AntConc has a freeware license, and includes a user-friendly intuitive graphical interface with a comprehensive set of features, e.g. a concordancer, word and keyword frequency generators, tools for cluster and lexical bundle analysis, and a word distribution plot (cf. Anthony, 2005; Kilgarriff and Kosem, 2012). As our intention was to cover a wide range of hyperbolic *like* comparison constructions, we only searched for the keyword *like* in the corpus. This general search returned hundreds of examples, out of which we discarded: (i) examples which did not qualify as comparative constructions, (ii) repeated examples, or (iii) literal comparisons. To illustrate, consider the following sentence *I just thought it [the robot] was going to be like a really cool robot, y'know? Like the terminator [...]* (S06E21). Such an example was not included in our sample as it is an instance of a literal comparison, i.e. both the target (A – *robot*) and the source (B – *the terminator*) belong to the same conceptual domain. In addition, we read carefully through the transcripts to take into account the whole scene. The examination of the entire context helped us identify the target domain and decide whether the example was hyperbolic or not. A sentence like *Wow, it is true what they say, pregnant bellies look like a drum* (S04E18) was removed from our initial sample as it does not involve any exaggeration. Watching the episodes enabled us to eliminate confusing examples from our sample. We also discovered that some constructions only appeared in the transcripts, but not in the episodes, for which they

were also discarded. In some cases, we used the Internet to document ourselves about the cultural references included in the source domains of the constructions under scrutiny and thus, decide whether these examples were valid or not. An example of a cultural reference is provided by Monica's remark *It's like cocktails in Appalachia* (S01E05). In this episode, Joey tricks Monica into going with him on a double-date. He tells Monica that their companions Bob and Angela are siblings and that she will be on a date with Bob. In fact, Joey organizes this date to separate Angela, his ex-girlfriend, from her current boyfriend, Bob. Monica, who feels shocked by Angela and Bob's flirtatious behaviour, uses the cultural term *Appalachia*, which refers to a region in the United States famous for its incestuous relationships.

Concerning the data analysis, we followed Cuenca (2015) and Romano (2017) to discuss the formal and conceptual properties of hyperbolic *like* comparison constructions. Thus, we started by examining the grammatical and semantic variation of the target and source domains of the constructions under consideration and then, we analysed how or whether the elaboration is expressed in the dialogues. For the interpretation of the constructions, we have also drawn insights from work carried out by other cognitive linguists such as Peña and Ruiz de Mendoza (2022), and Ruiz de Mendoza (2022).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Formal and conceptual properties of sources and targets

This section will start by presenting the most relevant formal properties of the sources and targets of the hyperbolic *like* comparison constructions in our corpus. Table 1 below shows the most frequent syntactic structures encountered in our sample. Four major syntactic configurations were found in the data: (1) NP [Noun Phrase] *is/VP [Verb Phrase] (not) like* NP; (2) NP *is/VP (not) like* Clause; (3) Clause *is/VP (not) like* Clause, and (4) Clause *is/VP (not) like* NP. Noun phrases were classified as definite (def), indefinite (indef) or as zero (NP0), where the noun is not preceded by an article.

Table 1. Syntactic nature of sources and targets.

Structure	Raw frequency	% total	Example
1.NP <i>is/VP (not) like</i> NP	76	63.33%	
NP _{def} ¹ <i>is/VP (not) like</i> NP _{def}	2	1.67%	[...] that's when it hit me: how much <i>Barry looks like Mr. Potato Head</i> . (S01E01)
NP _{def} <i>is/VP (not) like</i> NP _{indef}	1	0.83%	I mean <i>the whole weekend was like a dream</i> . (S04E14)
NP0 <i>is/VP (not) like</i> NP _{indef}	38	31.67%	No! No, <i>you smell like a meadow</i> . (S05E16)

NP0 is/VP (not) like NP0	27	22.50%	Oh Maria. You can't say no to her, <i>she's like this lycra spandex covered gym...treat.</i> (S04E04)
NP0 is/VP (not) like NP _{def}	8	6.67%	This is where they get out stains! Okay? <i>This is like Disneyland for me.</i>
2. NP is/VP (not) like Clause	36	30.00%	Because it's Richard's son! <i>It's like inviting Greek tragedy over for dinner!</i> (S04E08)
3. Clause is/VP (not) like Clause	3	2.50%	I didn't want him to start <i>yelling at me like I was some '74 Latour.</i> (S08E08)
4. Clause is/VP (not) like NP	5	4.17%	Well, I'm telling everyone about you! <i>That's the only way to explain the underwear and the video camera that doesn't make me look like a pig!</i> (S05E09)
TOTAL	120	100.00%	

The data gathered in Table reveals that the order of frequency of structural configurations is as follows: nominal-structure hyperbolic *like* comparison constructions (63.33%), mixed-structure hyperbolic *like* comparison constructions – NP *is/VP (not) like* Clause and Clause *is/VP (not) like* NP – (34.17%), and lastly, clause-structure hyperbolic *like* comparison constructions (2.50%). As regards the nominal structures, the only configurations that were not found in our corpus were NP_{def} *is/VP (not) like* NP0 and NP_{indef} *is/VP (not) like* NP_{indef}. In terms of frequency, the most recurrent nominal groups are NP0 *is/VP (not) like* NP_{indef} and NP0 *is/VP (not) like* NP0.

A closer scrutiny of the data indicates that targets are realized by simple Noun Phrases (92.50%), complex Noun Phrases (4.17%), and clauses (3.33%). This suggests that most target domains have a very simple structure, they are either personal or demonstrative pronouns (e.g. *you, it, they, that*) or simple noun heads preceded by deictic determiners (e.g. *that guy, your hair*). The simplicity of the target domain makes it evident that the first element (A) of the hyperbolic *like* comparison construction can be retrieved from the immediate context and can be easily processed by the interlocutor or the sitcom viewer. Regarding the syntactic realizations of the sources, these are as follows: complex Noun Phrases (37.50%), clauses (31.67%), and simple Noun Phrases (30.83%). Therefore, it can be argued that the sources show more syntactic complexity than the targets (69.17% vs. 7.5%). For instance, the source domains can occur in formally complex configurations, such as premodified Noun Phrase structures (e.g. *You can't say no to her, she's like this lycra spandex covered gym...treat* [S04E04]), postmodified Noun Phrase structures (e.g. *Me not a good kisser, that's like, like Mother Theresa, not a good mother* [S02E24]), Noun Phrases undergoing both premodification and postmodification (e.g. *[...] you jump like a young bronco coming out of*

a chute for the first time [S09E13]) and complex sentences or clauses (e.g. *Yeah, it's like someone literally wrote down my worst nightmare and then charged me \$32 to see it!* [S04E13]). As the source domains demand higher cognitive processing, it is normal that the target domains have been considerably simplified, at least structurally speaking. It may also be argued that the complexity of the source domains obeys the End-Weight Principle, according to which there is a tendency for long and complex elements to be placed towards the end of a clause. As Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad and Edward (1999: 898) put it, “[t]his eases comprehension by the receiver, who does not then have the burden of retaining complex information from earlier in a clause in short-term memory while processing the remainder”. We also agree with Cuenca’s (2015: 152) claim that the greater complexity of the source domain reflects “the descriptive function that characterizes similes, which relies on the evocative power of the source”.

Let us now discuss the conceptual properties of the sources and targets of the hyperbolic *like* comparison constructions in our sample. Thus, the sources and targets may be represented by stable discrete entities, dynamic entities, and predications. Examples of stable discrete entities are people, objects, locations, and social entities or institutions. Dynamic entities refer to relationships, activities, processes, situations, and events.

(2) *Oh, it's just like a bloodbath in here today.* (S03E08)

Rachel’s utterance in (2) contains two instances of dynamic entities. On the one hand, the target domain (*it*) points to an unpleasant situation that occurs in the episode, i.e. Monica accidentally bumps her nephew’s head into a post and then rips off a teddy bear’s head to take off its hat to cover Ben’s lump. On the other hand, the source domain (*a bloodbath*) alludes to an unreal hyperbolic event in which many people are killed in a violent manner.

Predications are complex constructions that include a verb, usually accompanied by one or more arguments. In (3), the target (*I*) is a discrete entity whereas the source (*I was in a coffin*), which illustrates an unreal situation, can be considered a predication.

(3) [...] *It was funny 'til I started feeling like I was in a coffin* (S04E02)

Table 2 below summarizes the semantic nature of the domains being mapped in the hyperbolic *like* comparison constructions in our corpus.

Table 2. Semantic nature of source and target domains.

Entities compared: Target - Source	Raw frequency	% total	Example
1. Discrete entity - Discrete entity	41	34.17%	[...] <i>they're</i> [my friends] <i>like-coyotes</i> , picking off the weak members of the herd (S01E03)
2. Discrete entity - Dynamic entity	13	10.83%	Mrs. Geller: (Looking around at the chapel.) Oh my God! <i>It's like a fairyland</i> (S04E23)
3. Dynamic entity - Discrete entity	1	0.83%	Oh, Jack Bing. I love that. Ooh, <i>it sounds like a '40s newspaper guy</i> , you know? (S10E17)
4. Dynamic entity - Dynamic entity	8	6.67%	Oh, <i>it's just like a bloodbath</i> in here today. (S03E08)
5. Discrete entity - Predication	12	10.00%	[...] It was funny 'til <i>I started feeling like I was in a coffin</i> . (S04E02)
6. Dynamic entity - Predication	3	2.50%	Phoebe: Oh, <i>it's [the interview] like the mother ship is calling you home</i> . (S01E18)
7. Predication - Discrete/Dynamic entity	18	15.00%	Ugly Naked Guy is using his new hammock. <i>It's like a Play-Doh Fat Factory</i> . (S03E08)
8. Predication - Predication	24	20.00%	Monica: I can cook and you can take care of the money. Phoebe: Yeah. Oh! <i>It'll be like I have a wife in the fifties!</i> (S04E06)
Total	120	100.00%	

As illustrated in the table above, eight types of semantic correspondences were identified, out of which the most frequent are: discrete entity - discrete entity (34.17%), predication – predication (20%), and predications combined with either discrete or dynamic entity (15%). Concerning the semantic nature of the targets, the order of frequency of the concepts they represent is the following: discrete entities (55%), predications (35%), and dynamic entities (10%). The frequency of the semantic types representing the sources is as follows: discrete entities (40%), predications (33.33%), and dynamic entities (26.67%). These figures demonstrate that the source domains are conceptually more complex than the target domains (60% vs. 45%). The examination of the syntactic and semantic nature of the targets and sources shows that the source domains of hyperbolic *like* comparison constructions are both structurally and conceptually more complex than the target domains.

Despite the structural simplicity of most targets (i.e. they are mainly realized by either personal or demonstrative pronouns), it can be argued that their conceptual interpretation largely depends on whether the hearer and/or sitcom viewer can correctly identify the referents of these targets. Cognitive accessibility may be hindered when the target needs to be

anaphorically retrieved from a previous intervention made by an interlocutor other than the user of the hyperbolic simile. In (4), the target *it* in Phoebe's speech refers back to Rachel's earlier enthusiastic contributions, i.e. obtaining an interview at Saks Fifth Avenue. Processing this target correctly involves performing a grammar-cued cognitive operation which consists of a search and retrieval of the referent from a pre-existing "file" in episodic memory (cf. Givón, 1995: 50).

- (4) Rachel: Oh! I got an interview! I got an interview!
 Monica: You're kidding! Where? Where?
 Rachel: (in disbelief): Saks... Fifth... Avenue.
 Monica: Oh, Rachel!
 Phoebe: Oh, it's like the mother ship is calling you home.

Cognitive accessibility may also be affected by the referential distance of the referent, or its anaphoric gap, that is "the number of clauses separating its present occurrence from its last occurrence in the preceding text" (Givón, 1995: 79). Exceptionally, the anaphoric referent cannot be found in the dialogue where the hyperbolic simile is used and thus, needs to be traced back to an earlier scene. For the sake of illustration, consider the sentence *I mean, you had me thinkin it was like a fleet* (S02E18). The hyperbolic *like* comparison construction is uttered by Richard in a conversation with his girlfriend Monica. Here, the target (*it*) can be retrieved from a previous scene in the episode in which Phoebe tells Richard the following: *I just wanna say that of all the guys that Monica has been with, and that is a lot, I like you the best*. Thus, the pronoun *it* refers to the number of men Monica was involved with prior to her relationship with Richard.

A small caveat is in order here about the syntax of some targets and how this affects the structural configuration of the whole hyperbolic *like* comparison construction. For the sake of clarity, let us take Ross' statement addressed to Rachel, e.g. *That you would treat her like some kind of showdog is inexcusable!* (S10E08). The target of the hyperbolic simile is the Direct Object of the transitive verb 'to treat', viz. *her*. This object pronoun makes reference to Emma, Ross and Rachel's daughter, who was made to participate in a baby beauty contest by her mother. The hyperbolic *like* comparison construction (e.g. She [A] is treated like some kind of showdog [B]) needs to be reconfigured from the intricate syntactic pattern of the *that* cleft sentence in which it is embedded.

Surprisingly enough, some targets together with their verbs are even absent from the text and as a result, the hyperbolic simile needs to be reconstructed by merging two sentences. Let us focus on the dialogue below:

- (5) Phoebe: Can you totally see through her shirt?
 Mike: *Like an X-Ray*. Bad day not to wear a bra.

In (5), the *like* marker and the source of the hyperbolic *like* comparison construction (*an X-Ray*) are mentioned in Mike's discourse. The target and its accompanying verb (*see*) can be retrieved from Phoebe's previous question. Thus, the hyperbolic simile is reassembled by combining Phoebe's and Mike's sentences, e.g. I can see through her (Monica's) shirt like an X-Ray.

Finally, the conceptual complexity of the hyperbolic *like* comparison construction arises from the fact that the mapping involves more than one element. Consider Joey's hyperbolic simile in *Can you believe that? Me not a good kisser, that's like, like Mother Theresa, not a good mother* (S02E24). In this example, the target *that* is explicitly mentioned within the same sentence, i.e. *me, not a good kisser*. The target is composed of the pronoun *me* which refers to the speaker, Joey, and the apposition *not a good kisser*, which offers a negative description of the person being compared. Joey's statement is an example of what Ruiz de Mendoza (2022) calls an *analogy-based simile*, whose similarity judgement takes the skeletal form *A is to B as C is to D* (so A is C). Even if this hyperbolic simile is expressed negatively, it needs to be interpreted positively as follows: Joey (A) is as good at kissing (B) as Mother Theresa (C) is at doing charitable work (D). From this, it results that Joey (A) is like Mother Theresa (C). The proper noun *Mother Theresa* triggers the metonymy CATEGORY FOR DEFINING PROPERTY (cf. Kövecses and Radden, 1998: 54), whereby the person Mother Theresa of Calcutta is made to stand for her essential attribute, namely kindness or thirsting love for humanity.

4.2. The elaboration

In this section we will deal with the elaboration, which is an optional element of a simile. As mentioned earlier, it denotes the property that the target and the source have in common and that allows the comparison between both. Most of the hyperbolic *like* comparison constructions in our corpus (92.50%) are non-conventional in the sense that the mappings between the target and the source domains do not contain highly institutionalized knowledge. As the presence of the elaboration or explanation is associated with the unlikelihood of the analogy between the target and the source, i.e. with unconventional similes (cf. Roncero, Kennedy and Smyth, 2006), we hypothesized that most constructions in our corpus will be accompanied by an elaboration. Contrary to this claim, 61.67% of the hyperbolic *like* comparison constructions in our corpus are not joined by any kind of elaboration. Such a discovery does not seem to corroborate Cuenca (2015) and Romano's (2017) findings according to which elaboration is a highly frequent component and a key element in the production and interpretation of similes. The difference in results may be motivated by the fact that the genre investigated varies in each case. While Cuenca (2015) and Romano (2017) focus on similes in Catalan and English opinion discourse (news, interviews, commentary sections,

blogs, comments to news), our study analyses hyperbolic similes in an American English comedy sitcom.

We will start by briefly discussing those cases in which hyperbolic *like* comparison constructions are elaborated (38.33%). Elaborations may occupy different positions with respect to the hyperbolic simile and they are usually realized by means of independent sentences. For instance, the elaboration in our corpus is most frequently placed before the hyperbolic comparative structure, as in (6):

(6) Monica: I can cook and you can take care of the money.

Phoebe: Yeah. Oh! *It'll be like I have a wife in the fifties!* (S04E06)

In the scene in (6), Monica suggests that she and Phoebe partner up to start their own catering business. The elaboration uttered by Monica briefly explains the roles that each would play in the catering partnership: Monica would cook whereas Phoebe would administer the money. The source domain of the hyperbolic simile (i.e. *I have a wife in the fifties*) draws a parallel between Monica's role in the partnership and the role played by women in the fifties in a prototypical American household.

The second most common position for elaboration is immediately after the hyperbolic *like* comparison construction.

(7) Ross: ... can't a guy send a barbershop quartet to his girlfriend's office anymorrre!!

Rachel: Oh, please, Ross it was so obvious! *It was like you were marking your territory. I mean you might have well have just come in and peed all around my desk!* (S03E12)

The hyperbolic simile in (7) is grounded in the metaphor PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS whereby Ross' romantic gesture for his girlfriend (i.e. sending Rachel a barbershop quartet to her office to sing her a song) is equated to a dog's territorial behaviour. Usually, dogs urine mark places to claim a territory. In a similar vein, out of jealousy towards Rachel's handsome colleague Mark, Ross starts to shower her with excessive love demonstrations at her workplace (e.g. sends her numerous love cards and flowers). The underlined elaboration further clarifies that Rachel is comparing Ross' behaviour to that of a dog.

Occasionally, an elaboration is constructed by combining information that is located both before and after the hyperbolic *like* comparison construction. Consider Monica's cluster of sentences, e.g. *I bring a guy home, and within five minutes they're all over him. I mean, they're like- coyotes, picking off the weak members of the herd* (S01E03). The sentence *within five minutes they're all over him* provides information about the target, i.e. her friends' behaviour toward her dates. The non-finite clause *picking off the weak members of the herd* explicitly makes reference to the source, i.e. the coyotes' savage behaviour towards the weak

members of their pack. Thus, the coyotes' physical aggression directed at the weaker members is similar to the verbal aggression displayed by Monica's friends towards her dates.

The absence of the elaboration may be accounted for by several factors:

- a) The conventionality of the hyperbolic simile, e.g. [...] *at first, I thought she was hot, but now she's like old news!* (S06E10). As the viewer is familiar with this type of comparative construction, the common property between the source and the target can be easily inferred. If someone is old news, it means that you no longer find them worthy of your attention.
- b) The clarity or commonness of the concepts expressed by both the source and the target, e.g. *It's like you're a cave person* (S08E20). This hyperbolic simile is used by Rachel's mother who thinks that her daughter not hiring a nanny for her newborn baby girl is acting as a primitive person.
- c) The support of the visual context, e.g. *It's like a baby caterpillar chasing its mama!* (S09E13). In this scene, Joey has just arrived home from the beauty salon where he went to get his eyebrows waxed. As the treatment hurt very badly, he left after the first one was plucked. No elaboration is needed as the visual input of Joey's face clearly explains Chandler's mocking hyperbolic simile.
- d) The aid of either or both contextual and cultural knowledge, e.g. *Oh, it's [Rachel's interview at Saks Fifth Avenue] like the mother ship is calling you home* (S01E18). To be able to understand Phoebe's hyperbolic *like* comparison construction, the viewer needs both cultural and contextual information. On the one hand, the viewer needs to be familiar with the cultural referent used in the construction, viz. Saks Fifth Avenue. This name refers to an American luxury department store which is headquartered in New York City. On the other hand, the viewer needs contextual information to identify the aspects that underlie the hyperbolic similarity. From previous episodes, we know that Rachel loves fashion and has always wanted to work in this industry. Thus, Rachel obtaining a job interview at Saks is likened to a smaller ship returning to the base or headquarters, namely the mother ship, which is a large vehicle that carries other smaller vehicles.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The present research intended to fill existing research gaps such as the interaction between two figures of speech whose study has been largely overlooked, namely hyperboles and similes. As the bulk of previous approaches has mostly focused on an exploration of the comprehension processes and the relation of these figures with metaphor, the current investigation set out to understand the production and interpretation processes of hyperbolic similes, also called hyperbolic *like* comparison constructions. Although the relationship between hyperbole and

simile has been tangentially addressed since antiquity (Brdar, 2004), such a connection deserves to be explored in more depth and especially in context.

This article has thus offered an extensive description of hyperbolic *like* comparison constructions by examining the formal and conceptual features of their source and target domains and by analysing the characteristics of the third component of hyperbolic similes, namely the elaboration. We carried out an analysis of 120 examples of hyperbolic *like* comparison constructions that were carefully selected from the ten seasons of the American comedy sitcom *Friends* (1994-2004).

At the structural level, the most recurrent configurations were the nominal-structure and mixed-structure (i.e. a combination between clauses and noun phrases) hyperbolic *like* comparison constructions. The analysis of the syntactic and semantic nature of the sources and targets has shown that the source domains of hyperbolic similes are both grammatically and conceptually more complex than the target domains. These results are consistent with Cuenca's (2015) findings according to which the greater complexity of the sources is motivated by the descriptive function of similes. We also argue that the complexity of the sources complies with the End-Weight Principle whereby heavier elements tend to be placed at the end of a clause. Our study has also revealed that even if the targets of hyperbolic similes are structurally simpler, their conceptual interpretation is inextricably linked to the correct identification of the referents of these targets on the part of the hearer and/or sitcom viewer. Additionally, the cognitive accessibility to these referents may sometimes be hindered by two factors: (i) the use of the antecedent by an interlocutor other than the user of the hyperbolic simile; and (ii) the use of a greater anaphoric gap between the target and its antecedent which be traced back to an earlier scene in the episode.

Moreover, our work does not corroborate Cuenca (2015) and Romano's (2017) claims related to the high frequency of elaboration in similes. In fact, most of our hyperbolic *like* comparison constructions are not accompanied by any kind of elaboration, despite being unconventional. This dissimilarity may be explained by the fact that these previous studies focus on a different genre, namely opinion discourse texts. In our corpus, the absence of the elaboration of hyperbolic similes may be justified by: (i) the use of conventional hyperbolic similes; (ii) the clarity or the ordinariness of the sources and targets; (iii) the contribution of the visual context, and (iv) the reliance of the viewer on contextual and cultural knowledge.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This publication is part of the R&D&i project Grant PID2020-118349GB-I00 funded by MICIU/AEI/10.13039/501100011033.

NOTES

ⁱ The category of NP_{def} also includes proper nouns.

REFERENCES

- Amundsen, M. (2015). *On the Road: Jack Kerouac's Epic Autoethnography*. *Suomen Antropologi: Journal of the Finish Anthropological Society*, 40(3), 31–44.
- Anthony, L. (2005). AntConc: A Learner and Classroom Friendly, Multi-Platform Corpus Analysis Toolkit. *Proceedings of IWLeL 2004: An Interactive Workshop on Language e-Learning*, 7–13.
- Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech, G., Conrad, S., and Edward, F. (1999). *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*. Harlow: Pearson Education.
- Bowlde, B. F., & Gentner, D. (2005). The career of metaphor. *Psychological Review*, 112(1), 193–216.
- Brdar, M. (2004). How pure is the pure hyperbole? The role of metonymic mappings in the construction of some hyperbolic effects. In D. Kučanda, M. Brdar & B. Berić (Eds.), *Teaching English for life. Studies to honour Prof. Elvira Petrović on the occasion of her 70th birthday* (pp. 373–385). Osijek: Filozofski Fakultet.
- Cano Mora, L. (2011). *This book will change your life! Hyperbole in spoken English*. Valencia: Publicacions de la Universitat de València.
- Chiappe, D., Kennedy, J., & Chiappe, P. (2003). Aptness is more important than comprehensibility in preference for metaphors and similes. *Poetics*, 31, 51–68.
- Claridge, C. (2011). *Hyperbole in English: A corpus-based study of exaggeration*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511779480>
- Cuenca, M. J. (2015). Beyond compare: Similes in interaction. *Review of Cognitive Linguistics*, 13(1), 140–166. <https://doi.org/10.1075/rcl.13.1.06cue>
- Dancygier, B., & Sweetser, E. (2014). *Figurative Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Deamer, F., Pouscoulous, N., & Breheny, R. (2010). A contrastive look at metaphor and hyperbole. *UCL Working Papers in Linguistics*, 22, 1–15.
- Filippova, E., & Astington, J. W. (2010). Children's understanding of social-cognitive and social communicative aspects of discourse irony. *Child Development*, 81(3), 913–928. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01442.x>
- Fogelin, R. J. (1988). *Figuratively Speaking*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Givón, T. (1995). *Functionalism and Grammar*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Glucksberg, S., & Keysar, B. (1990). Understanding metaphorical comparisons: Beyond similarity. *Psychological Review*, 97, 3–18.
- Glucksberg, S., & Haught, C. (2006). On the relation between metaphor and simile: When comparison fails. *Mind & Language*, 21(3), 360–378.
- Gibbs, R. W., Jr., & Colston, H. L. (2012). *Interpreting figurative language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139168779>
- Grice, H. P. (1975). Logic and conversation. In P. Cole & J. L. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Acts* (pp. 41–58). New York: Academic Press.
- Kilgarriff, A., & Kosem, I. (2012). Corpus tools for lexicographers. In S. Granger, & M. Paquot (Eds.), *Electronic Lexicography* (pp. 31–55). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kövecses, Z., & Radden, G. (1998). Metonymy: Developing a cognitive linguistic view. *Cognitive Linguistics* 9(1), 37–77.
- Miller, G. A. (1993). Images and models, similes and metaphors. In A. Ortony (Ed.), *Metaphor and thought* (2nd ed.) (pp. 357–400). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139173865.019>
- Moder, C. L. (2008). It's like making soup: metaphors and similes in spoken news discourse. In A. Tyler, Y. Kim, & A. Takada (Eds.), *Language in the context of use: Discourse and cognitive approaches to language* (pp. 301–320). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

- Norrick, N. R. (2004). Hyperbole, extreme case formulation. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 36(9), 1727-1739. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2004.06.006>
- Peña, M. S., & Ruiz de Mendoza, F. J. (2022). *Figuring out Figuration: A cognitive linguistic account*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins. <https://doi.org/10.1075/ftl.14>
- Ravazzoli, F. (1978). I meccanismi linguistici dell'iperbole. In L. Ritter Santini & E. Raimondi (Eds.), *Retorica e critica letteraria* (pp. 69-86). Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Romano, M. (2017). Are similes and metaphors interchangeable? A case study in opinion discourse. *Review of Cognitive Linguistics*, 15(1), 1-33. <https://doi.org/10.1075/rcl.15.1.01rom>
- Roncero, C., Kennedy, J., & Smyth, R. (2006). Similes on the Internet have Explanations. *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, 13(1), 74-77.
- Rubio-Fernández, P., Wearing, C., & Carston, R. (2015). Metaphor and hyperbole: Testing the continuity hypothesis. *Metaphor and Symbol*, 30(1), 24-40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10926488.2015.980699>
- Ruiz de Mendoza, F. J. (2020). Understanding figures of speech: Dependency relations and organizational patterns. *Language & Communication*, 71, 16-38. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2019.12.002>
- Ruiz de Mendoza, F. J. (2022). Analogical and non-analogical resemblance in figurative language: a cognitive-linguistic perspective. In S. Wuppuluri, & A. C. Grayling (Eds.), *Metaphors and analogies in sciences and humanities: Words and worlds* (pp. 269-293). London & New York: Springer.