

## „UNUSUAL” SIMILES

### A COGNITIVE STYLISTIC APPROACH OF A SPECIAL TYPE OF SIMILES BASED ON GYULA KRÚDY’S FICTION<sup>1</sup>

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#### 1. Introduction

In the present paper, I shall discuss a special type of similes, namely those in which what is similar (comparatum) is abstract, and it is compared to something concrete (comparandum).

I shall base my argument on the approach and methodology of functional cognitive stylistics in both the theoretical framework and in the analysis of my examples. Since, in this case, the theoretical framework is more emphatic, it is necessary here to briefly delineate the main tenets of functional-cognitive linguistics.

It approaches language from the aspect of cognition and knowledge, and considers the formation, accessibility and comprehension of meaning as its main function. Thus, its main characteristics and aims are the following: (cf. Geeraerts– Cuyckens eds 2007, Evans 2007, Tolcsvai Nagy 2013):

1. Functional-cognitive linguistics gives meaning a central position in the grammar. Linguistic structures are thought to express conceptualizations, that is, conceptualization is central for linguistic structure.
2. One of the central tenets of cognitive linguistics is its usage-based orientation. Discourse is then no longer the mere application of grammatical rules, but the grammatical rules themselves are motivated by the discourse functions that the grammar has to fulfil.
3. Production and comprehension are inherent parts of the linguistic system.
4. The emphasis on the dynamic nature of language, that is, the meaning of linguistic expressions is formed in a flexible way in the context of the moment of utterance.
5. The application of Prototype Theory: belonging to a category is the question of degrees in the case of linguistic phenomena as well. Individual examples fall into one category on the basis of common experience and family resemblance. The borders of categories are not always clearly defined. A fuzzy category, which can be contrasted with a classical category, is a category whose members exhibit degrees of family resemblance, with the category borders not being clearly defined.

#### 2. On the Concept and Role of Simile

Characterising the concept and textual role of simile in general terms, a good starting point might be the most recent and most significant Hungarian rhetorical-stylistic lexicon entitled *The Lexicon of Figures of Speech* (Szathmári, gen. ed. 2008). The entry on “Simile” (Kocsány 2008: 266) synthesises the relevant international history of the term and recent approaches:

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Simile: **conceiving (describing, evaluating, evoking) of an object or fact through another object or fact on the basis of partial similarity or analogy between the two.** Simile is a syntactic structure in which the thing or fact we want to compare (describe) and the thing or fact to which we compare it (that offers itself as a suitable explanation) are linked by grammatical and lexical elements. (Emphasis mine: PJ)

Cuddon's (1999: 830) *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* contains a similar definition:

A figure of speech in which one thing is likened to another, **in such a way as to clarify and enhance an image.** It is an explicit comparison (as opposed to the metaphor, q.o., where the comparison is implicit) recognizable by the use of the words 'like' or 'as' (Emphasis mine: PJ).

In my hypothesis, these definitions, which reflect a traditional approach and are valid for everyday language in general, can be amended if we take into consideration a type of simile discussed below. More specifically, the similes in which an abstract thing is compared to a concrete one may receive relevant new functions in the semantic structure and semantic production of texts, which **point beyond the concept of simile as an additional figure.**

In the traditional approach, simile is defined as a means whose role and function is to clarify or emphasize the compared thing by means of the thing to which we compare it (cf. Szathmári 2004: 64–65). This relationship is naturally a strongly hierarchical one between the compared thing and to which we compare it, with the latter in an inferior position. At the same time, in certain similes, for instance in the ones by Gyula Krúdy in the below examples, the relationship between the two elements is different. Instead of a hierarchical structure, the two elements are rather on the same level and amend each other in the meaning construction of the text. In some cases, it is precisely the explaining element that comes to the foreground. This can also be a promising field of research in the figure-ground relationship in stylistics (cf. Pethő 2013). (Naturally, the scalarity principle of stylistics must also be taken into consideration when examining such similes.)

At least another aspect must be highlighted here and be taken as a starting point: the question of conceptualization, the linguistic representation of reality, which is of basic importance in the cognitive approach. A fundamental tendency of cognition, including the production of meaning in language, is the movement from concrete to abstract. That is, people wishing to conceive of something make the abstract accessible by the concrete. The significance of this process has been most significantly described by cognitive research in metaphor. In the following section, I am going to examine the relationship between metaphor and simile for two (interrelated) reasons.

The two reasons are the following:

- (a) In what follows, I am going to examine simile as a factor in cognition, including the linguistic production of meaning. Thus, the process referred to above (the movement from the concrete to the abstract) is an important reference point.
- (b) The close link between metaphor and simile, which is treated variously in relevant literature, also offers significant lessons in the description of similes (cf. Kocsány 2008a, 2008b).

### 3. Metaphor and Simile

Cognitive linguistics places the relationship between the empirical knowledge of the world and abstract concepts in the focus of its attention. That is why the followers of this school have turned their attention to metaphor from the very beginnings. The role of metaphor is not merely decoration as the traditional approach claimed or at least suggested, but helps understand the abstract concepts of the world by linking them to specific experiences. As Kövecses claims (2010: 7) in his synthesis of metaphor-related research:

Conceptual metaphors typically employ a more abstract concept as target and a more concrete or physical concept as their source. Argument, love, idea, and social organization are all more abstract concepts than war, journey, food, and plant. This generalization makes intuitive sense. If we want to fully understand an abstract concept, we are better off using another concept that is more concrete, physical, or tangible than the abstract target concept for this purpose. Our experiences with the physical world serve as a natural and logical foundation for the comprehension of more abstract domains. This explains why in most cases of everyday metaphors the source and target domains are not reversible. For example, we do not talk about ideas as food or journey as love. This is called the principle of unidirectionality; that is, the metaphorical process typically goes from the more concrete to the more abstract but not the other way around.

This can be depicted schematically like this:

Let us have a look at some specific metaphorical expression from Lakoff–Johnson (1980: 46) that explains the metaphor or THEORY – BUILDING, which exemplifies the direction from concrete to abstract.

- (1) Is that the foundation for your theory?
- (2) The argument is shaky.
- (3) We need some more facts or the argument will fall apart.
- (4) We need to construct strong argument for that.

The statements of cognitive linguistics concerning metaphors may be valid in our case if we accept the tenet that there are fundamental similarities between metaphor and simile. If we accept that the prototype of the cognitive process goes from the concrete (in some cases,

the more concrete) towards the abstract (that is to say, the basic configuration is a semantic structure of concrete → abstract), then the same can be applied to similes as well.

This is true of “everyday” similes. Let us have a look at some proverbial similes. I have chosen these as examples because they are fixed expressions in the collective consciousness of a community, thus are adequate expressions/signifiers of the way of thinking and typical conceptualizing processes of that group of people.

Proverbial similes express the concept with the help of images. For instance, to express the concept STUPID in Hungarian, among others, the following similes are used in Hungarian.

(5) STUPID like the [dark] night.

(6) He/she is like stairway at night (dark).

(7) STUPID like a goose.

(8) He/she is like the television set of my grandmother: big-screen<sup>2</sup> and dim.

The general tendency of concrete → abstract can also be observed in literature besides everyday use. The introductory lines of *Toldi* (1846), a famous narrative poem by János Arany, the abstract **temporal** distance is accessible by means of concrete, **spatial** distance:

(9) Like a herdsman’s fire blazing on autumn nights  
across the vast sea of the puszta, the face of  
Miklós Toldi flares before me over nine or ten  
generations of antique time.

(Translated by Anton N. Nyerges)

Any deviation from this semantic structure of concrete → abstract is salient, that is, foregrounded. It is not a coincidence then that such similes often appear in fiction or poetry that presupposes individual style and modes of conceptualisation. Such similes are especially frequent in the fiction of Gyula Krúdy, considered by many as one of the most outstanding Hungarian authors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the next section, I am going to present “unusual” similes of the semantic structure of concrete → abstract.

#### 4. “Unusual” Similes in Krúdy’s Fiction

The “Archimedean” point of Krúdy’s fiction is style. The author of the first monograph about him, László Perkáti (1938: 86–87) is right when he claims that Krúdy’s style is “his biggest achievement” and “the deepest manifestation of his individuality.” From the most recent evaluations, let me refer to John Lukacs (2007: xxix), who claims in the “Foreword” to the English translation of Krúdy’s novel *Napraforgó* (*Sunflower*):

„The unclassifiable character of his style [...] is more than the mark of an eccentric talent: the talent exists not because it is eccentric, and the eccentricity is remarkable not because it is talented. Like a Shakespeare or a Dante or a Goethe in their very different ways, Krúdy is a genius.”

Imagery, figures of speech, most notably similes and metaphors, are essential components of Krúdy’s style. Due to this, the significance and role of similes is frequently

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2 The Hungarian equivalent (“nagyképű”) can be translated into English to mean “pompous” or “big-screen” (television).

discussed in literature examining Krúdy (see e.g., Mátrai 1948, Herczeg 1959, Kemény 1974, Kemény 1993, etc). The present study, however, wishes to deviate from former descriptions of either essayistic style or of structuralist in character, by applying the means of cognitive linguistics and placing emphasis on conceptualisation.

As referred to above, the basic configuration of simile is explaining an abstract idea by comparing it to a specific thing. Naturally, there are examples of this classic type in Krúdy's fiction, but since the primary aim of investigation is not this, let me quote only a few examples of this type: <sup>3</sup>

- (10) Transience squats by the foot of the bed like a moribund, faithful old servitor.
- (11) Dawn poured over the city like farm-fresh milk.
- (12) ...in the village the midnight hours can drive you to distraction, their slow passage is as sluggish as the creaking of the deathwatch beetle.
- (13) As if that extraordinary woman — who had wreaked such havoc in the lives of gullible men, setting frozen hearts ablaze like a bonfire built by woodcutters shivering at the edge of a forest.

There are, however, several examples in Krúdy's texts when the relationship is precisely the opposite, that is abstract → concrete. I am going to quote abundant examples from two of his works, *Good Old Days in Aranykéz Street* (Aranykéz utcai szép napok) and *Sunflower* to prove that such "unusual" similes are not incidental, but they penetrate the whole text, thus have a central role in determining the stylistic and semantic structure of the texts.

First, let us see some examples from *Good Old Days in Aranykéz Street*:

- (14) Ah, finally her figure disappeared at the corner like when a sweet dream vanishes at the noise of morning birds.
- (15) Only in our hearth is the ember flickering like memory.
- (16) Wild geese were flying over the Danube at night, and their cries reached the earth from above as if wandering spirits were travelling near Budapest...
- (17) The street near the banks of the Danube was desolate, and in the distance, a cart was gliding like dormant conscience...
- (18) The music was echoing in the courtyard like when joy or sorrow gets on a carriage...
- (19) ... red-cheeked like a folk song coming alive.
- (20) A pair of village female shoes – its traces equipped with high heels like ambition and its buckles like craving for luxurious life – was marching through the garden.
- (21) The road was long like memory.

The following examples are taken from *Sunflower*:

- (22) The hands of the clock were creeping upon midnight like some soul climbing a rock face.
- (23) A wonderful fresh icy scent pervaded Eveline's chamber, like a token of reviving life.
- (24) High above the reeds, where the air is as empty as space floats a nameless solitary bird, musing about the aimlessness of life on earth.

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<sup>3</sup> The source of quotations of *Sunflower* is the following volume: Krúdy, Gyula: *Sunflower*. New York: New York Review Books, translated by John Batki. Other translations are mine.

- (25) The doves were tumbling in the air above the manor house like distant spring time memories of youth...
- (26) ...there stood a memorable little garden bench, a secret spot on the grounds surrounding this red house, as private as the purity of a youth and the nobility of a heart.

The constraint of space does not make it possible to analyse the examples in detail, so I would like to make a few general statements.

The starting point should be that in both works **remembering** gets special emphasis. The relationship with the past is the basic question of Krúdy's fiction, and most often its main theme as well. Already István Perkátai, the first one to evaluate Krúdy's works highlights the importance of remembering. In the introduction of his volume he remarks: "Both in his life and in his writings, Gyula Krúdy is a man of remembering" (Perkátai 1938: 9). It is due to the remembering nature of his texts that a special mode of the conceptualization of reality is visible in his similes: the juxtaposition of different time scales, aspects, frameworks of knowledge that appear on the same rank with each other. Naturally, remembering often appears directly in similes as is seen in examples (15), (21) and (25).

The semantic structure of similes display another feature, namely that "the most usual semantic structures are coupled with the most unusual ones" and that the "the distance between the conceptual domains of the components of similes is sometimes little or sometimes great, and the density of correspondences is sometimes intense, and other times negligible" (Tolcsvai Nagy 2004: 104). Let us compare similes (10)–(13) and (15), (17), (24), etc. We can agree with Tolcsvai Nagy (op. cit.), who claims that with this way of conceptualisation and language use, Krúdy **questions the certainty of self-understanding and world-description**, and thereby creates a meaning whose point is the "blurring of the borders of the self and its interpretation as a relationship."

In the above, I quoted abundant examples of "unusual" similes. The question also arises as to what role the discussed similes acquire in the global stylistic and semantic structure of the text. It has to be pointed out that in Krúdy's novels, the insularity of human existence and loneliness has a key role. As László Fülöp ascertains (1986: 298):

"*Sunflower* may be regarded as the novel of loneliness, as a panorama of lonely fates, because all its characters are solitary. All of them play to one another and with one another, relations are built between them, they approach one another, and revolve beside and around one another. It is only that nobody meets nobody else and roads do not cross in a way to resolve this loneliness so that borders of separation may disappear. [...] Loneliness is fatal and definitive, it seems an unalterable law of life. Neither friendship, nor love, nor any kind of relationship is able to put an end to the individualized closure of fates."

The following statement may seem bold, yet I believe it can be supported convincingly: the great semantic distance between the elements of the similes is a way of iconic representation of the worldview of which loneliness is a necessary part. Besides, an important element of this fictional world is unreality and loneliness mentioned above. It is precisely these factors (solitude, remembering, unreality) appear in the following "unusual" similes with a structure abstract → concrete that are taken from a single page of *Sunflower*:

- (27) A drawn-out train whistle sounded somewhere in the great depths of the night beyond the hills, like life itself fading into the distance.

- (28) Like ghost images of an otherworldly night, these village Gypsies milled about in the pitch-black yard.
- (29) Her eyebrows grew together, thick and uninterrupted like somber memory itself.

## 5. Summary

Summarising, I would like to highlight first of all that role the “unusual” similes discussed above goes beyond only illustrating or clarifying an object or fact by comparison.

The role of the examples of this kind of simile can be explained with the linguistic fact that “the meaning of compound linguistic expressions [...] is not based on simple addition. The meaning of such an expression is not merely the sum of the meaning of its component parts, but there is a mutual conceptual and semantic relation between these expressions” (Tolcsvai Nagy 2005: 48). The number of “mutual conceptual and semantic relation”, depending on the type of structure and its individual variant, is practically infinite.

Also, the general claim might be made (naturally, taking the principle of scalarity into consideration) that in the majority of the cases of similes with a structure abstract → concrete, there is no hierarchical relationship between the compared thing and to which it is compared. The latter comes to the foreground, and thus the simile takes part in conceptualisation in an “unusual” way. The result of this, from the point of view of style, may be salience. From the point of view of semantic production, the result is greater flexibility and openness. In some cases, the “unusual” simile becomes determining in the stylistic structure and semantic production of the text.

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### **„Rendhagyó” hasonlatok**

#### **A hasonlatok egy sajátos típusának funkcionális kognitív stilisztikai megközelítése Krúdy prózája alapján**

Jelen dolgozatban a hasonlatok egy sajátos szemantikai szerkezetű típusát tárgyalom funkcionális kognitív stilisztikai megközelítésben, nevezetesen azt a típust, amelyben elvont hasonló (comparatum) jelenik meg a konkrét hasonlított (comparandum) mellett. Ezek a hasonlatok a hagyományos, „kiegészítő” szereptől eltérő, releváns új funkciókat kapnak a jelentésképzés folyamataiban, illetve a szövegek jelentésszerkezetében. Az ehhez a típushoz tartozó hasonlatoknak a vizsgálata alapján a hagyományos felfogást összegző és a hétköznapi nyelvhasználatra általában érvényes hasonlatjellemzések, amelyek a hasonlat lényegét egy eszköz-cél jellegű viszonyban adják meg, fontos kiegészítéseket kaphatnak. Például Krúdy itt vizsgált hasonlataiban sem eszköz-cél jellegű viszony van a hasonlított és a hasonló között, azaz nem ennek megfelelő alá-fölérendeltség, hanem éppen a hasonló kerül előtérbe. Mindez a figura-alap viszony stilisztikai relevanciájának vizsgálatában is további ígéretes elemzések tárgya lehet. Az itteni elemzések tanulságai alapján összegzően mindenekelőtt az emelhető ki, hogy a vizsgált „rendhagyó” Krúdy-hasonlatok szerepe más, pontosabban szólva: jóval több a szöveg értelemszerkezetében, mint a hasonlított magyarázata, szemléletesebbé vagy nyomatékosabbá tétele. A hasonló kerül előtérbe, és a hasonlat a maga egészében a „szokásos”-tól eltérő konceptualizációval vesz részt a jelentésképzésben. Ennek eredménye a stílus szempontjából a szalienencia, a jelentésképzés szempontjából pedig mindenekelőtt a jelentéstanilag nagy távolságban álló tudáskeretek megnyitásával a nagymérvű nyitottság, illetve a szövegértelem különösen sűrített formájú, hatékony alakítása. A „rendhagyó” hasonlatok így meghatározó jelentőségűvé válnak a szöveg egészének stílusstruktúrájában, illetve a jelentésképzésben.