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## **Plenary lecture: Similes and Comparisons**

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Since the publication of Lakoff and Johnson (1980: *Metaphors We Live By*), a vast literature has grown up on the subject of metaphor. Other kinds of figurative language have been rather neglected by comparison. In particular, similes have not been studied empirically in any depth, but have often been treated rather superficially, as if they were merely “second-class metaphors”.

Lakoff and Johnson argued that cognitive metaphors are created and interpreted in terms of “experiential gestalt”. While broadly in sympathy with this approach, I question whether it is strictly correct. I adduce evidence instead to suggest that similes at least – possibly also metaphors – are interpreted on the basis of a purely linguistic cognitive gestalt, which has little or nothing to do with an individual's perceptual experiences of the world. However, we must be careful not to overgeneralize. Up to a point, similes are similar in structure and function to metaphors, but there are important differences.

The preposition *like* normally introduces a simile or comparison. *Like* is important because it is one of the means by which speakers to talk about new and unfamiliar events, entities, and experiences, relating the new to the given. But not all uses of *like*/prep. have this function, and not all similes are governed by *like* or *as*. I therefore offer a corpus-based analysis of the uses of the preposition *like* and I go on to develop a typology of similes, examining their structure, contrasting it with that of metaphors, and investigating the function of similes in text.