SIMILE IN ENGLISH: FROM DESCRIPTION TO TRANSLATION

Patrizia Pierini

Università di Roma Tre

pierini AT uniroma3 it

Abstract

Simile is much less investigated than metaphor, although it occurs as frequently in discourse. This paper aims to provide an account of similes in English, which serves as the starting point for an exploration of the problems they can pose when translated into Italian. First, it deals with the nature and function of similes, the criteria for their classification, and their interpretation. Then, it examines a range of similes illustrating the translation problems they can pose, and discusses the strategies to adopt for each problem stated. The data discussed are taken from English texts belonging to various textual genres, and their translations into Italian.

Keywords: simile, figures of speech, translation, translation strategies.

1. **Introduction**

While metaphor has attracted interest and research in a number of different disciplines — philosophy, linguistics, cognitive psychology, literary theory and criticism — with an extraordinary amount of papers and books on the subject, simile is much less investigated. The same is true in Translations Studies, where the translation of metaphor has been treated in many studies, e.g. Newmark (1981:84-96), Newmark (2001:104-113), Snell-Hornby (1995:55-64) and Toury (1995:81-84), while the translation of simile is, when referred to, simply mentioned in passing (Newmark 1981:88).

Simile is a figure of speech used in general language as well as specialized language, in everyday conversation as well as literary, journalistic and promotional texts. Research on simile is carried out within rhetoric (e.g. Mortara Garavelli 2002: 251-252), literary studies (e.g. Wellek & Warren 1973:186-211), linguistics and psycholinguistics (Ortony 1993; Miller 1993; Bredin 1998), often discussing simile along with metaphor.

This study aims to provide an account of similes in English, which serves as the starting point for an exploration of the problems they can pose when translated into Italian. Central to my discussion are the concepts of 'translation problem' and 'translation strategy', rooted in the view of translating as a problem-solving process (Pierini 2001), where the problem identification is followed by decision-making in selecting the appropriate procedure of problem-solving (Wills 1998). The two concepts, debated in translation theory, are intended as follows: a 'problem' is constituted by a divergence between the source language - culture and the target language - culture; a 'strategy' is a generalization about typical courses-of-action exhibited by professional translators (Neubert & Shreve 1992:52-53). Translation strategies are recognized as being universal, namely, independent of the languages involved in the translation process (Laviosa 1998). Operationally, they are the standard tools of the trade, the procedures offering a solution to the various types of problems encountered in the translation task (Chesterman 1997:87-112).

The paper is organized into five sections. Sections 2, 3 and 4 deal with the nature and function of similes, the criteria for their classification, and their recognition and

interpretation. Section 5 investigates a range of similes illustrating the translation problems they can pose, and discusses the strategies to adopt for each problem stated. Section 6 draws the main conclusions. The data discussed are examples taken from English texts belonging to various textual genres, and their translations into Italian.

2. **Nature and function of similes**

Simile is an ancient rhetorical practice: from the Bible to contemporary texts, simile is ever present in discourse. Ever since Quintilian, it has been numbered among the figures of speech: some, like alliteration, are phonetic; others, such as syllepsis, are syntactic; others again are semantic, such as metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. Simile 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. Comparing entities leads to, and concludes with, a judgement, i.e. a statement that can have an affirmative or a negative form: the affirmative form asserts likeness between the entities compared (*The sun is like an orange*), and the negative one denies likeness (*The sun is not like an orange*).

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 1995:73-74), consisting of: 'topic', or *comparandum*, (the entity described by the simile); 'vehicle', or *comparatum*, (the entity to which the topic is compared), accompanied by a comparison marker; 'similarity feature(s)' (the properties shared by topic and vehicle), which can be expressed explicitly or left unsaid. The entities compared can be persons, objects or processes.

Both simile and metaphor establish a connection between two entities, but the two figures differ in three respects: simile compares the entities, while metaphor conceptually assimilates them to one another (Bredin 1998); the former can be literal or non-literal, the latter is only non-literal; the former is signalled by a variety of comparison markers, the latter has no surface marker. Probably, there is also a difference in impact: a simile usually has less power, suggestiveness and effectiveness

than a (good) metaphor. In literary texts, we can find similes mingled inextricably with metaphors, enhancing each other's effect. Simile also differs from analogy, intended in its narrower sense (Miller 1993): the former involves two entities, while the latter involves four, since it is patterned following the arithmetic relation of proportionality, e.g. 3:4::9:12, as in *The toes are to the foot as the fingers are to the hand*. In my analysis, I shall also deal with analogies because they are statements of similarity.

Similes can fulfil various functions (Fromilhague 1995:88-94). 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 fulfil more specific functions depending on the textual genre in which they occur. In scientific texts, comparison and analogical reasoning play an important role[1]. In argumentation, similes (and analogies) are used in two ways: a) as exegetic tools in order to clarify and explain points, as in (1):

(1) The Direct Method differed from the Natural Method only in its attempts to find a scientific rationale for its procedures. <u>Like</u> the Natural Method the Direct Method aimed at presenting language to the pupil without making him resort to grammatical analysis.[2]

b) as devices in order to develop and construct new theoretical concepts, as in (2):

(2) <u>Like</u> genes, memes are replicators.[3]

In popularisation, similes serve to establish a direct link with the reader's general knowledge, which makes the topic easier to identify (Gotti 2003: 296). Consider, for example, the description of a mystery mollusc observed in the deep in (3):

(3) A ghostly creature <u>resembling</u> a cross between a megaphone and Thing, the Adams Family pet hand, floats on the screen [4].

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[1] Questions about similarities appear in many IQ tests, such as 'How are X and Y alike?'.
[2] Kelly L.G., *25 Centuries of Language Teaching*, Rowley, Newbury House, p. 12.
[3] Chesterman (1997:5).

In textbooks, they are used as pedagogic aids to teach abstract or unfamiliar concepts by employing concepts known by students, as in (4):

(4) An atom is <u>like</u> a miniature solar system.

In journalistic texts, similes can be used as an ornament, but in most cases they serve a function: illustrating behaviours or individual experiences, as in (5); describing entities in an appealing way to add interest, as in the description of a tropical beach (6):

(5) "It was, she says, <u>like</u> belonging to a very exclusive, exciting club".[5]

(6) Lapping a headland, the shallow water is <u>as clear as a paperweight</u> embedded with shells and pebbles.[6]

In advertising texts, we can find hyperbolic statements, such as

(7) Colour <u>like</u> no other. BRAVIA New LCD Television.

which denies a likeness between the promoted product and others.

In literary texts — be it fiction, poetry or drama — similes fulfil an aesthetic function, and are usually creative, a way of talking about something in a surprising way, as in the following examples:

(8) Let us go then, you and I,
   When the evening is spread against the sky
   <u>Like</u> a patient etherised upon a table[7].

(9) The morning light in the living room was <u>like</u> dish-water, pouring in under the grubby scalloped edge of the scooped-up curtains[8].

In Eliot's verses, the similarity statement is contrived resuming the Baroque practice of associating the natural world and man's domain of crafts and artifices (Wellek &

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[4] Morell V., "Way Down Deep", *National Geographic Magazine*, June 2004, p. 42.
[5] Leigh D., "The spy who loved me", *The Guardian Europe*, October 2 2002.
[6] Symington M., "Do you Know the Way to Saõ Tomé?", *Travel* (The Sunday Times Magazine), January 2006, p.100.
[7] Eliot T.S., "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" in *The Waste Land and Other Poems*, London, Faber & Faber, 1972.

Warren 1973: 198-199), producing a memorable simile. In the descriptive statement (8), Riley's simile serves to create estrangement.

In literary texts, we can also find an original use of standard similes, as in (10):

(10) Just <u>like</u> little dogs[9].

(10) is the title of a short story where the subject (i.e. the topic) and the verb are omitted. It will be interpreted by the reader at the end of the narrative: two young men (the topic) are compared to little dogs (the vehicle) attributing to them the reckless behaviour of young animals that play and are not aware of the consequences of their actions.

3. Classifying similes

Scholars have applied various criteria to classify similes. A basic distinction is that between objective, originating from concrete physical experience, and subjective similes, stemming from individual association mechanisms, namely, 'actually seeing as' vs. 'thinking as' (Fromilhague 1995: 77-78). Another classification is that grounded in the semantic distinction between literal and non-literal comparisons (Ortony 1993), as illustrated by the following examples:

(11) Blackberries are <u>like</u> raspberries.
(12) Crime is <u>like</u> a disease.

(11) is a literal simile, (12) a non-literal one. In non-literal similes, topic and vehicle are not symmetrical: the terms denoting the two entities cannot be reversed; if they are reversed, the simile may become meaningless (e.g. *A disease is like crime*), or its meaning may change substantially (e.g. *Surgeons are like butchers* vs. *Butchers are like surgeons*). Conversely, in literal similes, the terms can be reversed (e.g. *Raspberries are like blackberries*). Furthermore, non-literal similes can drop *like* (e.g. *Crime is a disease*), while literal ones cannot (e.g. * *Blackberries are raspberries*).

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[8] Riley G., *Tuesday Nights and Wednesday Mornings*, New York, Carroll & Graf, 2004, p. 171.
[9] Thomas D., *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*, London, Dent & Sons Ltd, 1971, p. 62.

Taking into consideration Bredin's (1998: 77) remark about the mortality of similes, we can state that similes show various degrees of life and death, and fall along a scale going from the most stereotyped to the most creative. At one extreme, we situate conventionalised similes, the type of fixed expressions stored as units in the lexis. At the other extreme, we situate creative similes, where a totally unexpected and surprising vehicle is associated with the topic. Between the two extremes, we can situate standard (ordinary) and original (fresh, but not totally unexpected) similes. Consider the following examples:

(13) This meat is <u>as tough as old boot leather</u>.
(14) He is <u>like</u> a father to her.
(15) Encyclopaedias are <u>like</u> gold mines.
(16) She [Desdemona] was false <u>as</u> water[10].

(13) is an idiomatic simile; (14) is quite ordinary, (15) is fresh, while (16) is creative: Desdemona is compared to water, which lacks fixed shape, to attribute her the property of fickleness.

Another distinction, suggested by Fromilhague (1995:83-84), is that between similes that mention the similarity feature, such as (13) and (16), and the ones that do not, such as (14) and (15). Thus, we can distinguish between 'explicit' similes, that can also carry an explanation (e.g. *Music is <u>like</u> medicine because it takes away the pain*) (Roncero *et al.* 2006), and 'implicit' similes, that leave the onus of interpretation to the reader.

4. Recognition and interpretation of similes

Similes are easily recognisable by the presence of one of a variety of comparison markers. In English, the available markers include the following:
a)   verbs: *seem, look like*, *act like*, *sound like, resemble*, *remind;*
b)   adjectives: *similar to*, *the same as*;
c)   nouns: *a sort of*, *some kind of*;

d) prepositions (in comparative phrases): *like*, *as*[11];

e) conjunctions (in comparative clauses): *as if/though*, *as when*.

Such markers are not interchangeable: they impose different syntactic requirements on the constituents being compared, and often have different meanings. For example, *be like* signals a clear similarity, while *be a sort of* a loose similarity; the verb *seem* can signal both an objective and subjective similarity, while *remind* signals a subjective one (i.e. 'thinking of x as'). They also occur in different registers: *similar to* and *resemble* occur most typically in written, more formal discourse.

We can also observe compressed similes, realized in various ways, such as:

f) N-*like* adjectives: *native-like proficiency*;

g) N-*shaped* adjectives: *an L-shaped room;*

h) N-*style*: *Star Trek-style command seat*;

i) N-*type* adjectives: *terrorist-type offences*;

j) N + N: *bow tie*.

The compound adjectives are a way of compressing information into a two-word lexeme, where N functions as vehicle. They typically occur in attributive position, and are an alternative to a full relative clause, e.g. *proficiency which is like that of a native*. They are formed exploiting highly productive processes and, with the exception of some established words (e.g. *child-like*), are not listed in dictionaries, being created *ad hoc* according to the writer's communicative needs (Huddleston & Pullum 2002:1630, 1656, 1711)[12].

The N (vehicle) + N (topic) sequences are 'covert' similes without any surface marker; for this reason, they are not easily recognisable. Some are lexicalized (e.g. *bow tie*), but many are novel (e.g. *She wore her <u>Marilyn Monroe wig</u>*), since the juxtaposition of nouns is an extremely productive device. Novel sequences can be interpreted as similes by inferring the semantic relation between the two nouns (i.e. 'head resembles modifier') from the discursive context.

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[10] W. Shakespeare, *Othello*, London, Methuen, V, ii, verse 135.

[11] Some markers can convey various values: e.g. *as* can also mean 'when', 'while', 'since', 'in the role of'; *seem* is also used to diminish the force of a following infinitive to be polite, or noncommittal.

[12] There is another group of compound adjectives, i.e. comparative N-Adj (e.g. *bone- dry*), which are the short versions of similes (e.g. *as dry as a bone*); the effect is to intensify: *bone- dry* means 'completely dry'. Since most of them are lexicalized, they will not be examined here.

N + N sequences, as well as compound adjectives, tend to occur in written, rather formal genres, such as fiction, newspaper articles and academic prose (Biber *et al.* 1999: 535-36, 592-93). Gotti (2003: 271) registers their presence in specialized discourse, e.g. *drum-type* in *drum-type printer*, and *butterfly valve*, which refer to the aspect or the category of an item.

Though a simile is easily recognised, it is not always easily understood: in most cases, the reader has to discover the aspect(s) for the claimed similarity[13], and this is the central problem in the interpretation of similes (Chiappe & Kennedy 2001: 270-71). First, the reader will look for the properties of the vehicle that either match properties of the topic, or that can be attributed to the topic. S/he will extract them from the lexical meaning of the vehicle, or activate world knowledge (what the reader knows about the two entities), while processing the discursive context. Then, the reader will transfer the identified properties (or features) from the vehicle to the topic; the vehicle preserves all its features, while the topic is 'enriched' (Fig. 1). Certain features belonging to the topic are highlighted, or novel features not belonging to the topic are added.

TRIGGER: comparison marker (in covert similes, simile-inducing context)
↓
PROCESSING: identification and transference of vehicle features
          to topic resulting in

                          ↓
                     ENRICHED TOPIC

CONNECTION: 'full' vehicle remains active   topic is foregrounded
                as backdrop for further
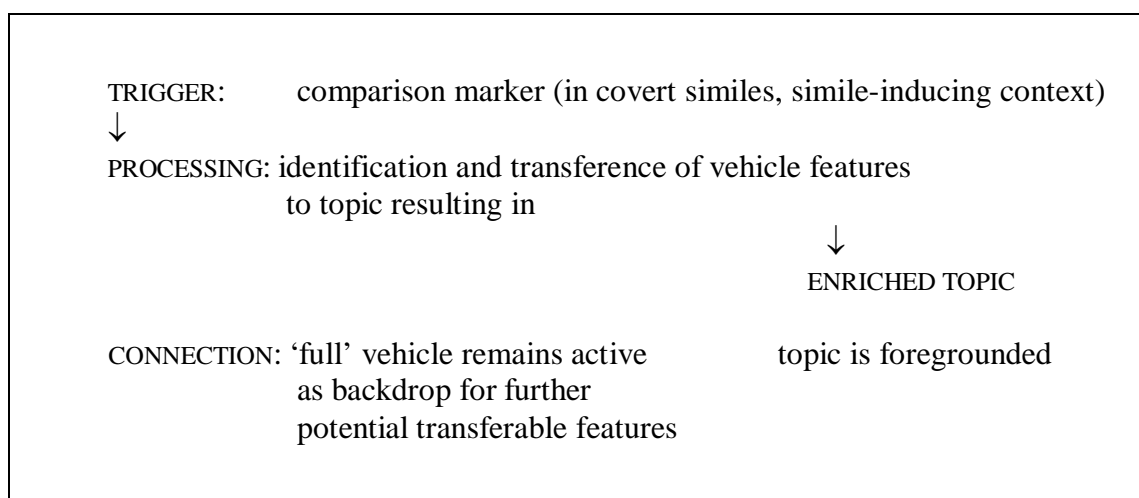   potential transferable features

Fig. 1 – The functioning of simile

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[13] The search for the similarity feature(s) is at the basis of riddles occurring as similes, such as *Why is a raven like a writing desk?* The answer (*because Poe wrote on both*), which requires the activation of world knowledge of the American writer, identifies a person as the 'similarity feature', with an

To illustrate the process of interpretation, let us consider the following examples:

(17) Rage is <u>like</u> a volcano.
(18) Harvard is <u>like</u> Yale.

In (17), the reader extracts features from the lexical meaning of the vehicle (e.g. something 'that builds up and explodes'). In (18), the reader extracts properties from chunks of world knowledge attached to the vehicle, e.g. 'exclusive, expensive university', 'private university in the north-east of US', 'having a large library', 'having a renowned teaching staff', or other properties. Only one or a part of the properties, relevant to the current discursive context, will be applied to the topic. By considering the different functioning of (17) and (18), we can suggest a further distinction between 'lexical' and 'encyclopaedic' similes.

A fact pointing to the asymmetrical role of topic and vehicle, mentioned in Section 3, is the following: when the reader knows little or nothing about the topic, for example, *Attila* in (19),

(19) Attila the Hun had manners <u>like</u> a cesspool.

but knows about the vehicle, s/he uses this knowledge to interpret the topic. When the vehicle is unfamiliar to the reader, for example, the Adams family pet hand in (3) above, the simile does not work, i.e. the topic is not 'enriched'.

With regard to the interpretation of creative similes, what makes a simile striking is the writer's sensitivity to previously unnoticed similarity, his/her ability in linking together two spheres of knowledge or experience in novel ways. In such cases, the writer challenges the reader to search for the features of similarity. Similes can have an intricate conceptual structure hidden in a sentence of moderate complexity, and may pose all the interpretation problems of metaphors.

Similes (and analogies) are realized in a variety of linguistic forms, occur in a variety of genres with a variety of functions, and can pose problems in interpretation;

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unexpected, humorous effect, playing on two meanings of *on*. (The riddle functions also when translated into Italian).

therefore, the problem in translating similes varies considerably. The issue of to what extent a simile is translatable, how difficult it is to translate, which of the potential translation strategies to adopt, can be decided by the translator taking into account macro factors, such as genre and readership, as well as micro factors, such as type, structure and function of the simile, its relevance to the message, and lastly, the resources available in the target language.

5. From problem identification to problem solving

Among the various types of simile, conventional and encyclopaedic similes, in particular, can pose translation problems. Before discussing some examples, I would like to indicate the potential strategies to translate similes, from which the translator will choose the most appropriate for each translation problem:

S1:   literal translation (retention of the same vehicle)

S2:   replacement of the vehicle with a different vehicle

S3:   reduction of the simile, if idiomatic, to its sense

S4:   retention of the same vehicle plus explicitation of similarity feature(s)

S5:   replacement of the vehicle with a gloss

S6:   omission of the simile

Let us start our discussion with idiomatic similes. In English phraseology, we can find a great number of conventional similes, such as

(13) This meat is <u>as tough as old boot leather</u>.

The structure of these expressions, fixed in syntax as well as meaning, which typically occur in predicative position, is (*be*) + *as* + Adj + *as* + NP. The adjective, quite ordinary and gradable in most cases, is interpreted literally, and the NP, interpreted non-literally, is the vehicle, whose function is to intensify the meaning of the adjective (Moon 1998:150-152). The nouns selected as vehicles are entities (humans, animals, objects) to which British people have conventionally attributed certain characteristics, the same characteristic expressed by the adjective. Over time, each vehicle has come to represent the epitome of individual characteristics. So, when people say sentence (13), they are emphasising the idea of toughness.

Conventional similes, which are typically evaluative and rather informal, tend to occur, like other types of idioms, in written discourse in some genres (e.g. journalistic texts) in order to create 'the illusion of oral mode' (Moon 1998: 244 fll., 267-68). The selection of the entity used as vehicle is often culture-bound, thus posing a lexico-cultural problem in many cases. Consider the following similes, randomly selected from the *Longman Dictionary of English Idioms* (1980):

(20) a. as busy as a bee

      b. as old as the hills

      c. as rich as Croesus

      d. as easy as pie

Also in Italian, there are conventional similes, having the structure Adj + *come* ('like') + NP, but many divergences are observed. If we consider (13), we can choose between rendering its sense in (13a) and using an idiomatic simile with a similar meaning, but a different vehicle, in (13b):

(13a) La carne è durissima ('very tough').

(13b) La carne è <u>dura come un sasso</u> ('tough like a stone').

Let us now look at the similes in (20), accompanied by their translation into Italian, and the indication of the strategy adopted:

(21) a. as busy as a bee   molto occupato / occupatissimo

    [**S3**: reduction to its sense, with Intensifier + Adj, or a superlative]

    b. as old as the hills   <u>vecchio come il cucco</u>

    [**S2**: replacement of the vehicle with a different vehicle in a culturally equivalent idiomatic simile]

    c. as rich as Croesus   <u>ricco come Creso</u>

      [**S1**: literal translation. Italian culture also associates richness with the king of Lydia, noted for his great wealth]

    d. as easy as pie   <u>facile come bere un bicchiere d'acqua</u> / facilissimo

    [**S2,** with a culturally equivalent idiomatic simile, or **S3**, with a superlative]

The other common construction associated with idiomatic similes is Verb + *like* + NP, as illustrated in (22):

(22) a. to eat <u>like a pig</u>

    b. to work <u>like a dog</u>

    c. to stick out <u>like a sore thumb</u>

In translating these expressions, we can adopt various strategies according to the context:

(23) a. to eat <u>like a pig</u>	mangiare <u>come un maiale</u> ('like a pig')	**[S1]**
b. to work <u>like a dog</u>	lavorare <u>come uno schiavo</u> ('like a slave')	**[S2]**
c. to stick out <u>like a sore thumb</u>	farsi notare ('to attract attention')	**[S3]**

As we can see, in several cases the two cultures select two different vehicles to express the same meaning, and pairs of cultural equivalents can be found.

    In selecting the appropriate strategy, the translator should take into consideration factors such as context of use, connotation, rhetorical effect and register. The first example is the following:

(24) He is <u>as pleased as Punch</u>.

This idiomatic simile is referring to Mr Punch from the traditional children's puppet show "Punch and Judy", who always seems to be pleased, especially when doing something cruel to other characters. We can translate this simile with the cultural equivalent *contento come una Pasqua* ('like Easter'), when said of someone pleased about something positive; but, when said of someone pleased about a person's troubles, we should render it in another way, e.g. *godere di* x ('to take special pleasure / to delight in x').

    Now consider the following passage taken from *Oliver Twist* by Dickens, and how it was translated:

(25) "I hope you've been at work this morning, my dear." "<u>Hard</u>", replied the Dodger. "<u>As nails</u>", added Charley Bates.

"Spero che vi siate dati da fare stamani, miei cari". "<u>A più non posso</u>" rispose il Furbacchione. "<u>Da matti</u>", soggiunse Charley Bates[14].

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[14] Dickens C., *Oliver Twist*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 2002, p. 69, and *Le avventure di Oliver Twist*, Milano, Mondadori, 2003, translated by B. Oddera, p. 80.

Hard is an item which, when collocating with *work*, takes on the sense 'with (great) effort'. *As nails*, added by the third speaker, is contiguous to *hard*, thus producing the idiomatic simile *as hard as nails* ('unmoved by sympathetic feelings, determined'). A pun is resulting: on one level, the two men have worked 'hard, with effort', as the Dodger says; on another level, they have been 'hard as nails', that is, heartless, unsympathetic, because their work consists in stealing from 'innocent' people. The humorous effect was not recreated in the Italian translation: the translator did not render the pun, but only the meaning 'hard' expressed by two idiomatic expressions (underlined).

Let us now consider a type of encyclopaedic simile in which the vehicle is a proper name representing a cultural allusion (Pierini 2006). Allusions (e.g. literary quotations, and references to people, places, events, songs and films) are culture-bound elements whose interpretation depends on world knowledge (Leppihalme 1997: 2-11). Since target readers may not have the chunk of knowledge needed to interpret the simile, the translator will first assess their likely background knowledge. If s/he believes that the target readership has the knowledge required, s/he will leave the simile unchanged; if the target readership does not, some modification to the source simile may be required, for example, s/he can add some explanatory information. The examples we are going to discuss are similes in which the vehicle is the name of a real or fictive person, familiar to the members of the source culture. The first example, discussed in Leppihalme (1997: 93-94) is taken from a detective novel:

(26) She did not look <u>like Carry Nation</u>.

Carry Nation (1846-1911), an unfamiliar figure to Italian readers, was an American campaigner for temperance and an advocate of woman suffrage, tall and heavy, dressed in stark black and white clothing of vaguely religious appearance (*The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* 1986). The aim of the statement is to signal that the topic (a radical feminist writer, well-dressed and wearing make-up) has an appearance contrary to the narrator's expectations. In this case, we can adopt two strategies:

(26) a. Non sembrava <u>una suffragetta del primo Novecento</u> ('a suffragette of the early 20th century')

b. Non era <u>come mi aspettavo</u> ('as I expected')

In (26a), the vehicle *Carry Nation* is replaced by a gloss which can help the reader interpret the simile: it refers to the traditional image of suffragettes as unattractive in dress and hair, and aggressive in behaviour. In (26b), the vehicle is omitted and substituted by a rendering of its pragmatic value.

The choice of strategy can depend on the status of the source text. When allusions occur in authoritative texts, they are usually translated literally. Consider the following passage taken from *Dubliners* by James Joyce, and its translation into Italian:

(27) Their faces were powdered and they caught up their dresses, when they touched earth, <u>like alarmed Atalantas</u>.
I visi erano incipriati, e toccando terra esse si rialzavano la gonna <u>come Atalante</u> <u>spaventate</u>[15].

The vehicle alludes to the Greek mythological figure of Atalanta, a maiden who agreed to marry any man who could defeat her in a running race. In this case, even if the vehicle is unfamiliar to most target readers, it is left unchanged — simply adapted to the target language system — with no extra information, leaving the onus of interpretation to the educated reader.

Translation problems can also be posed by divergences between the two language systems, as in the case of Italian and English, which differ typologically. As far as compound adjectives and N + N sequences are concerned, the Italian language is more analytical, and much less productive than English (Pierini 2004: 94-96, 116-117). Translating English compressed similes into Italian requires the unfolding of the similes: this process involves a syntactic transformation and the insertion of a comparison marker, selected on the basis of syntactic, semantic and stylistic considerations. Consider the following examples:

(28)   a. a rapier-like wit   spirito <u>arguto</u>
     [**S3**: the idiomatic sense is rendered with a simple adjective]

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[15] Joyce J., *Dubliners*, "A little cloud", Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1971, p. 69, and *Gente di Dublino,* "Una piccola nube", Milano, Mondadori, 1964, p. 73, translated by F. Cancogni.

b. a Robinson Crusoe-like life   una vita <u>alla</u> / <u>da</u> Robinson Crusoe

   [**S1**: retention of the vehicle. Marker: the preposition *a* combined with the article *la*, or the preposition *da*]

c. a thread-like tentacle   un tentacolo <u>filiforme</u>

   [**S1**: retention of the vehicle. Use of a compound adjective]

(29) an L-shaped room   una stanza <u>a</u> L

   [**S1**: retention of the vehicle. Marker: the preposition *a*]

(30) Star Trek- style command seat   posto di comando <u>in stile</u>/<u>che ricorda</u> Star Trek

   [**S1**: retention of the vehicle. Marker: the preposition *in* + *stile*, or the relative clause *che ricorda*]

(31) a. butterfly valve   valvola <u>a</u> farfalla

   [**S1**: retention of the vehicle. Marker: the preposition *a*]

b. Marilyn Monroe wig   parrucca <u>alla</u> Marilyn Monroe

   [**S1**: retention of the vehicle. Marker: the preposition *a* combined with the article *la*]

In some cases, as in (30), there is more than one rendering. The preposition *a* seems to be the preferred marker to render the similarity relation in the translation of some adjectives (28 b), (29), and N + N sequences (31), rendered in Italian with the structure N (topic) + *a* + N (vehicle). In (28 c), we can observe an adjective from a small class of Italian compounds of Latin origin (e.g. *aghiforme*, *fusiforme*), no longer productive, usually found in specialised discourse with the meaning 'similar in shape to X'.

Let us now discuss the translation of similes in relation to textual genres, beginning with literary texts. The discussion of similes in literary texts usually means discussing creative, non-literal and non-objective similes. In fiction, similes are usually found in descriptive segments to lend a more accurate insight into the psychological or physical traits of a character, or a situational setting. They are also very common stylistic devices in poetry as well as drama, through which imaginative thought is realized: creative similes are designed to reveal new relations between entities.

Assuming that style is meaningful *per se* in literary texts, and should be rendered carefully, after an in-depth analysis of the source text, in order to reproduce the same effect in the target text, let us now start with an example from Shakespeare:

(32) I take thy hand, this hand,

As soft <u>as dove's down</u>, and as white <u>as it</u>,

or <u>Ethiopian's tooth</u>, or <u>the fann'd snow</u>, that's bolted

by th' Northern blasts, twice o'er.

Io ti prendo la mano, questa mano morbida: e <u>bianca come piumetta di colomba</u> o <u>come la dentatura dell'etiope</u> o <u>come neve</u> due volte vagliata al ventilabro delle raffiche boreali.[16]

In the source text, the originality resides not so much in the single similes, as in their rapid succession, the four similes producing a cumulative effect. The fourth simile (*as the fann'd snow*) fades into a metaphor: snow is described as flour sifted (*bolted*) by winds. In the target text, translated in prose, the first simile is omitted, probably because the vehicle is the same as the second simile; the others are translated literally with an addition: the past participle *vagliata*, which renders *bolted*, is used in its original, literal meaning ('to pass flour, etc. through a sieve in order to remove the coarse particles'), while today the verb *vagliare* is used in its figurative meaning 'to examine, to look over'. The translator added another metaphor: the obsolete lexeme *ventilabro*, modified by *raffiche* ('blasts'), denotes a device for winnowing, i.e. separating grain from chaff and then scattering chaff in the air. So snow is metaphorically described first as flour, and then as chaff.

The next example concerns analogies. They typically occur in scientific texts, but are also used in literary texts, as in the following lines from a Shakespeare sonnet:

(33) <u>Like</u> as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,

<u>So</u> do our minutes hasten to their end.

<u>Come</u> incalzano le onde verso la spiaggia petrosa,

<u>Così</u> gli istanti nostri si affrettano al loro fine[17]

Shakespeare used an analogy involving four items — waves and minutes, shore and end — with the purpose of highlighting a similarity between the two processes, i.e. the

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[16] See Shakespeare W., *The Winter's Tale*, London, Methuen, 1963, IV, iv, 363-366, and *Il racconto d'inverno*, in *Teatro*, vol. V, Torino, Einaudi, 1972, transl. by C.V. Lodovici, p. 525.

[17] See Shakespeare W., *Sonetti*, bilingual edition, Milano, Mondadori, 1970, translated by A. Rossi, Sonnet 60.

swiftness with which waves as well as time go towards their end, interpreted as death. The strategy adopted is literal translation.

We may state that the more the simile is divergent from current use of language, the stronger the case for literal translation, so that the target reader will be as puzzled as the source reader. As a matter of fact, creative similes in literary texts tend to be translated literally, sometimes with some under- or over-translation, e.g. the omission and the insertion of items in (32), in particular, when the simile occurs in a complex figurative structure. To deal with this aspect, I shall now discuss an example taken from *Hard Times* by Dickens, where he describes the bald head of Thomas Gradgrind:

(34) The emphasis was helped by the speaker's hair, which bristled on the skirts of his bald head, a plantation of firs to keep the wind from its shining surface, all covered with knobs, <u>like </u>the crust of a plum pie, <u>as if</u> the head had scarcely warehouse-room for the hard facts stored inside.
A dare ancora più enfasi c'erano i capelli dell'oratore, che crescevano ispidi <u>a corona</u> intorno alla testa, calva sulla sommità, <u>simili</u> a una foresta di pini destinati a proteggere dal vento quella lucida superficie, tutta bitorzoli, che <u>pareva</u> la crosta di una torta di prugne, <u>come se</u> nel cranio non ci fosse abbastanza spazio per contenere tutti i solidi fatti che vi erano pigiati. [18]

To understand the similes in (34), it is necessary to refer to a typical Dickensian stylistic feature, namely, the use of Grotesque — an artistic device, dating back to the 16th century, used in painting and sculpture and later in literature — through which he offers a satirical portrait of characters, often seen as negative. It consists in the association of human beings with animals, plants or artefacts, in metaphor as well as simile, often producing dense figurative structures, which can pose problems for the translator.

The major characteristic of the long and complex sentence in (34) is the combination of metaphors and similes, in which vehicles are from different fields. The interweaving of these figurative devices produces a ludicrous effect. Through metaphor, the bald surface of Gradgrind's head is described as an area (*skirts*) surrounded by hair perceived as trees (*a plantation of firs*). In the comparative phrase, the surface of Gradgrind's head (with bumps) is perceived as a pie filled with plums. In the comparative clause, his head is perceived as a warehouse in which his pragmatic ideas,

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[18] See, respectively, Dickens C., *Hard Times*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1970, p. 47, and *Tempi difficili*, Milano, Garzanti, 2000, transl. by G. Lonza, p. 7.

described metaphorically as *hard facts*, are too numerous for the size of his head, so that they protrude, producing bumps.

The translation problem in (34) is not so much the single figure of speech, rather, the dense figurative structure which requires a careful rendering of each word. In the target text, the translator translated the similes literally, but made some changes to the figurative structure:

- the metaphor *on the skirts of* was rendered with the simile *a corona* ('like a crown/garland');
- the metaphor *a plantation of firs* became a simile with the insertion of *simili a*, with a shift from *plantation* (a group of trees) to *foresta* ('a very large area with lots of trees') and an unmotivated shift from *firs* to *pini* ('pines');
- *warehouse-room* was rendered with a generic *spazio* ('space'), and *stored* with *pigiati* ('pressed down').

So, we can say that the Italian translation does not do justice to Dickens' complex and richly-nuanced style. The segment could be translated into Italian as follows, the underlined words rendering the points discussed with a lesser loss of semantic nuance:

(34a) […] i capelli dell'oratore che crescevano irti <u>ai margini</u> della testa calva, <u>un bosco di abeti</u> che proteggeva dal vento quella superficie lucida, coperta di bitorzoli, che sembrava la crosta di una torta <u>con</u> le prugne, come se la testa non fosse <u>un deposito</u> sufficiente a contenere tutti i solidi fatti che vi erano <u>immagazzinati.</u>

Let us now turn our attention to similes in scientific texts. In argumentative texts, they are usually translated literally. In popularisation, as well as textbooks, translators translate similes literally, as in (35):

(35) When the alkaline solution emerges, calcium carbonate crystallises, building shapes <u>like</u> stalagmites.

La soluzione alcalina che fuoriesce fa precipitare il carbonato di calcio, creando forme <u>simili a</u> stalagmiti[19].

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[19] Lutz R.A., "Dawn in the Deep. The Bizarre World of Hydrotermal Vents", *National Geographic Magazine*, February 2003, and "L'alba negli abissi", *National Geographic Italia.* Respectively.

Or, when necessary, they make some changes to the source simile in order to make the vehicle sufficiently clear or culturally familiar to the target readership. An interesting case is mentioned in Scarpa (2001:164): in a textbook introducing new technologies, the translator made some changes:

(36) The PCI is constantly evolving to meet this challenge. It gets faster in one of two ways: its speed increases or its data path widens. This is <u>like</u> raising the speed limit on a freeway or adding additional lanes.

Per ottimizzare le prestazioni del PCI si può ricorrere a due espedienti: aumentare la velocità o ampliare la linea di trasmissione. È <u>un po'</u> <u>come se</u>, <u>dovendo rendere il traffico più scorrevole</u> su un tratto autostradale, si scegliesse di aumentare il limite di velocità o di aggiungere altre corsie.

The simile was retained because it is culturally familiar to the target reader, but some changes (underlined) were made: the addition of the expression *un po'* ('a little'), which mitigates the similarity making it looser; the transformation of the comparative phrase into a comparative clause (*come se*, 'as if'); the addition of a gerundive clause (*dovendo rendere il traffico più scorrevole*, 'intending to make traffic smooth-flowing'), which renders explicit the purpose of the actions presented in the simile. The changes might be motivated by the fact that the simile is presented abruptly in the source text, and the translator is not overly-confident in its clarifying value.

6. Conclusion

The functioning of similes is rather complex. While they are easily recognisable in most cases, their interpretation is not always simple, involving semantic as well as pragmatic considerations. The attribution of vehicle features to the topic can result in the highlighting of its features, or the addition of new features. The vehicle features can come from lexical meaning, or chunks of world knowledge attached to it. Moreover, similes can be placed on a *continuum* from the most conventional through the standard and fresh to the most creative.

The translation of similes is also complex, posing various types of problems. To solve them, the translator needs to take into account macro factors, such as genre and readership, as well as micro factors, such as type, structure and function of the simile, its relevance to the message, and lastly, the resources available in the target language. One type of problem may be termed 'systemic' in nature: English compressed similes, not found in Italian, are rendered by adapting them to the target language system. A further problem is of a cultural nature: idiomatic similes, like other phraseological units, reflect cultural peculiarities to a high degree, thus requiring the rendering of the sense or the use of a simile, divergent at a lexico-grammatical level, but pragmatically equivalent in the target culture. When the vehicle is represented by a proper name, the similarity feature(s) relies on chunks of world knowledge attached to it; this fact can pose a cultural-encyclopaedic problem when the source reader and the target reader possess different world knowledge-bases. So, in most cases, the translation strategy adopted is the addition of extra information in various ways.

One last remark on creative similes: they tend to be translated literally. When they occur in literary texts, however, in complex figurative structures consisting of more similes or a mix of metaphors and similes, we observe some omission, addition or change in their translation.

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