

Cross-cultural Study for Similes in English and Arabic

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Abstract

Contrastive linguistics is a vital and flourishing branch of linguistics. Within this field languages, are investigated, or more precisely, the level of languages are examined and compared with each other in order to find similarities and differences. The current study is a contrastive study between Arabic and English languages and examines the phenomena of similes within these two languages. The focus in the current study was on four adjectives namely: tough, sure, dry, and silent. In order to find frequencies for the previous adjectives within similes in English, BNC corpora were used where a questionnaire was distributed to some students asking about the use of certain adjectives as similes in the Arabic language. The results show that both English and Arabic use these adjectives. However, though there maybe be some similarities in how these similes are used by both languages, most of them are used in are used in different ways relying on the cultural differences.

Introduction

A simile is a figure of speech that is used in general language accompanying in the specialized language of everyday conversation, and in literary, journalistic and promotional texts. The use of simile is an ancient rhetorical device that has been practiced from the Bible to contemporary texts. Furthermore, it is a semantic figure based on comparison (Bredin 1998), a mental process playing a central role in the way we think and talk about the world, which often associates different spheres. A simile can be defined as the statement of a similarity relation between two entities, essentially different but thought to be alike in one or more respects, or a non-similarity relation. It has a tripartite structure (Fromilhague, 1995), consisting of the topic or “comparandum” - the entity described by the simile; the vehicle or “comparatum” - the entity to which the topic is compared - usually accompanied by a comparison marker; and similarity feature(s) - the properties shared by topic and vehicle - which can be expressed explicitly or left unsaid. Moreover, the entities compared can be persons, objects or processes.

Going even further, similes can fulfill various functions (Fromilhague, 1995). First, they serve to communicate concisely and efficiently: they are one of a set of linguistic devices (figures of speech) which extend the linguistic resources available. Secondly, they can function as cognitive tools for thought in that they enable us to think of the world in novel, alternative ways; namely, they can create relations of similarity. In discourse, they can also fulfill more specific functions depending on the textual genre in which they occur. In scientific texts, comparison and analogical reasoning play an important role as well.

When it comes to classifying similes, scholars have applied variety of criteria in doing so. A basic distinction is that seen between objective similes originating from concrete physical experience, and subjective similes, stemming from individual association mechanisms, or in other words, “actually seeing as” versus “thinking as” (Fromilhague 1995). Another classification is that grounded in the semantic distinction between literal and non-literal comparisons (Ortony 1993), even though the use of simile is a much less investigated means of figurative language than the use of metaphor, the two go hand-in-hand in that, by studying one, we are also kind of studying the other one at the same time. Both metaphor and simile are forms of comparison, which means that both have a third element with which something is compared. The most basic difference between them lies in how the comparison is carried out; similes usually operate with such specific markers as “like” or “as” while metaphors can be created using these markers or without using them at all.

Conversely, metaphor is a broader term where, in a literal sense, a metaphor is an imaginative way of describing something from a philosophical point of view; that is to say, a metaphor is one way of perceiving and shaping the world around us. The opposition between metaphor and simile was first established by Aristotle. He suggested that the two patterns differ rather insignificantly. As David Cooper suggests, similes are metaphors with the only difference being that they use words such as “like” or “as” (Cooper, 1986). In other words, a simile makes the comparison explicit.

One of the most significant studies was conducted by Novoselec and Parizoska (2012) when they investigated similes with reference to the differences and similarities in English, Swedish, and Croatian. The focus of their study was to investigate the form of similes in each language. The study also analyzed the frequencies for the adjectives in each simile and their meanings. Novoselec and Parizoska (2012) noticed that the structures of simile are similar in English, Swedish and Croatian. Moreover, simile mechanisms underlie similar processes and meaning in these languages with different levels of conventionality.

In another study, Nguyen, T. N., & Zuckermann, G. A. (2012) mainly investigated similes in Vietnamese language. They differentiated between Meaning Similes and Rhyming Similes in terms of their structure and semantic and phonetic requirements by comparing them with other similes from other languages such as those found in the English language. Nguyen, T. N., & Zuckermann, G. A. (2012) indicated that there are several structural differences between Meaning Similes and Rhyming Similes. Furthermore, they noticed that, although there are slight differences between Vietnamese similes and English similes based on cultural differences, similes in these two languages have similar features and fascinating parallels regarding rhyming similes.

Still another study by Tartakovsky Shen (2019) focused on standard similes and non-standard similes mainly using the non-standard simile “meek as milk”. The study also focused some on closed similes and their distribution among poetic and non-poetic corpora.

Another important study by Aasheim (2012) examined the syntactic and conceptual levels of similes in both the Norwegian and English languages. Although Aasheim (2012) considered the cultural differences between the two languages, the analysis showed that, when using similes in both languages many similarities in addition to the use of adjectives with similes occurring with the same nouns.

Furthermore, many researchers such as Lasron (1984), Pierini (2007), Alshammari (2016) and Hastürkoğlu (2018) have conducted studies on the translation of similes. In their literature, the focus is more on simile translation than it is on the structure of similes and their meanings outside of the cultural differences. Alshammari, (2016) conducted a case study about translation methods in translating similes from English to Arabic in literary text. The researcher chose a novel by American author Ernest Hemingway titled "The Old Man and the Sea" to conduct his study. He compared the similes in the source text and the translated texts and found that the literal translation is the most frequently used strategy when translating similes from English into Arabic. For his part, Hastürkoğlu (2018) collected ten simile-based idioms as a base for his analysis. He observed the translation of these ten simile-based idioms from English to Turkish by Turkish students both before and after they learned about the Conceptual Metaphor Theory. The results show that the students' proficiency in translation increased after the training.

The present study aims to describe and compare a set of similes across two languages - English and Arabic. Similes can be applied in different languages and it might be interpreted differently from one language to another. The study will focus on the nouns that operate with certain adjectives; the most common nouns in each language; and whether they are different or similar from one language to the other.

Methodology

Similes can be applied in different languages. Moreover, similes are different among various cultures and languages. The study focuses on similes used in English and Arabic. English similes were collected from British National Corpus (BNC) (since the researcher doesn't live in an English-speaking country) whereas similes in Arabic were collected through a questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed to 90 BA students from Princess Alia University College. The focus of the study was on four adjectives: “tough”, “sure”, “dry” and “silent”.

This study focused on the analysis of the occurrence of simile Lexical collocation entries in Arabic and English. The process of data collection in the present study includes counting, grouping, and further recording occurrences from the BNC regarding the English language in the first part of the data collection; likewise, the second part of data collection comes from a questionnaire. The data were gathered and grouped into tables then an analysis for these data was completed through the following steps:

- Investigating which nouns could be found after the adjectives under study. To have more occurrences, the main research lexical collocations was conducted by using (adjective + as) because this form included (as + adjective + as) from which would be found in BNC corpora, but with less frequency. Moreover, simile forms or occurrences using “like” were excluded because it occurred in no more than one or two frequencies.
- For the second part, similes in Arabic were collected through a questionnaire. The questionnaire contains a direct question for each adjective about the use of these adjective with simile devices in colloquial or standard Arabic: /zaj/ زي , /metel/ متل , /miθl/ مِثْل , /ka/ ك

- Comparing the two tables looking for similarities and differences between the Arabic and English choice of nouns.

Analysis

Table 1: The Frequencies of Nouns Following the Adjective “Tough” in English and Arabic

English	Arabic
boots (15)	/ʃawwan/ flint stone (42)
leather (8)	/ħadʒar/ stone (33)
nails (4)	/dʒabal/ mountain (15)
metal (1)	
guards (1)	

As shown in Table 1, the most frequently used nouns that follow the adjective “tough” in English according to the BNC are boots (15), leather (8), nails (4), metal (1) and guards (1). However, in Arabic similes with /qa:si:/ (“tough”) are followed by different nouns which are /ʃawwan/ “flint stone” (42), /ħadʒar/ “stone” (33) and /dʒabal/ ‘Mountain’ (15). Somehow /ʃawwan/ “flint stone” and /ħadʒar/ “stone” has almost the same meaning. It is remarkable that there are distinct variations for the use of nouns in each language. The nouns that operate in English with the adjective “tough” are different types of materials, but they are all somehow related to each other. For instance, boots and leather are connected to each other with boots being made of leather, while the same can be said for metal and nails with nails being made of metal. On the other hand, the Arabic language has different occurrences with the adjective “tough” which are /ʃawwan/ “flint stone”, /ħadʒar/ “stone” and /dʒabal/ “mountain”. The three occurrences are almost the same or end up with the same connotation. Since /ʃawwan/ “flint stone” is a kind of stone and /dʒabal/ a “mountain” consists mainly of stones.

Table 2: The Frequencies of Nouns Following the Adjective “Sure” in English and Arabic

English	Arabic
hell (54)	/zay ma anaʃajfak/ “as I can see you” (78)
eggs (19)	/esmi:/ /esmak/ “as my name or your name” (77)
day (3)	/ʃams/ “sun” (59)
night (3)	
death (2)	
fate (2)	
heck (1)	

In Table 2, once can see the most frequently used nouns that follow the adjective “sure” in English according to the BNC are hell (54), eggs (19), day (3), night (3), death (2), fate (2), heck (1). At the same time, Arabic uses the phrases /zay ma anaʃajfak/ “as I can see you” (78), /esmi:/ /esmak/ “as my name or your name” (77), and the noun /ʃams/ “sun” (59) after the adjective /naʃif/ or “dry”. Note that there is just one similarity in the use of nouns after the word “dry” for both languages and that is the use of “day” in English and /ʃams/ or “sun” in Arabic, for when else does the sun shine but during the day? However, this is where the similarities end as it is considered improper to talk about “hell”, its euphemistic cousin “heck”, “death” and even “fate” in polite everyday Arabic conversations.

Table 3: The Frequencies of Nouns Following the Adjective “Silent” in English and Arabic

English	Arabic
grave (7)	/nasi:m/ “breeze” (101)
tomb (2)	/baħar/ “sea” (39)

dead man (1)	/ʔarnab/ “rabbit” (38)
ghost (1)	/saḥab/ “clouds” (30)
death (1)	/allajl/ “night” (29)
	/bisse/ “cat” (25)

Moving along to Table 3 where the frequencies of nouns following the adjective “silent” in English and Arabic will be observed. Starting with English again, one can see that English uses the more macabre nouns grave (7), tomb (2), dead man (1), ghost (1), and death (1) which, as stated above are never used in everyday Arabic polite conversation. As a result, Arabic tends to use more natural nouns like /nasi:m/“breeze” (101), /baḥar/ “sea” (39), /saḥab/ “clouds” (30), and /allajl/“night” (29) or animal nouns such as /ʔarnab/“rabbit” (38) and /bisse/ “cat” (25) following the adjective /hadiʔ/ or “silent”. Therefore, in this case, there are no similarities, but only differences in the frequency of nouns following the adjective “silent” in English and /hadiʔ/or “silent” in Arabic.

Table 4: The Frequencies of Nouns Following the Adjective “Dry” in English and Arabic

English	Arabic
bones (9)	/ṣaḥraʔ/ “desert” (46)
dust (6)	/ryi:felxobiz/ “bread”(30)
chalk (1)	/xaʃab, ḥatab/ “wood”(29)
drawing (1)	/waraʔalfadʒar/ “leaves”(25)
biscuits (1)	/ḥadʒar/ “stone” (18)

Finally, looking at the frequencies of nouns following the adjective “dry” in English and Arabic in Table 4, once can notice that the nouns bones (9), dust (6), chalk (1), drawing (1), and biscuits (1) are the preferred nouns of the English while ṣaḥraʔ/ “desert” (46), ryi:felxobiz/ “bread”(30), xaʃab, ḥatab/ “wood”(29), waraʔalfadʒar/ “leaves”(25), /ḥadʒar/ “stone” (18). As a result, one may notice that there are few similarities between the two languages, the first being the use of “biscuits” in English and ryi:felxobiz/ or “bread” in Arabic. Another similarity is they both tend to use natural nouns after the adjective “dry” where English uses “bones”, “dust”, and “chalk” and Arabic speakers prefer the natural nouns ṣaḥraʔ/ “desert”, xaʃab, ḥatab/ “wood”, waraʔalfadʒar/ “leaves”, and /ḥadʒar/ “stone” after the adjective insert Arabic word for “dry” here or “dry”

Conclusion

This study sets out to explore the similarities and differences between Arabic and English languages regarding the use of similes. It is aimed at figuring out the nouns which are collocated with each form of similes in both languages. First, it is posited that the structural side for similes between Arabic and English displayed high degree of structural similarity in constructing a simile. Both are using the same structure adjective + particle + noun. However, in Arabic there are some similes that occur with dependent clauses instead of a noun. Regarding collocated nouns, it was significant that English varied more and has more occurrences for the nouns. The nouns in each language are different though we have similarities some times. However, cultural differences reveal the differences in the use of nouns; for instance, the Arabic language would refuse the use of “hell” and “heck” in comparison, not because of the language, but in favor of the culture. Moreover, the idea of death is not something which is preferable to neither talk about nor even mention anywhere or anytime in Arab society, so for that reason death is also not used in this kind of comparison.

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