Research article

Narrativised simile and emotional responses to Brexit

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Abstract

This study looks at two figurative ways in which popular media and social media represent the public's response to the process of implementing Brexit. Specifically, it contrasts analogies, which construe the nature of Brexit in terms of the nature of the problems arising (e.g. the impossibility of *taking the eggs out of the cake*), with tweets relying on simile to express emotional responses. The focus of this study is on the nature of simile, as the trope of choice in profiling emotional responses, and especially on narrativised similative constructions, such as *Brexit is like X*, where *X* as an extended narrative. These similes match the real story of Brexit, which lasted several years, with other narrative scenarios. Crucially, the scenarios created are focused on how the person *feels* about the 'story of Brexit' (e.g. the long period of hesitation and indecisiveness) and not on political affiliations and arguments. In effect, *Brexit is like X* framing could be loosely paraphrased as *Experiencing Brexit* <u>makes me feel</u> *similarly to experiencing a narrative such as X*, where *X* is a made-up story, depicting unimportant social events or movie genres. The emotions targeted in the *Brexit is like X* examples (such as disappointment, boredom, feeling exasperated or bemused) are complex emotional reactions to a narrative failing to reach a satisfying resolution. From the perspective of figuration, *Brexit is like X* similes suggest the need to re-evaluate the nature of simile as a conceptual mapping and to consider the role fictive stories play in expression of emotions. Also, the complex syntactic forms used to represent the narrative structure of *X* provide the material for reconsidering simile as a construction.

Keywords: *simile, analogy, Twitter, narrative, Brexit, expression of emotion*

Научная статья

Нарративное сравнение и эмоциональные реакции на Брексит

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Аннотация

В статье рассматриваются фигуры речи, к которым прибегают популярные СМИ и социальные сети, представляя реакцию общественности на процесс реализации Брексита. В частности, сравниваются аналогии, которые объясняют природу Брексита с точки зрения характера возникающих проблем, с твитами, основанными на сравнении и выражающими

эмоциональные реакции. Основное внимание уделяется природе сравнения как тропа, предполагающего выбор эмоциональных реакций, и особенно нарративным симилятивным конструкциям, таким как *Brexit is like X* (Брексит – это как X), где X – расширенное повествование. Эти сравнения пересекаются с реальной историей Брексита, которая длилась несколько лет, и с другими нарративными сценариями. Важно отметить, что в основе созданных сценариев – не политическая принадлежность человека и его аргументы, а эмоциональное восприятие «истории Брексита» (например, долгий период колебаний и нерешительности). По сути, сравнение *Brexit is like* X приблизительно можно перефразировать как «Переживание Брексита вызывает у меня такие же чувства, как и нарратив X», где X – это выдуманная или взятая из кино история, изображающая не столь значимые социальные события. Эмоции, которые вызывает сравнение *Brexit is like X* (разочарование, скука, чувство раздражения или замешательства) – это сложные эмоциональные реакции на нарратив, в котором отсутствует достижение решения. Результаты исследования свидетельствуют о необходимости переоценки природы сравнения как концептуального переноса значения и учета роли вымышленных историй в выражении эмоций. Кроме того, сложные синтаксические формы, используемые для построения нарратива, предоставляют материал для пересмотра сравнения как конструкции.

Ключевые слова: *сравнение, аналогия, Twitter, нарратив, Брексит, выражение эмоций*

1. Introduction

There has been much discussion in the media and in analytical work about the specificity of the discourse of Brexit.[1] The situation created by Great Britain's decision to leave the EU is unprecedented and complex, and it has also taken several years. Even now, when the final separation from the EU has been achieved, there are still many difficult issues. It is not surprising, then, that the discourse surrounding the success and progress of Brexit invited and continues to invite various angles of analysis, in the press and in political circles. The analyses of discourses surrounding the unprecedented event address a broad range of concepts and emerging construals of the situation.

Critical discussions of the discourse of Brexit also build on now classic theoretical approaches to political discourse, relying, to a large degree, on analyses of conceptual metaphors. [2] In this paper, however, I consider examples of much less serious nature, coming from several periods when negotiations were still ongoing – tweets, jocular analogies, and noteworthy quips by various political figures involved (gathered by journalists outside of the context of formal negotiations). The specificity of these examples results to a large degree from their brevity and (somewhat) humorous intent, but it is also quite clear that the primary goal of the

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[1] See Zappettini and Krzyżanowski (2019). Special issue on Brexit, *Critical Discourse Studies* 16.4.

[2] I cannot review the relevant research in detail, for lack of space, but my proposed approach owes much to studies of metaphor in discourse by scholars such as Charteris-Black (2005), Hart (2010), Musolff (2004), Musolff and Zinken (2009), and Chilton (2004).

speakers, columnists or Twitter users is giving expression to their evaluation of Brexit, rather than proposing a sound analysis. These informal reactions are interesting from the linguistic perspective because of the frequent use of figurative and analogical forms and constructions suggesting comparison. Thus, aspects of the saga of Brexit are described in terms of comparisons to imaginary objects or much less complex and much less important events.

My approach in this study relies on the cognitive linguistic view of figuration. The analysis proposed thus treats figurative concepts as conceptual mappings, following the theoretical grounding given in Dancygier and Sweetser (2014).[3] However, I do not focus here on conceptual metaphor – rather, I attempt to clarify the conceptual role of simile, especially in figurative representation of emotions.

The analysis proposed here considers emotions in the range of media sources selected from a specific perspective. Rather than study how emotion concepts are understood and construed in various Brexit discourses (e.g. Bouko 2020), I look at how patterns of figuration displayed in the examples represent the emotional stances expressed by the communicators (politicians outside of formal negotiations, Twitter users, or journalists). In other words, I am not considering what kinds of emotions are described, rather, I consider how 'popular' representations of the effects of Brexit rely on figurative forms to give expression to emotional stances. I also use these observations to argue that the figure which serves the purpose of reflecting emotional responses best is simile. Throughout my discussion, I point to the features of simile which make it a useful figure in the context of emotions.

Many of my examples have been, in a sense, preselected for me, as they were gathered, based on their clarity and originality, in several articles, published, among other venues, in the *Independent* and in *Politico*. The article in the *Independent*, by Aoife Kelly, shows a number of tweets, mostly formulated as "Brexit is like X" similes, while the collection of quotes by political figures gathered by two *Politico* journalists (Paul Dallison and Sanya Khetani-Shah) gives the reader a glimpse of the evaluative stances expressed outside of the mainstream negotiations and discussions. Other examples elaborate one specific Brexit analogy. The examples were not selected by the journalists with respect to the emotional stances of people commenting on Brexit, and there are thus many possible ways to approach the wording chosen. In what follows, I focus on the choice of the forms of comparison and the resulting construals of an aspect of the Brexit situation. As my examples suggest, there are essentially two general strategies – either constructing an unreal situation which helps reveal some essential flaw in the conceptualization of Brexit (and not in the idea as such), or explicitly comparing the stage in Brexit negotiations to a situation or artifact which evokes a similar emotional or evaluative stance. Importantly, these informal responses seem mostly independent of the Leave versus Remain stances, so they do not take sides in the discussion – rather, they look at Brexit as an experience.

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[3] There has been much research on the conceptual treatment of metaphor (starting with Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1999). The examples considered here follow a broader model of figuration.

My discussion starts with non-similative examples – *structural analogies* – which focus on the rational evaluation of the Brexit project. In the remaining part of the paper, I focus on *similes and related constructions*, to show how their meaning profiles an emotional response. Since simile and related forms are my focus, I start with some clarification of what I refer to as **similative meaning**.

Many of the examples to be considered below use the preposition *like* and thus construct a simile. The concept of simile has many formal and interpretive aspects, and an exhaustive account of the options is beyond the scope of the present paper, but some of the main points need to be recounted. On the formal level, simile has often been studied in comparison to metaphor. The suggested correlation was often used to claim that a simile construction such *X is like Y* (as in *My job is like a jail*) should be considered in the context of a metaphorical predicative sentence such as *My job is a jail*. While the initial assumption was that simile and metaphor are essentially the same as mappings (this tradition dates back to Aristotle), recent work undermines that view, postulating different functions of the two tropes, and showing the different ways the forms are processed.

There are several important strands in the work comparing metaphor and simile. Very influential work by Gentner (1983) and Gentner and Bowdle (2001), among others, has argued that metaphor (like analogy) primarily maps relations (such as characteristic processes or functions), while simile primarily maps specific attributes (such as color or shape); however, in their later article, Gentner and Bowdle (2008) weaken their stance and show that the criterion does not distinguish the two concepts reliably. Still, further work confirms that simile can and should be treated independently of metaphor (cf. Bredin 1998), even though different aspects of simile are brought up to support that claim. To mention just a few, O'Donoghue (2009) argues that simile invites us to consciously consider the specific dimension of comparison, while Israel et al. (2004), Harding (2017) and Romano (2017) point to simile's vividness and originality, unexpectedness, increased complexity and 'daring'; and finally, Cuenca (2015) attempts to narrow down the application of the term simile. It is thus not surprising that Gargani (2016) does not see the distinction between metaphor and simile as based on reliable criteria, but at the same time recent work in psycholinguistics repeatedly confirms that simile and metaphor are not processed in the same way (Haught 2013, 2014, Roncero & de Almeida 2015). In spite of these various approaches, it seems that the majority of scholars find simile to be different from other figures. The core of its special character, though formulated in different ways, is its ability to 'draw attention to itself' and prompt the listener/reader to consider the content described from a fresh, original perspective. The examples of simile I consider below further support such an approach.

Another aspect of simile, which will also be addressed in this paper, is the way it functions in discourse (Moder 2008, 2010), especially extended discourse (Goatly 1997/2005, Dorst 2011, 2017). Dancygier and Sweetser (2014) advocate a view of simile as a construction (to account for the formal aspects) and describe the meaning

as a limited-scope blend[4] – a blend focused on one specific aspect of the situation described, a one-off comparison. A closer look at the meanings of similes (Lou 2017, Dancygier & Lou 2019) further suggests a spectrum of cases from basic perception (*His voice sounds like a squeaky wheel, This juice tastes like wine*), through depictions of intersubjectively inaccessible embodied states, such as pain (*It felt like an explosion in my head;* for a range of examples, see Semino 2016), to complex emotional experiences (*The break-up felt like being stabbed in the heart*). The fact that many of the more complex similes depict source situations that are not related to actual realistic experience further confirms the specific figurative role simile plays: evocation (rather than replication) of an exaggerated source experience to allow the hearer to construct a frame[5] representing the experience of the target situation. Additionally, similes with *like* are not the only constructions used to make such comparisons, and there is in fact quite a range of appropriate expressions: *as…as, more than, reminds me of,* etc. A thorough review of the uses of *like* and other similative expressions is beyond the limits of this paper (Goatly 1997/2005 offers a very rich overview), but it is clear that the variety of possibilities is quite broad syntactically and lexically, while what is shared is the meaning pattern, consisting primarily in evoking a salient experiential situation which can be viewed as the ground for comparison. I refer to that pattern as **similative meaning**.

Considering the full range of similative constructions here is beyond the scope of the paper. I will focus, however, on how reliance on similative meaning structures informal discussions about Brexit. I argue that similative figuration provides an experientially rich and vivid frame to help model the potential emotional response to an object or event. I also compare similes to analogies, to trace their differing communicative effects.

The meaning potential of similative constructions can be illustrated by the following quote from a conversation with a retired member of the Canadian women's soccer team, after the team's beloved coach resigned, leaving all team members sad and upset:

> (1) "That's why I *felt like* I was in it," she said. "*It was like, 'Oh my god, this is horrible.'* In terms of other people, *it's like if* you had a favourite boss and your boss said he's leaving, you're gutted."

This example illustrates three different uses of *like*. The first one (*I felt like*) represents the most typical cases of simile using experiential verbs followed by *like*; jointly, such examples refer to basic perceptions and emotions (with verbs such as *sound like*, *look like*, or *feel like*) as well as weak epistemic stance experiences

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[4] An account of the Conceptual Integration Theory (or Blending Theory), as outlined in Fauconnier and Turner (2002), is beyond the scope of this paper; I am thus assuming the reader's general familiarity with the concept.

[5] I am using the concept of a frame in the sense introduced by Fillmore (1982, 1985), further developed on the context of figurative language in Sullivan (2013). I also follow the convention whereby frames are referred to via capitalizing the initial letter.

(*appear like, seem like*). The second phrase, *It was like*, is a variant of the *be like* quotative construction which uses forms similar to reported discourse, while openly not guaranteeing the faithfulness. Typically, the construction uses forms of spoken discourse (in this case, *'Oh my god, this is horrible.'*) to represent how the person being discussed felt about the situation. The third *like* phrase is *it's like if*, which describes an imaginary source situation (of the boss leaving) to describe how that situation would make one feel about the target event (*you're gutted*). The constructional details differ across these *like*-expressions, but the construals share the pattern of evoking a situation which has clear emotional consequences. Examples of similative *like* that I have investigated so far (in journalistic prose, humor, and literature) all share the evocation of imaginary situations which give a clear (though exaggerated) depiction to the feelings the speaker attempts to describe. The examples considered below confirm the 'emotion-oriented' nature of similative meaning.

In some cases, as in the final sentence of (1), *like* is followed by an *if* clause depicting the situation construed as emotionally similar to the target situation. The joint constructional effect is that an imaginary (often counterfactual) situation is construed as an example of the emotional reaction it evokes. *Like* makes such a comparison explicit, while the *if*-situation allows the speaker to propose a more complex situation for the purposes of the comparison; this feature makes the formal aspects of the construction different from more typical cases, where *like* (as a preposition) is followed by an NP, as in *moving like a snake*, *sounding like a squeaky wheel*, etc.). The non-real situations described by *if*-clauses may serve the role of evoking emotionally loaded situations and prompting the desired inferences (for example about the desirability of the situation described). This is the case in some of the examples considered below, where *like, like if*, and *if* can all be used to profile imaginary situations to be seen from the perspective of their implied emotional impact, and then used as the comparative source domain to the emotional impact of the target situation. Additionally, the situation set up for the purposes of the comparison needs to evoke the emotional reaction unambiguously, which requires that it is somewhat exaggerated in comparison to the situation under consideration.

In what follows, I discuss four types of figurative scenarios. I start with analogy (which is structural, and not similative), to then consider variants of similative construals: explicit comparisons, narrow-scope and broad-scope similes, and, finally, narrativized Twitter similes. I use these examples to show how these constructions differ, not only structurally, but first of all in evocation of emotional responses.

2. Brexit analogies – one selected aspect

Brexit has been discussed from many angles, and various types of comparisons have been used. The broadest category is that of analogy, a concept used often (also in public discourse). The way I am approaching analogy here is quite

specific.[6] Analogies discussed below evoke a situation very different from the target one (in this case Brexit), and offer a clear and intuitively accessible concept which highlights an opinion the speaker or writer wants to express. Importantly, like various figurative forms, including simile and metaphor, such an analogy selects a salient aspect of the complex situation under discussion, but its goal, unlike in the case of experiential focus of simile, is to propose a *rational evaluation* of the target concept. As I argue below, the goal of a similative construal, whatever its form, is different – construing the *emotional response* to the target situation.

My data include several cases of such analogical construals, each of which selects an aspect of the source to express an opinion about the target. I have labelled them as follows: A. taking the eggs out of the cake, B. cheese submarine, C. taking the teabag out of the cup, D. 28 drinkers in a pub. They all suggest that the very idea of Brexit is irrational, or not feasible. I will discuss each of them briefly.

A. *Taking the eggs out of the cake*

The analogy constructs a situation which suggests the destructive character of Brexit as a general plan (not dealing at all with how it might be implemented). In this analogy, Brexit is construed in terms of the process of baking a cake, where all ingredients are blended together, to create a uniform desired structure. Undoing the process is not possible, as the eggs cannot be extracted. This analogy rationalizes the idea of the EU as a coherent structure, but inadvertently implies that the cake (EU) could also be destroyed by taking the eggs out (Brexit).[7] This analogy seems particularly apt in the context of frequent references to 'cake' metaphors in the discourse of Brexit (see Musolff 2021, this issue; Zappettini 2021 this issue).

B. *Cheese submarine*

An object such as a submarine made of cheese would not be edible and it would not serve its purpose as a sea-going vessel. Construed this way, the Brexit plan appears to be driven by wanting something that has no purpose of any kind.

C. *Taking the teabag out of the cup*

This analogy is quite complex and addresses the concept of 'strength'. The description chosen relies on the conditional form (imagining a future scenario) and then addresses the mistaken perception (*it might appear like*). It has been described as follows:

> (2) If you leave the bag in, then over time the cup of tea itself as a whole gets stronger. And it might appear like the bag is getting weaker but it's now part of a stronger cup of tea. Whereas, if you take the bag out, the tea's now quite weak and the bag itself goes directly in the bin.

You can make the tea (EU) stronger by keeping the teabag (UK) in it; taking the teabag out weakens the tea, but does not save the teabag (UK). Similarly to the 'cake' analogy, the point is avoiding an outcome that weakens both political agents.

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[6] Analogies have been discussed from various perspectives – as a common conceptual tool (Hofstadter & Sander 2013), or in comparison to metaphor. In this paper, I am focusing on the nature of the profiled connection between the target situation (Brexit) and a constructed source situation.

[7] In another text, the author used the analogy of 'taking the eggs out of the omelette', which is essentially identical. It is interesting to note, though, that such parallel construals have been evoked.

D. *28 drinkers in a pub*

The specific target is the fact that the UK initially refused to pay their Brexit bill. The analogy was coined by Jean-Claude Juncker, on the basis of an imagined (*if)* situation:

> (3) "If you are sitting in the bar and you are ordering 28 beers and then suddenly some of your colleagues [leave without] paying, that is not feasible. They have to pay, they have to pay."

The analogy shows that the refusal to pay undermines the agreement accepted by all members of the EU upon entering it. In other words, the attempt to withdraw without settling the bill is seen as a post-factum rejection of the way the organization has been set-up. Importantly, leaving without paying your share is described as *not feasible* (something that cannot be done) rather than as rude, offensive, or unfair – that is, the imagined pub scenario is not described in any emotional terms.

All these construals create an evocative source situation which makes it clear that Brexit is not a rational idea – it involves losing strength, integrity and ability to function, or breaking the rules agreed upon earlier. All of the situations prompt inferences about why Brexit is a misconstrued project, but they do not appeal primarily to the hearer's/reader's emotions. If anything, they are inviting the reader to share the speaker's surprise at the UK's inability to see the flaws inherent in the idea of leaving the EU. It is interesting to note that the forms chosen are quite varied: A and B are expressions which suggest lack of feasibility in any context – we don't have to understand Brexit at all, or even think about it, to determine that taking the eggs out of the cake is not possible, and that a submarine made of cheese is not a sea-worthy vessel. Then, C. and D. rely on the conditional *if*, thus being explicit about the fact that an unreal situation is presented as a clear example of the inferences it yields. Importantly, the analogies proposed are quite humorous, showing the UK's refusal to look at the situation rationally as surprisingly naive.

As cognitive linguistic studies of figuration have suggested, using a specific frame as the source domain of a figurative mapping is made possible by mappings and concepts of a lower level. The most skeletal concepts are referred to as image-schemas, which are basic experiential patterns such as Container, Up/Down, Source-Path-Goal, etc. These foundational concepts can then motivate the use of so-called primary metaphors – mappings which reflect primary scenes of experience and thus connect an infant's early prelinguistic experiences with the emergent conceptualizations (cf. Grady 1997 and Johnson 1997). Primary metaphors such as MORE IS UP, MIND IS A CONTAINER or PURPOSIVE ACTION IS GOAL DIRECTED MOTION thus form a substrate of more complex metaphors and blends. The do not have to be explicitly referred to in order to prompt figurative thought.

It is important to note that, in conceptual terms, the A-D analogies rely on the very basic image-schematic level, proposing an understanding of EU membership in terms of cohesive structure, where the integrity of the whole is a reflection of the structural adjustment of each of the parts. That is, the structure of the EU is assumed

to be governed by primary metaphors such as ABSTRACT STRUCTURE IS PHYSICAL STRUCTURE, rather than the basic idea of Containment. Being 'in' the EU or leaving it (as the UK has been framing it) suggests a simple image schema of a Container, with objects placed inside or moved outside, without structural changes. This construal indeed makes the UK approach justifiable and does not include any need to adjust anything – it is just a plain act of removal of an object beyond the boundary. The critics quoted above propose a different construal – a structure where all components are integrated to form a coherent and stable whole. Under this construal, one cannot just remove something (e.g. eggs from the cake), and if a component is extracted, it would not be a well bounded and self-supporting object. A similar concept lies behind the teabag analogy – it may seem that taking the teabag out of a cup is again an extraction of an object from a container filled with fluid, which leaves the remaining substance intact, but the analogy suggests it is not a matter of containment, but increased strength derived from substances moving between the fluid and the immersed object.

The analogy in B relies on ABSTRACT STRUCTURE IS PHYSICAL STRUCTURE primary metaphor – the material in the analogy (cheese) does not allow one to build a stable structure, especially one resistant to water. This analogy is not so much about the structure of the EU, but about an attempt to achieve a result that will be stable and resilient. And finally, the pub analogy is about the shared responsibility and the spread of the weight supporting a complex structure. A plan such that every member contributes to keeping the structure 'standing' cannot be changed without re-weighing the responsibilities, and so a refusal to contribute as planned jeopardizes the stability of the whole structure (which would be captured by the PERSISTING IS REMAINING ERECT primary metaphor).

To sum up, the construals built in A-D require a careful one-off set-up and are not easy to extend (unlike in the case of metaphorical mappings). But they question the validity of the idea of Brexit by appealing to the reader's rationality and basic image-schemas and primary scenes of experience. The source domains built for the purpose represent unstable structures, rather than situations which would evoke specific emotions. It seems that these extended figures, depending on their nature and the expected construed response of the reader, can suggest various viewpoints on contentious ideas – such as Brexit.

The analogies discussed above provide a good ground for showing how similative construals are conceptually different. In what follows I will consider similative meaning in overt and covert comparisons, in two common types of similes – those that follow the pattern of either narrow-scope or broad-scope construction, and in narrativized similes. These similes are figurative expressions which construct experientially rich situations and appeal to readers' emotions.

3. Comparisons, similes, and similative meaning

As suggested above, using *X is like Y* similes is by far not the only formula for making comparisons, and the preposition *like* itself construes comparisons or similative meanings in combination with a range of verbs, and in constructions

(such as *be like* or *it's like if*). I have proposed above that the core of similative meaning is the focus on experiential aspects of the source situation, from basic perception (*Her room smells like a beauty salon*) to complex experiences of physical or emotional pain or pleasure. One more aspect of similative meaning was captured in earlier work as 'exaggerated' or 'vivid', but I suggest here that it is more specific – it is scalar. To sum up, similative meaning sets up a scale of experiential responses, such that the target situation (the one that the speaker describes) is put on that scale and compared to a (possibly unrealistic) source situation higher up the scale, representing the same experiential or emotional response.

3.1. Overt and covert comparisons

Examples of comparisons can easily be found in the informal discussions of Brexit. Example (4) shows how Jean-Claude Juncker described the communication with the UK during the Brexit negotiations, while example (5) represents what Boris Johnson said about the prospect of Jeremy Corbyn negotiating with the EU.

> (4) If I were to compare Great Britain to a sphinx, the sphinx would be an open book by comparison. And let's see how that book speaks over the next week, or so.
> (5) It would be a disaster. He would go into the negotiating chamber with all the authority of a smacked blancmange.

Examples (4) and (5) do not use an overt simile or a comparative construction, and yet their meaning describes two situations, source and target, where the source provides a one-off context in which the target can be construed. In both cases the source image is experientially evocative. In (4), the speaker expresses lack of satisfaction with UK's communicative choices. The source is a frame involving a mythical creature that either doesn't talk at all or speaks in riddles. In the context of negotiating a solution to a complex problem, that kind of behaviour is unhelpful and frustrating. In the construal proposed there are thus several components: an exaggerated example of non-cooperative communicative behaviour, which, in spite of being seemingly extreme, is lower on the scale of lack of communicative openness in comparison to the UK. Consequently, the emotional response of the EU negotiators is also intense. The comparison thus allows the listener to gauge the level of frustration that the EU is experiencing. Example (5) also suggests a scale of source frames representing authority and aligning the potential contribution of the political opponent with an image of a malleable and misshapen object (a soft dessert) – thus suggesting no authority at all. These comparisons represent a similative construal – a scale of experientially evocative situations or objects, where an exaggerated example of the source situation profiles an emotional response and an evaluation of the experiential/emotional reaction to the target event. In the context of Brexit, the examples are also remarkable in construing the negative sides of the handling of the negotiation – inability to communicate effectively or displaying lack of strength and authority. In contrast to analogies in A-D, they appeal to emotional or experiential reactions, rather than pointing out flaws in the reasoning.

Examples (4) and (5) represent similative construals, even though they do not use the form of simile. Example (4) uses a hypothetical comparison (actually signalling the comparison twice – with the verb *compare* and the phrase *by comparison*). The sphinx sets up a rather extreme example of failing to communicate (surely, riddles are not prime examples of informativeness), and so a comparison which suggests that the UK says even less is quite damning. In (4), the crucial expression is *all the authority of,* which sets up a scale of objects evoking authority, and putting a boundary of how high Corbyn's authority could go on that scale. The object selected as such an extreme example is a blancmange – a popular dessert, which is soft and jelly-like, the very opposite of anything exuding authority, and additionally described as *smacked* – possibly flattened or misshapen. In both cases similative meaning is construed without *like*, via the setting up of a comparative scale of examples of the feature is question (informativeness, authority), where the target is represented as comparable to an exaggerated salient example. Example (4) uses the explicit verb of comparison and (5) relies on the *all of* expression, and in both cases the meaning is inherently scalar. Importantly, both express the speaker's emotional response to the experience being described – frustration caused by inability to communicate and deep disregard for the political opponent. These comparative construals are thus different from the structural analogies discussed in A-D. In what follows I will look more closely at similes and their construal of Brexit.

3.2. Narrow-scope and broad-scope similes

Similes differ in how easy it for a hearer to access the link between the source and the target. With this criterion in mind, Moder defines two types of similes, in terms of their discourse behaviour. Narrow-scope similes can be used without additional context because they provide enough information about the source and the target by selecting appropriately evocative expressions. For example, a sentence such as *This house is like a palace* compares two types of buildings and clearly determines the difference in terms of size or opulence. Typically, narrow-scope similes refer to features which are readily accessible in experience, and hence are often focused on perception. Broad-scope similes, for comparison, require an 'elaboration' – an explanation of the nature of the conceptual link between the source and the target. One of Moder's examples describes a town in Texas as *a reality which is like those 3-D pictures of Jesus. It changes depending on your perspective*. The NP following *like* is not easily applied to the concept of a town, and thus the unique connection between source and target has to be explicitly provided. No such effect can be achieved through narrow scope similes.

In the discourse of Brexit, both similes are found. Two examples of narrow-scope similes are provided in (6):

> (6) Leaving the EU is a negotiation, […] What we don't want to find is that at the first tap it falls apart **like** a chocolate orange. It needs to be coming through **like** a cricket ball, he said.

The similes in this example both use source domains that are immediately recognizable as describing structural integrity (PERSISTING IS REMAINING ERECT) and striking power. These domains are experientially unambiguous and are thus good candidates for narrow scope similes. An elaboration of the nature of the conceptual projection from source to target is not required, because of the clear indication of the difference between an object which easily loses its integrity, and another one (also round and easy to handle) which can be used to strike its target with considerable force. It is interesting to note that narrow-scope similes seem rare in the discourse of Brexit. Apparently, the complexity of Brexit does not yield itself easily to experiential and naturally accessible domains as sources. Broad scope similes, including appropriate elaboration, are thus more common. I am including three such examples here:

(7) #Brexit is **like** consent. Just because you said yes three years ago doesn't mean you can't change your mind
(8) Q: Why is #Brexit **like** a Spectrum Pursuit Vehicle?
    A: It's fast, exciting, totally imaginary, and the driver is facing backwards
(9) "It is a bit **like** the Gandhi thing — first they laugh at you, then they attack you, and then you win." (said by former UKIP leader Paul Nuttall)

There are some interesting similarities and differences among the three examples. They are all broad-scope similes, in that the initial sentences do not specify the specific dimension of comparison across the source and the target. As Dancygier and Sweetser (2014) have argued, simile is a limited-scope blend, which means that it creates a projection link between the two domains along just one dimension. As a result, the inferences are drawn not by creating more connections between the source and the target (which would be the case in conceptual metaphor), but rather by applying the aspect of comparison specified in the elaboration to the target. Example (7) is very useful as an illustration here. Brexit is compared to "consent", which is a one time, linguistically simple acquiescence to a proposal, while anybody who has observed the developments knows very well that arriving at consent has taken a long time and even after the formal departure from the EU has been announced there remained numerous crucial issues that still await a resolution and may never reach that stage. So most of the assumed implications of consent do not apply to Brexit. However, the similarity is claimed to hold only along the one dimension clarified in the elaboration – that the approval by referendum can be annulled by another one, or by other legal means. The proposed license to 'change your mind' was and still is an emotional and contentious issue, as Theresa May's *Brexit means Brexit* mantra has been used repeatedly to deny the UK citizens the right to re-think their decision.

Example (8) belongs to the very numerous category of *Why is X like Y?* jokes, often relying on pun and other such ambiguities. For example, there are numerous jokes about the nature of men, formulated within this pattern (e.g. *Why are men like mascara? Because they run at the slightest sign of emotion*). In the case of (8), the listener/reader does not even have to know what a Spectrum Pursuit Vehicle is

(I admit I still don't), but the elaboration explains what the joke-teller means – the idea may be exciting, but it is unrealistic and dangerous. From the perspective of the passenger's experience, travelling in a fast vehicle whose driver can't see where they are going cannot be desired. Somewhat similarly to internet memes (Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2019), where top text often introduces a topic, while the bottom text adds a comment, such similes first pose an unanswerable question (there is really nothing in common between men and mascara or Brexit and imaginary vehicles) and then reveal the only way in which the source presents the target in a new (and emotionally revealing) way ('Men do not like women to show their emotions'/ 'Brexit is a spurious and dangerous idea').

Example (9) also illustrates broad-scope simile well, as it seeks to compare UKIP's success with the referendum result to Gandhi's success in making India a free country. However, the example is really a cross between typical broad-scope similes (such as (7) and (8)) and the narrativized similes to be considered in the next section. On the one hand, there is the element of surprise (UKIP and Gandhi seem to belong to very different frames), but on the other hand the similarity is revealed in the elaboration through detailing the stages leading from not being taken seriously to winning. There is also the (even more disturbing) suggestion that freeing the UK from the EU is in any way similarly courageous and desirable as freeing India from colonial rule. The parallels are clear, even if unfair. I consider this example to be a cross between an ordinary broad-scope simile (the surprising comparison followed by an explanation of the profiled dimension of comparison) and a narrativized simile (where the similarity constructed is in the emotional impact of the story, not in the nature of what the story describes). Further examples of stories used in constructing similative meaning are discussed in section 4.

4. Narrativized similes

Simile in its basic form refers to perception, feeling, and emotional or epistemic stance (*sounds like, looks like, feels like, seems like*, *is like*, etc.). As I suggested above, simile (*X is like Y* or other constructions), as opposed to inferential analogy (such as the ones in A-D), evokes an emotional or experiential response. As the examples above show, the similative construal requires several components: comparison, scalar meaning, focus on a specific situation, and an experiential or emotional core of the comparison. Brexit, as we could see in the examples above, provides an unusually complex target domain, hence the variety of forms used. There is, however, an aspect of Brexit which requires a separate treatment – and that is the fact that Brexit is a story, and thus evokes emotions in the reader in the same way in which fictional stories do. It is a series of events developing over time, it profiles two protagonists (the EU and the UK), it sets up a conflict between them, and goes through various stages, (presumably) leading to a resolution. But it is also an emotional story, where both opponents have their hopes and desires, where they both attempt to overcome obstacles, and where they both are dealing with large groups of people either supporting them or not. And finally, the observer is

responding similarly to a reader of a novel – expecting that the events lead to a resolution of the conflicts set-up without complicating the plot unnecessarily or allowing precious narrative time to pass without moving the story forward.

When looking through the collection of "Brexit is like X" tweets, published by Aoife Kelly, we find the Twitter users' reactions to Brexit as a(n) (un)satisfying narrative. Interestingly, they make a number of types of comparisons, while focusing on two things: the expectations regarding a good story and the emotional reaction to the narrative not reaching a satisfactory conclusion. The most representative tweets are quoted below, in examples (10) to (15):

> (10) Brexit is **like** half the country rang the bell on the bus by accident, and now they feel like they have to get off even though it's the wrong stop.
> (11) Realising that this whole Brexit thing is **like** season 6 of a show I stopped watching partway through season 3. I keep hearing stuff but I have no clue what is going on, or even if it's still the original cast.
> (12) Late stage Brexit is **like** one of those viral videos where a lad is shoveling snow and then hilariously slips and takes a long time to fall.
> (13) The handling of Brexit is **like** procrastinating a uni project until the last day only to realise it is way harder than you thought so you beg the lecturer for an extension. And then procrastinate some more loool
> (14) Brexit is **like** the disastrous wedding in a romantic movie and you are waiting for Richard Gere or Hugh Grant to burst in and call the whole thing off but they never do and then you realise it isn't a romantic movie but a really long tragic arthouse movie and you can't escape.
> (15) Brexit is starting to feel **like** the writers for the purge movies got asked to redo the backstory but they are having a really hard time with writer's block right now.

The most striking feature of the tweets is how they refer to a range of narrative events as the source domain of their comparison: a bus ride, a TV show (which goes through several seasons), a viral video, completing a university project, a movie. What the tweets target is not so much the nature of the narrative (types of characters, entertainment value, how interesting the story is, etc.), but the fact that stories are expected to reach a resolution at some predictable point. In other words, a successful narrative leads the reader, observer, or viewer through various events and episodes, creates expectations and suspense, but leads to a closure before the observer stops paying attention. The recurring theme of the tweets is how the Brexit story does not lead to a satisfying and timely closure. Jointly the tweets are focused on the emotional (rather than political, economic, or international) aspects of Brexit, both with regard to the primary participants and from the perspective of the observer.

Example (10) is the only tweet which suggests that the narrative is a result of a mistake, combined with the insistence to accept the unintended outcome. In narrative terms, this presents the protagonists as going ahead with the wrong solution by attributing an emotional stance to them (*they feel like they have to get off*: sense of obligation). What we expect in a typical narrative context is that the

protagonists would attempt to repair their mistakes. In a way, the desire to do the right thing should be stronger than the unwillingness to show weakness by admitting one has made a mistake. The situation set up by the tweet (a bus ride) is a type of Journey, and thus assumes that the travellers have a destination in mind. Ending the journey at the wrong place implies serious consequences – such as not knowing where to go next, being thrown into a situation one is not prepared for, etc. Evoking the Journey frame (which can metaphorically stand for any long-term purposeful activity) and implying reaching an undesirable destination allows the reader to draw many negative metaphorical entailments, such as lack of ability or determination to reach the right goal, inability to tell what the desired goal should look like, yielding to emotions such as protecting one's ego, rather than admitting a mistake, etc. Simple as it is, the tweet is rich in emotional and evaluative stance.

Importantly, the sentential structure of the tweet in (10) is not a typical *X is like Y*, where Y is an NP. Instead, what follows *like* is the entire narrative (which I will refer to as a Z), starting with half the country ringing the bell to get off by mistake. A similar structure (*X is like Z*) is used in (15) and (16). These choices suggest that the presence of *like* is treated less in terms of a traditional comparison, and more as a prompt to consider the discourse that follows (however long and syntactically complex) as a ground for evocation of the targeted emotional response. The meaning of such construals overrides the expected constructional features. For comparison, in (11), the Twitter user made an effort to refer to the story as an NP (*this whole Brexit thing*), apparently to stick to the expected form.

In the cases where *like* is followed by an NP such as *a viral video* or *season 6* of a show the narrative construal of Brexit is clear, and the evaluation is based on the expectations one typically has of an entertainment show. In (11) the story is expected to hold your attention enough that you do not tune out to the degree that you can't follow the story anymore. And (12) refers to an event which is in fact instantaneous, to highlight the comical lack of control represented by visually spreading a fall through time. I do not want to speculate whether this Twitter user chose a Fall frame as an example for a reason. Finally, (13) creates a parallel story of procrastination and inability to complete the task, but from the perspective of a student. The slow pace and the apparent lack of focus seem to be primary reasons for dissatisfaction with the Brexit narrative.

Example (14) also refers to a narrative – a romantic movie – for a comparison, but, somewhat surprisingly, chooses 'a disastrous wedding' as the event to compare Brexit to. The irony should have been clear (Brexit has been talked about as a difficult divorce), but the choice suggests that what matters in this simile is the genre of the narrative – the film was expected to be light entertainment, but problems are not solved as they would be in a romantic comedy and so it is watched as an ambitious but grim production which the viewer cannot enjoy at all.

The examples also share another interesting formal feature. Once the narrative expectations are set up, many of the examples use coordinating conjunctions such as *but, but then, and, and then* to signal why or how the narrative does not live up

to the expectations – the desired outcome is delayed, mistakes are not corrected, the plot develops in unsatisfying ways, etc., so that the 'story of Brexit' appears to be a poorly designed story. The response of bemusement, boredom, and becoming tired with the never-ending narrative permeates all the examples. These are thus not analogies or metaphors where the nature of Brexit is compared structurally to another concept. The examples cited are similative in nature – they set up an exaggerated and transparent situation for comparison which allows the Twitter users to express their emotional or experiential response. The situation created to profile the emotional response is easily accessible experientially and marked with a specific range of emotions.

Another group of narrativized Brexit similes relies on a social situation as the source. In the three examples below, the events reported have the protagonists ready to leave the current situation, but unable to actually take appropriate action (not leaving in spite announcing it or not being able to choose the substitute for the situation abandoned). In each of these scenarios the shared concept is apparent determination to make a change, but then not being able to decide what could be done to achieve it or make it a change for the better.

> (16) Brexit is **like** when that one friend slaps their knees and loudly proclaims "RIGHT, I'm away." but then they just carry on sitting there.
> (17) Brexit is **like** a group of friends having a great evening in a fantastic pub and then deciding to go to another pub, but then everyone has a massive argument about which pub to go to and they end up stumbling from pub to pub secretly wishing that they'd stayed in the first pub.
> (18) I think I have managed to pinpoint what the Commons' approach to Brexit **reminds me of** and it is exactly **like** having a group of friends at a festival & you all agree you don't want to go to the main stage but argue for so long about where to go instead that you miss all the gigs.

Furthermore, in (16), the grammatical structure is unusual: *like* refers to a situation, introduced with the temporal conjunction *when*. In an ordinary context we would expect *when* to introduce two events (or types of events), such that one temporally (and also causally) follows another: *When you heat up water sufficiently long, it will boil*. Interestingly, as Lou has observed (2017), the standard constructional pattern is also not used in the so-called *when*-memes. Such memes follow the introductory *when* clause (such as *When people say they are open-minded*) not with the main clause, but with an image which represents how one feels in such a situation (in this case, it is an image of a can of food with a double lid – you pull off one, but there is another one underneath). Lou describes *when* memes as multimodal similes, because they use multiple modalities (text and image) to describe how the meme-maker feels about the situation described by the *when*-clause. Grammatically, such formulas are not complete linguistic structures, but as memes they perform the similative job unambiguously. It seems that in the tweet a similar formula is followed.

The tweets discussed above all use *like* to construct similative meaning, but they are not typical similes in several ways. They compare the idea of Brexit to various narratives, from the perspective of how successful these stories are as forms of entertainment. This approach explains why *like* cannot be followed by a simple NP. Instead, the structure that follows, even if grammatically unusual, has to construct a narrative which fails as a good story in ways in which Brexit fails as a good story. The primary criticism in these tweets is the slow pace and unclear focus, so that the 'story of Brexit' annoys those who follow it because it lacks clear purpose, quick pace and a swift, satisfying resolution. One might be concerned about why those Twitter users even care about Brexit having the features of a good story, as the criticism formulated in this way omits the crucial aspects of the 'story' – its political, international, and economic impact. But in fact, these tweets are not evaluating Brexit as such – they are only showing why its inability to reach a satisfying closure is disconcerting, boring, disappointing, etc. In other words, these tweets are not about Brexit, they are about emotional responses to its (lack of) progress.

5. Conclusion

This paper argues that different figurative forms address different aspects of Brexit. There are inference-rich analogies (such as A-D above) which offer a critical apprehension of Brexit as an idea, but do not evoke emotional responses. But also, there are comparisons and similes which select one specific aspect of Brexit and use a vivid and exaggerated concept (the sphinx, a damaged dessert, an imaginary vehicle, sexual consent, etc.) to profile an aspect of Brexit they are evaluating (so that describing the UK as a sphinx applies only to their informativeness in the context of the negotiations, rather than the whole idea). These examples confirm that similes rely on one selected dimension of comparison, construct a scale of examples and select an exaggerated example to compare the target behavior to it. And then there are the narrativized similes on Twitter which do not comment on the idea, the participants, or the expected outcome, because they are focused entirely on Brexit as a story. The Twitter user is someone watching the show, and, in most cases, finding it boring, too long, not well-constructed and not reaching a swift-enough conclusion. These emotional responses are structured on the basis of what is expected of a good story and the disappointment Brexit has been in this respect. At the same time, these extended examples, where various stages of the narrative have to be mentioned, accept various complex grammatical forms (so that, for example, the preposition *like* can be followed by a sentence or several clauses, rather than an NP).

The examples considered suggest some observations about similative meaning and form. As regards meaning, we have seen some very clear differences between inferential analogies and experiential similes. The analogies A-D discussed at the beginning of this paper seek examples which would reveal the perceived structural features of an event such as Brexit. Their form is quite varied, because what counts is capturing the concept which would best represent the very nature of Brexit. As

we have also seen, such choices have important inferential consequences – removing an object (UK) from a container (EU) seems easy, and so the analogies show clearly that the required figurative construct has to reflect the degree of integration of the UK with the EU.

Other examples (overt and covert comparisons, scalar construals, narrow-scope and broad-scope similes) set up a scale of experiences, such that an exaggerated example serving as the source allows one to construe the target (Brexit) in experiential terms. Finally, the narrativized Twitter similes narrow down the scope of the comparison even further, by focusing on evaluating Brexit from the perspective of it being a not-quite-satisfying story.

The variety and scope of these figurative expressions suggest some observations about the way in which such complex and temporally spread events are presented in the media. None of the texts referred to here presents a thorough political or economic analysis. Instead, they focus on how ordinary citizens conceptualize Brexit and how they respond to its delivery – and, importantly, the construals address issues other than the standard discussion of Leave versus Remain stances. The media outlets engaging readers in such considerations are perhaps not best known for their high-level political commentary, but they do make an effort to connect to UK citizens and the ways in which they respond to the puzzling and uncomfortable issue, adjusting it to the level of experience of an ordinary citizen. Even when political agents are quoted (as in the *Politico* article), they speak informally about their experiences.

And then there are the Twitter similes. We can assume, based on the types of events and artifacts chosen as source domains, that the Twitter users quoted by Aoife Kelly are members of a younger generation – possibly students. It is surprising to see how consistent these responses are in what they focus on – the unattractiveness of the story developing through weeks, months and years, without much hope for a resolution. As I am writing these words, the Brexit saga is closed, the deal has been approved and is being implemented. So why does it feel like it is not over yet? Why are there still disputes and disagreements? Perhaps the nature of this cataclysmic political event is that it will never be completely resolved? Is it indeed a story worth watching?

But beyond the sources of the figurative construal discussed above, the examples considered here clarify at least two things – the nature of similative form and of similative meaning. The examples confirm what earlier work on metaphors of Brexit (Charteris-Black 2019) has observed – that figurative forms (of all kinds) are a necessary tool in conceptualizing unfamiliar experiences, especially since they go well beyond a dry and rational analyses offered by specialists. They appeal to our reasoning skills (like analogies) or they reflect the way in which events are experienced. Furthermore, the examples suggest that English speakers have a number of forms at their disposal.[8]

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[8] I have deliberately not included a separate discussion of metaphors of Brexit. First of all, they have been discussed quite thoroughly by Charteris-Black (2019). But also, the goal of this paper has been to contrast two ways of using figuration to frame a contentious issue – a rational one and an

As regards simile as such, though, the differences in formal structure go far beyond the observations made by Moder (2008, 2010), about the different nature of narrow scope and broad scope similes. The narrativized similes discussed would seem similar to broad-scope similes in that the artifacts evoked (films, shows, social events) do not propose a clear ground for comparison without an explanation. But the kind of elaboration Moder talked about (usually one sentence long) would not be sufficient in these cases, since the Twitter users are constructing a story to match their perception of Brexit as a story. The examples quoted thus rely on coordinate conjunctions *and, but* or *and then/but then*, in order to develop the narrative in the way that demonstrates its poor structure, lack of pace, or its disappointing conclusion. Also, the stories following *like* in the tweets can deviate from the expected NP structure, or at least a gerund form which would typically follow the preposition *like*, while introducing a new sentence that starts the story (*like the writers for the purge movies got asked to redo the backstory* or *like half the country rang the bell on the bus by accident*), or even starting with a *when*-clause, more or less in the way used in *when*-memes. The use of *like* in these cases resembles the construction such as *be like* (*And I'm like, I can't believe it*), but it is also unique in its narrative structure. Still, what we are seeing is a contextual extension of the formula that simile typically depends on.

What is more, some of the comparisons found do not rely on *like* at all. My final example is (19), coined by Frans Timmermans (Vice President of the European Commission), which shows a UKIP party representative as refusing to admit the self-inflicted irreparable damage of Brexit, while focusing on the imagined harm to the EU. This one uses the verb *remind*, rather than similative *like*, to express amazement at how much in denial some of the Brexit proponents are. It is thus another instance of similative framing of an emotional response by referring to a story that evokes similar emotions.

> (19) "To say that the whole European Union is going to suffer terribly in the G20 because of Brexit is a bit rich, frankly. Mr. [Raymond] Finch really **reminds me of** a character created by John Cleese in Monty Python's 'The Holy Grail;' the Black Knight, who after being defeated terribly and having all of his limbs cut off, says to his opponent: 'Let's call it a draw.'"

One might also note that looking at the responses to Brexit offered via witty quips, jocular analogies or social media sites reveals the need for giving expression to feelings of frustration and disappointment, and doing so independently of the

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emotional one. Metaphors in discourse often combine both framings, but are typically not focused on the emotional or experiential side alone. For example, a metaphor such as BREXIT IS A DIVORCE is primarily structural in nature (two parties, conjoined in a legally binding relationship, need to separate while making sure that their obligations are respected), though it may evoke the emotional aspects of the separation. However, the legal union and approved ways to separate are at the core of the proceeding in any divorce, and they at the core, though on a much larger scale, of Brexit. This metaphor confirms one of the central goals of metaphorical thinking – finding a source domain (Divorce) which simplifies and clarifies the nature of the target domain (Brexit).

mainstream media discussion. In the context of shifting attitudes towards traditional sources of information and well-tested outlets of journalistic commentary, the role of these less serious channels, where emotions can flow freely, seems to be increasing. Looking in more detail at how the low-brow media play an important role in public discourse might help us understand better how complex events require numerous, and equally complex figurative construals. At the same time, we can learn more about the roles various forms of figuration play in public discourse.

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