

Cuenca, Maria-Josep; Manuela Romano. 2022. “Like a Virus. Similes for a Pandemic”. *Metaphor And Symbol*, 37, 4, 269-286.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10926488.2021.1998902>

Accepted version

Like a virus. Similes for a pandemic

Maria-Josep Cuenca^a and Manuela Romano^{b*}

^aCatalan Philology, Universitat de València, Spain; ^bEnglish Philology, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a great impact on the life of every inhabitant of the planet. During 2020 and 2021 a significant amount of work on how the pandemic is being conceptualized and communicated has been done. Most work has focused on the role of metaphor in the construal of specific cognitive frames. In this paper, we turn to a similar but different conceptualization mechanism, i.e. simile. Drawing from recent socio-cognitive and discursive empirical approaches to similes, this paper focuses on ‘TARGET is like SOURCE’ constructions in English and Spanish containing (CORONA)VIRUS either as target or source of the simile. The analysis is based on 200 examples found in the digital media during the first wave of the pandemic in 2020. First, the constructions, conceptualizations and mappings are analyzed. Second, the relevant discourse features (genre type, relation to subjectivity, text location and structuring properties) are described. Finally, the cross-linguistic English-Spanish analysis shows that, despite the many coincidences in both datasets, there are different tendencies as for the use of culture-specific mappings and the genres where the similes occur in. The study aims at testing to what extent the general features characterizing similes also hold in the case of (CORONA)VIRUS, both as source and as target. The corpus analysis contributes, in addition, to the emerging line of research on the use of figuration in the communication of the pandemic, as well as to the study of the discursive dimensions of similes in real settings.

Keywords: similes, coronavirus, English, Spanish, similes’ discursive functions

1. Introduction¹

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a great impact on the life of every inhabitant of the planet and this can also be seen through discourse. From the outbreak of Covid-19 at the end of 2019, scholars working within cognitive linguistics and discourse analysis have started tracking down how the use of specific discourse strategies, mainly metaphors, contributes to spread a particular conceptualization of the pandemic. Work by Filardo-Llamas (2020), Gillis (2020), Sabucedo et al. (2020), Semino (2021), Wicke & Bolognesi (2020), among others, explains how certain conceptual metaphors (e.g. those based on the domains of WAR, TSUNAMIES, MONSTERS, FIRE) are being used pervasively to create very clear DANGER, VIOLENCE and THREAT cognitive frames in order to create an emotional response and sometimes allow authorities to cut the population's basic rights. At the same time, scholars and journalists also reflect on how these more hegemonic metaphors and frames can be contested through the deliberate use of other novel metaphors that can help to project different frames, such as those of SOLIDARITY, COOPERATION and RESPONSIBILITY, for instance (Olza et al. in press, Pérez-Sobrino et al. in press).²

This study wishes to contribute to the emerging line of research on the use of figuration during the pandemic by focusing on a different rhetorical and discursive strategy, i.e. simile. Even though similes share a number of common cognitive and linguistic features with metaphors, there is evidence today that similes show specificities, both cognitive and discursive (see, e.g. Bernárdez 2009; Cuenca 2015; Dancygier & Sweetser 2014; Gentner & Bowdle 2008; Glucksberg 2008; Israel et al. 2004; Romano 2017).

The main aim of this paper is to analyze similes containing the word *virus* or *coronavirus* in English and Spanish digital media by describing their components (target,

¹ We want to thank the anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions. This study has been carried out under the funding of Research Project PID2020-119102RB-I00, Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation.

² Also, within this last line of research we find recent monographs on Covid19 studies, such as *Discurso y Sociedad* 15(1), 2021 (<http://www.dissoc.org/ediciones/v15n01/>) or Breeze et al. (in press).

source and mappings), as well as their main discursive features, in order to understand their actual use and discursive dimensions in context. To this end, a corpus of 200 similes containing *virus* or *coronavirus* either as target or source (50+50 for each language) has been collected (see Section 2). The similes have been analyzed considering the whole text in which they appear and the conceptual and discourse dimensions have been described qualitatively.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 describes the data and methodology of analysis. Section 3 briefly revises the concept of simile and how it has been approached in the previous literature. In Section 4, the targets, sources and mappings are identified. Section 5 deals with the discursive features of similes. Finally, Section 6 includes a cross-linguistic comparison of the data, before the conclusions are presented.

The analysis of the similes aims to contribute to the general interest in the conceptualization of the pandemic, while exhibiting the distinctive features of a mechanism that has lived under the shadow of metaphor. The study also shows the extent to which the general characterization of similes in the literature can be applied to a single concept. In addition, the approach adopted here adds two new perspectives, namely, the consideration of one concept, (CORONA)VIRUS, both as target and as source domain,³ as well as a cross-linguistic (English-Spanish) perspective.

2. Data and methodology

The dataset for the study consists of two sub-corpora containing instances of the string ‘TARGET is like SOURCE’ where *virus* or *coronavirus* is either the target, that is, the concept that is described (‘(CORONA)VIRUS is like X’), or the source, i.e. the concept that lends its properties for another, usually more abstract, one (‘X is like A VIRUS’). The study includes samples from the English and Spanish media during the first wave of the pandemic in 2020. All digital newspaper formats in both languages, as well as different webpages from media, organizations and blogs, regardless of country, language variety

³ This perspective is in line with a very recent paper by Tay (2021), which deals with two parallel metaphors relating the anti-government protests in Hong Kong with the pandemic, namely COVID-19 IS THE SOCIAL UNREST and SOCIAL UNREST IS COVID-19. Following a socio-culturally situated approach, Tay analyses the preference or aptness of the metaphors implying source-target reversal. Results prove that metaphor aptness is linked to contextual factors such as the perception of structural similarity between the crises, as well as Hongkongers’ personal experiences with both crises.

or ideological stance were included. Valid examples, with retrievable complete texts, were then selected.

The data were searched for in the Internet by means of Google Advanced Search tools by typing the strings: ‘coronavirus is like’, ‘virus is like’ and ‘is like a virus’ (and their counterparts in Spanish: ‘virus/coronavirus es como’, ‘es como un virus’). The final number of samples analyzed amounts to 200 texts, 100 in each language. Each of the datasets was retrieved and cleaned for mere comparisons, in which the domains compared did not show a figurative relationship as in *This virus is like the flu*, for instance, or cases in which the expression included *virus/coronavirus* but it was part of the concept compared (e.g., *the fight against coronavirus*). The English data correspond to the period from February to June 2020, and the Spanish from February to August 2020, in order to obtain the same number of examples.

The relevant data were included in an Excel database containing the following information: article title, link, date, simile construction, target and source types, mapping, location in text, genre, subjectivity and reported speech, and observations.⁴ Next, the similes were analyzed considering the whole text. Two different but complementary analyses were performed on the data: first, a qualitative analysis of target and source types, as well as mappings, was conducted; and second, the main discursive features of the similes were studied, namely, the specific genre type they appear in, text location, the structuring properties that some similes show and their use in relation to the presence of the subject as a stance taker; all crucial features necessary to unravel their linguistic, conceptual and discursive functions in the specific contextual settings analyzed. The corpus was annotated separately by each researcher and language and then double checked: all the examples and texts were reviewed by a different annotator and the examples were finally revised in both languages considering each feature separately. Chi square tests were then conducted in order to retrieve reliable patterns from our data. This paper focuses thus on the discourse features of the coronavirus similes.

3. Similes: between comparison and metaphor

⁴ The observations include information about the positive or neutral character of the simile, which is seldom the case (only 5 cases in English and 6 in Spanish), specific topics (such as religion, science, sports or economy), alternation with metaphors or other relevant features.

Cognitive approaches to language, starting from Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors we Live by* (1980), have changed the traditional conception of metaphors and other 'figures of speech'. They are no longer considered as rhetorical resources, but as general cognitive mechanisms that allow us to understand the world and communicate in an effective way not only in literary texts but also in ordinary communication and all kinds of discourse (see Deignan 2005).

Similes can be defined as analogical devices expressed by means of an equative comparison construction ('TARGET is like SOURCE'). They are thus similar to both metaphors (conceptually) and comparisons (formally), as shown in (1):

- (1) a. Racism is like a virus
- b. Racism is a virus
- c. Coronavirus is like the flu

The simile in (1a) has identical source and target domains as the metaphor in (1b) and shares the structure of the comparison in (1c). In contrast to comparisons, similes need to compare different domains, as in (1a), not sources and targets belonging to the same domain, as 'coronavirus' and 'flu', both viral diseases compared in (1c). Both similes and metaphors establish an analogy between two different domains. However, they do not only show structural differences (the presence of *like*), but also, and more importantly, different cognitive and discursive functions.

Similes ('TARGET is like SOURCE') have been traditionally seen as second-level figures of speech, variants of the 'almighty' metaphor ('TARGET is SOURCE'). This approach, called 'the equivalence approach', assumes that: (i) a metaphor is a 'condensed' simile (the traditional view that a simile "simply makes explicit what a metaphor merely implies", Israel et al 2004: 123), and (ii) similes and metaphors receive a similar conceptual interpretation.⁵ The equivalence approach has been challenged by empirical work coming from psycholinguistics and discourse studies in the main, as described in detail in Romano (2017). Despite the close relation between similes and metaphors, which explains the traditional equivalence approach, they exhibit differentiating features (e.g.,

⁵ See, Tversky (1977), Glucksberg & Keysar (1990), Addison (1993), for instance.

Aisenman 1999; Bowdle & Gentner 2005; Gentner & Bowdle 2008; Chiappe et al. 2003; Croft & Cruse 2004; Dancygier & Sweetser 2014; Glucksberg 2008; Glucksberg & Haught 2006; Israel et al 2004; Moder 2008; Roncero et al. 2021; Romano 2017; Utsumi 2007).⁶

One obvious difference is that similes and metaphors differ as for the constructions used to evoke them and crucially by the presence of *like* (or similar markers), which makes similes an overtly marked strategy. Therefore, a key question to be answered is why similes and metaphors differ in structure, and how these different formats can be associated to differences in cognitive processing and discursive uses. Starting from one of Cognitive Linguistics' main premises, the idea that any difference in the structure of a linguistic form entails meaning and/or functional changes however slight they might be (Langacker 1987, 2013), different explanations have been proposed for the existence of *like* and the occurrence of an elaboration, the most productive being formal and conceptual complexity. In addition, similes seem to be preferred in the case of conceptual analogies that allow more creative mappings (e.g., Bernárdez 2009; Bowdle & Gentner 2005; Dancygier & Sweetser 2014; Israel et al. 2004; Moder 2012). Semantic and structural complexity would explain why *like* can be interpreted as a cognitive and discursive 'staller' announcing dissimilarity, that something new and unexpected is coming, giving interlocutors time to find a feature linking source and target domain and enabling the construal of the final intended mapping.⁷ Conceptually, the mappings and interpretations are not always the same—as they evoke different features—, which explains why only some similes can be turned into metaphors and vice versa (Romano 2017). In fact, recent work coming from psycholinguistics also points to the fact that metaphors and similes are processed and interpreted differently. Roncero et al. (2021) argue that metaphors are understood as categorizations and similes as comparisons, and “categorical processing is predicted to be faster than comparative processing because fewer processing stages are required” (Roncero et al. 2021: 95).⁸

⁶ As Johnson (1981:7-8) and Roncero et al. (2021: 85) point out, the idea that similes and metaphors are variants of the same mechanism can be traced back to Aristotle and Cicero.

⁷ The formal and conceptual complexity of similes has also been related to the iconic principles of quantity and proximity/distance (Romano 2017).

⁸ This issue is certainly not settled within the scientific community as the same research group (Ashby et al. 2018) in another empirical study based on evidence from eye movements argue that similes are easier to interpret than metaphors.

Another group of arguments distinguishing similes from metaphors is related to their different discursive functions in real communicative contexts. Work on empirical data (e.g. Bernárdez 2009; Cuenca 2015; Romano 2017) has proved that whereas metaphors' main role is conceptual, working mainly on the lexical-paradigmatic axis, similes are as much linguistic-discursive as conceptual, belonging thus to the syntagmatic axis; that is, similes are integral elements of the text itself, with clear descriptive, evaluative and structuring functions. Within this same line of research, Israel et al.'s (2004) study, even if based on single sentence examples, already points to some of similes' main rhetorical functions such as the fact that they are used to highlight themes in a narrative, to add ironic shading, to inject humour, or to heighten the dramatic tension of a climactic scene (2004:133).

The use of similes seems to be clearly related to their 'catchy' function, to call the reader's attention towards the contents, to persuade him or her to continue reading or listening to the text. The more unlikely or non-conventional the mappings the greater the reader's need to find the conceptual link between source and target by reading the whole text. Similes are clear discursive strategies to express opinion and stance, as our data show. As a consequence, similes are worth analyzing in real communicative settings, considering their wide context of occurrence, as well as their effects on communication. Before focusing on their discourse effects (Section 5), we will briefly review the sources, targets and mappings of the similes identified.

4. Similes as a construction: sources, targets and mappings

As described in Cuenca (2015), a simile prototypically corresponds to a three-slot construction⁹ (A, B and E) where A (the target, topic or *comparandum*, i.e. the entity described by the simile) and B (the source, vehicle or *comparatum*) belong to different cognitive domains and are linked by the comparison marker *like*. The property shared by A and B can be either explicit or implicit. When explicit, as in (2), the property shared by A and B is expressed by the elaboration (E), i.e. "a discourse portion that highlights in which respect A is similar to B" (Cuenca 2015: 143).

⁹ Similes have been compared to grammatical constructions as they are complex compositional linguistic forms which involve the combination of both formal and semantic information (Croft & Cruse 2004; Dancygier & Sweetser 2014; Moder 2012).

- (2) “Racism is like a virus: *It can be invisible until somebody gets killed*” (EN69, www.sigrun.com, 03/06/2020)¹⁰

In (2) A is *racism*, B is *virus* and the elaboration (E: “It can be invisible until somebody gets killed”) is the explicit indicator of a mapping between A and B that could be difficult to individuate (as there are many possible shared features between both domains), or to infer from conventional or shared cultural knowledge, as in the following example.

- (3) The virus is like a pen drive (EN6, www.thehindu.com, 16/05/2020)

The example in (3) corresponds to the subheadline of a paper in a Science section (“Why dead bodies do not spread coronavirus”). The simile (*The virus is like a pen drive*) does not provide enough clues for readers to process it and this is why the writer needs to provide additional information in the form of an elaboration. For most speakers, the concept of *pen drive* contains a wide variety of features that cannot be easily related to a virus and, more importantly, it is almost impossible to decide which one the writer/creator intends to map: small but very powerful, useful, transportable, safe, quick, information storage device, etc.? The mapping can only be successfully activated by means of the elaboration that comes next —“The pen drive may contain huge data for storage, transport, copying and visualization. But none of that can be done unless the USB connector docks onto the port of a computer”— and the full explanation in the body of the text: Coronavirus carries genetic material, can make copies of itself but “only when the spike protein (the equivalent of the USB connector) of the virus successfully binds to the ACE2 receptor protein (the equivalent of the USB port) of a host cell.”

An interesting example in this respect is (4), a reader’s comment to a sports news including a simile with no elaboration.

- (4) Neymar es como un virus debe ser (SP62, www.marca.com, 17/04/2020)

[Neymar is like a virus should be]

¹⁰ The italics in the examples are ours. They highlight the aspects in each example that are more relevant according to the current explanation.

Neymar, a famous soccer player, is compared to a virus in (4). Without an elaboration, it is very difficult to determine the mapping, and thus the simile remains opaque to most readers. Highly specific shared knowledge within the SOCCER frame and about the current situation that the news describes is needed (Neymar's bad behavior is 'contagious', since Mbappé, another player, acts like him).

As the previous examples show, a simile can be described as a double movement of conceptualization since it asserts similarity, but, at the same time, presupposes dissimilarity: The two entities are dissimilar in most respects but similar at least in one, and this is why an elaboration is generally needed or expected (Cuenca 2015: 144).

The analysis of the Covid-19 similes in the corpus under study starts with a general description of their sources, targets and the mappings that trigger the analogy.

4.1. *Virus as target*

When the target corresponds to *virus/coronavirus* ('(CORONA)VIRUS is like SOURCE'), the most frequent sources are: Generic people that can harm or annoy (an enemy, a terrorist, a wife or a hacker), harming objects and activities (poison, iceberg, a bomb, a bullet, war), natural disasters (storm, hurricane, typhoon, tsunami, fire, plague) and other disasters or negative situations (9/11, being hit by a car) (See Appendix 1).

(5) Dr Peter Hotez, Dean of tropical medicine at Baylor College of Medicine, said:
"The coronavirus is like the '*angel of death*' for older individuals" (EN59, www.the-sun.com, 16/03/2020)

(6) Coronavirus is like *tracer bullet*, stay indoors: Ravi Shastri (EN86, www.mykhel.com, 30/03/2020)

(7) El virus es como un *incendio forestal*, que inicia focos de pandemia no bien cae una chispa (SP85, www.lanacion.com.ar, 30/06/2020)

[The virus is like a *forest fire*, which starts pandemic outbreaks as soon as a spark falls]

The most frequent mappings are actions performed by the virus, especially those related to harming:

- (8) Ben McAdams: Coronavirus is like *'being hit by a truck'* (EN97, www.deseret.com/utah, 30/03/2020)

Regarding qualities, the virus is equated to entities or situations that are difficult to recognize, cure or predict, that are out of control and that are malignant, as in (9):

- (9) Entiendo que mucha gente no tiene un balcón para tomar el aire, pero el virus es como las *minas antipersona: nunca sabes cuándo las puedes pisar* (SP14, www.diariovasco.com, 27/04/20)

[I understand not everybody has a balcony to breathe fresh air, but the virus is like *anti-personnel mines: you never know when you are going to step on them*]

Some of the sources and mappings identified in the study coincide with those found in recent studies on Covid-19 metaphors (see Section 1), as well as in the data collected in the #ReframeCovid project,¹¹ especially in the case of WAR and NATURAL DISASTERS. However, those related to similes are often more complex and cannot be inferred easily through common shared knowledge. Most of the samples from our dataset include sources whose relation to virus can only be understood contextually, that is, by reading the specific features mapped within the elaborations; a fact that is especially relevant when the simile is included as headline and the mappings are explained in the body of the article, as we will see in Section 5.3.

For instance, different FIRE sources appear both in simile and metaphor forms — the latter analyzed in detail in Semino (2021). Still, a closer look at both conceptual mechanisms shows that, even though FIRE can be considered a prototypical source domain in the sense that it is widely accessible and image-rich (Grady 2017), its conceptual complexity, that is, the many different types of fires and their effects that exist, makes it especially apt for similes. In the similes under study, we find ‘simple’ sources such as FIRE, FOREST FIRE, or SPARK, that account for mappings such as the fact that fires convey danger and urgency or that they spread rapidly, etc. But our data also contain more complex sources that conceptualize Covid-19 as A FIRE BREAKING OUT IN A LARGE

¹¹ A collective initiative launched in March 2020 worldwide to promote non-war-related language on Covid-19 (<https://sites.google.com/view/reframecovid/initiative>).

BUILDING, AN ACCELERANT IN A FIRE or A HUMAN VERSION OF A FOREST FIRE, all of which need specific explanations or elaborations for readers to understand the exact mappings intended by the writer or creator.¹² See, for instance, the complexity of example (10):

(10) *This virus is like a human version of a forest fire, a forest fire will burn through and burn off all the dead trees, old trees, fallen brush, and scrub shrub-sucklings that drain the resources of the forest and causing it to be unhealthy We would have significant loss of life, we would lose many elderly, that would reduce burdens in our defunct Social Security System, health care cost (once the wave subsided), make jobs available for others and it would also free up housing in which we are in dire need of* (EN17, www.eastbaytimes.com, 01/05/2020)

The mappings in (10) are multiple: People are trees, Covid-19 is a forest fire, dead from Covid-19 are burnt trees (mostly older ones). The following conclusion, the fact that Covid-19 can reduce the economic burden of the health system, etc., however, does not seem to be applicable to both domains (or to none of them).

To sum up, coronavirus, and the disease caused by SARS-CoV-2, are conceptualized as a harming person, object or activity and also as a disaster, mostly natural ones. The main properties mapped within the '(CORONA)VIRUS is like' construction, are related to harming or killing and the difficulty to be recognized, cured or predicted.

4.2. *Virus as source*

When the source corresponds to *virus/coronavirus* ('TARGET is like (CORONA)VIRUS'), the most frequent targets are: Specific or generic people (Trump, Bolsonaro, Jeff Bezos, Neymar; a toxic friend, humankind); negative states or activities (disinformation, fake news, bad science, corruption, violence and disorders), ideologies (politics, capitalism, nationalism, populism, racism) and negative feelings (fear, panic, anxiety, worry, negativity, hate) (See Appendix 2).

¹² Interestingly, some of the examples highlighted in Semino (2020, 2021) and Pérez Sobrino (in press) or even in the #ReframeCovid project are similes rather than metaphors, as they include expressions such as 'are similar to', 'like' or 'likens'.

- (11) *He [Trump] is like a virus* and he thrives off of the chaos, anger, confusion and seeing others in distress. We should all be working together to stop feeding his malignant narcissism (EN61, [pressthink.org](https://www.pressthink.org), 20/03/2020)
- (12) *La desinformación es como un virus paralelo* que azota en Ecuador con noticias falsas y rumores que están en las redes. En el exterior han tenido enorme repercusión (SP40, www.abc.es, 04/04/2020)
[*Disinformation is like a parallel virus* that scourges Ecuador with false news and rumours in social media. They have had a great impact abroad]
- (13) You are right, I love philosophy and even the philosopher Nietzsche that I read some of his books wrote that there is nothing worse than *the fever of nationalism, it is like a virus* that has been spreading since Bush, even with Obama and now is turning into ultra-nationalism with Donald Trump (EN91, www.wsws.org, 22/04/2020)
- (14) *Anxiety is like a virus* and runs around and attaches to whatever it wants (EN45, intermountainhealthcare.org, 26/05/2020)

The most frequent mappings can be grouped into three categories: actions by the virus, actions to be taken against the virus, and qualities. As for the actions performed by the virus, both the virus and the target are conceptualized as agents that spread, harm, destroy, invade and attack:

- (15) El *populismo* es como un virus, *se propaga* muy fácilmente (SP49, www.elmundo.es, 03/02/2020)
[*Populism is like a virus, it spreads* easily]
- (16) *Power is like a virus, it infects* and it *grows* and it *inflates* people's ego (EN50, www.cbc.ca, 10/04/2020)

The actions to be taken against the virus (and thus against the target) are related to prevention and cure, control and elimination.

- (17) *Hate speech* is like a virus or virulent contagion — it must be *eliminated or controlled* just as soon as humanly possible, lest it spread (EN58, calgaryherald.com, 29/05/2020)

The qualities most frequently mapped from the virus to the target are the following: it is contagious, it is persistent and resilient, it is dangerous and it is difficult to recognize, control or cure.

- (18) A second impression was how *intangible radiation* is. Like a virus, *you do not smell it, see it, or intentionally touch it*. You think it's nowhere, until suddenly you realize it's everywhere (EN54, www.mvtimes.com, 06/10/2020)

Coronavirus, or viruses in general, hence serve as a source for evil people, negative states, activities or feelings, as well as for ideologies considered as dangerous. The properties mapped are related to harming, invading or killing, and also to the prevention, cure, control and elimination of a threatening agent. Additional qualities mapped are the high spreading capacity (contagious) of the agent, its persistence and resilience.

In conclusion, similar features are being mapped to VIRUS as a target and from VIRUS as a source. When (CORONA)VIRUS is the target, the conceptualizer is an observer (e.g., the virus is out of control), whereas when the VIRUS is the source, the conceptualizer exhibits a more active attitude (e.g., it must be controlled).

5. Main discursive features

The discursive functions analysed in this study follow Cuenca's (2015: 159) work in which the author identifies four outstanding discourse features in her corpus of Catalan similes:

- Similes are frequent in information and opinion genres.
- Similes are often attributed to a specific speaker, especially in interviews and news.
- If a text contains a simile, it is often the case that it is selected as the headline of the text.
- Similes tend to be given a prominent text location.

The analysis in the following sub-sections aims at testing to what extent these features also hold in a corpus of English and Spanish similes sharing one specific conceptual domain (VIRAL DISEASE), either as source or as target.

5.1. *Genres*

Similes are especially frequent in informative and/or opinion genres, as they put forward the speaker's stance boldly. The data on the different media genres in which the similes under study appear corroborate this idea, since about 40% of the samples analyzed in both languages belong to opinion genres (articles, comments to news and posts in blogs or Facebook). The rest, except 5 cases of advertisements in English, correspond to news and interviews (Table 1).¹³

Table 1. Genres including similes

	English			Spanish		
	VIRUS is like X	X is like VIRUS	Total	VIRUS is like X	X is like VIRUS	Total
Opinion	12 (24%)	29 (58%)	41	16 (32%)	27 (54%)	43
Interview	9 (18%)	--	9	11 (22%)	11 (22%)	22
News	28 (56%)	17 (34%)	45	23 (46%)	12 (24%)	35
Advertisements	1 (2%)	4 (8%)	5	--	--	0
Total	50	50	100	50	50	100

As for the use of similes in each language, the general data show that similes appear in similar percentages in opinion genres in English and Spanish, whereas the distribution between interviews and news shows a significant difference: The number of samples appearing in interviews in the Spanish data, 22%, more than doubles the

¹³ Table 1 organizes the genres along an axiological cline from more subjective to more objective. It is worth noting that the classification of the texts has been sometimes difficult to delimit as some discursive features overlap. For instance, some news summarize interviews by means of successive instances of reported speech. Even though this text type does not follow the discursive features of prototypical-first person 'interviews', it has been considered as a type of interview. Similarly, some news mix facts with opinion. This is especially the case when experts write or talk about controversial topics. These cases have been categorized as news.

occurrences of English similes in this specific discourse type, 9%. This means that in Spanish the use of similes is more linked to subjective genres (opinion and interviews add up to 65% of the cases), whereas in English, similes occur in objective genres as frequently as in subjective genres (45% news vs. 41% opinion + 9% interview). A chi-square test revealed that the relation between the variables text subjectivity / objectivity and language was significant, $X^2(1, N = 200) = 4.6, p = 0.031$, at $p < 0.05$.

When comparing the two constructions analyzed in this study, we see that the preferred genre in the '(CORONA)VIRUS is like X' construction is news for both languages; a fact that is especially relevant in the English data, where similes occur in 28 news articles (56% of the construction). In the Spanish data for this same structure, genres appear to be more distributed (46% news, 22% interviews and 32% opinion). The chi square test was also significant, $X^2(3, N = 200) = 19.7, p = 0.0002$, when relating the different genres to each construction type ('x is like virus' and 'virus is like x'), regardless of language.

The higher frequency of the VIRUS as target domain in news in both languages seems to be natural in the period analyzed, the first months of the pandemic, when we needed to understand as clearly as possible the new shocking disease, its effects on people and how to protect ourselves from it.

As for the high incidence of the 'X is like A VIRUS' construction, the fact that the Covid-19 pandemic is a highly salient frame which is active in writers'/speakers' minds during the timespan of the study might help to explain why it is used profusely as a source domain to understand other more complex topics dealt with in the media during the pandemic, as the analysis in Section 4 shows. According to genres, the construction appears in very similar percentages in both English and Spanish: 58% and 54% in opinion articles and 34% and 24% in news. As for interviews, the English corpus includes none, whereas the Spanish corpus includes 11 cases. This confirms even more clearly that Spanish similes are more tied to subjective genres —76% of the 50 occurrences of the 'X is like A VIRUS' simile, adding opinion and interviews— than in the English dataset (58% out of the 50 examples).

5.2. Subjectivity and reported speech

Similes are characterized by being both descriptive and evaluative: “A simile requires the individuation of both source and target concepts, and an evaluation of what they have in common” (Cuenca 2015: 147). The evaluative component is linked to subjectivity, that is, to the presence of someone taking a stance. The stance-taker can be either explicit (i.e. someone talking in the first person) or implicit (i.e. no explicit person is linked to the utterance including the simile beyond the author).

This feature interacts with genre. In opinion articles, blogs and news comments, the voice behind the simile is active and identifiable often by the use of the first person. In interviews, similes are often attributed to interviewees. In more objective genres, similes often occur in reported speech, that is, they are introduced as third person’s words.

Table 2 shows the proportion of each case, either subjective (explicit stance-taker) to objective contexts (implicit stance-taker).

Table 2. Type of stance-taker

	English			Spanish		
	VIRUS is like X	X is like VIRUS	Total	VIRUS is like X	X is like VIRUS	Total
Explicit stance-taker	37 (74%)	14 (28%)	51	38 (76%)	20 (40%)	58
Implicit stance-taker	13 (26%)	36 (72%)	49	12 (24%)	30 (60%)	42
Total	50	50	100	50	50	100

The overall proportion of explicit and implicit presence of the stance-taker is about 50% in both languages (English: 51%-49%; Spanish: 58%-42%). However, there is a significant difference according to the direction of the simile. An explicit voice, often introduced through reported speech, is more frequent when the virus is the target in both languages (English: 37 cases of 50, 74%; Spanish: 38 cases, 76%). Instead, when the virus is the source, implicitness is predominant (English: 36 cases, 72%; Spanish: 30 cases, 60%). The chi-square test was significant for the variables explicit / implicit stance-taker and construction type, $\chi^2 (1, N = 200) = 33.8, p < 0.00001$.

This quantitative difference can be linked to the novelty of coronavirus. Similes including virus as source (‘X is like A VIRUS’) are used to describe a great variety of general concepts during the first months of the pandemic. This means the domain of DISEASE, and more precisely VIRAL INFECTIONS, is usually active as a source for metaphor and comparison. Similes in which virus is the target (‘(CORONA)VIRUS is like X’) refer to

a new and dangerous reality that people try to conceptualize analogically. Similes' main function in the data under analysis is thus to describe this complex situation while introducing an emotional bias that enhances the discourse prominence of what is said. The use of similes responds to an effort to conceptualize the new pandemic in an effective and also shocking way, so that people understand its danger and how to protect themselves and others in the quickest and most straightforward way.

Authority is also important in the success of the communicative goal. The 'voice' behind the simile usually corresponds to experts (scientists, physicians/nurses, politicians), popular people (sportsmen, journalists, authors), and also individuals who have experienced the disease (people affected by the pandemic, Covid-19 survivors or sick people).

- (19) a. *WV Governor Says Virus Is Like a 'Movie* (EN 5, www.usnews.com, 21/03/2020) (Jim Justice, West Virginia Governor)

Virus is like an 'asteroid hitting the earth,' *Fontaine says* (EN 16, www.bloomberg.com, 17/05/2020) (Richard Fontaine, chief executive officer, Center for a New American Security)

b. Este virus es como un huevo kinder con un juguete dentro, lo que lleva dentro es el material genético del virus, que en este caso es RNA (ácido ribonucleico). (SP 9, www.tourinews.es, 1/6/2020) (José María Mateo, biochemist)

[This virus is like a kinder egg with a toy inside, what it carries inside is the genetic material of the virus, which in this case is RNA]

- (20) a. Coronavirus is like tracer bullet, stay indoors: *Ravi Shastri* (EN82, www.mykhel.com, 30/03/2020) (Ravi Shastri, Indian coach)

b. *Josemi*: "El coronavirus es como una guerra mundial sin armas" (SP25, www.ondacero.es, 05/03/2020) (Josemi Rodríguez-Sieiro, journalist)

[Coronavirus is like a world war but without any weapons]

- (21) a. the virus is like "having glass in your lungs. It's hard to explain, but every breath is a battle (EN 7, www.sacbee.com, 20/03/2020) (Tara Jane Lanson, patient)

b. "El coronavirus es como una guerra silenciosa" (SP30, www.semana.com, 24/3/20) (Rodolfo Gaitán, patient)

[Coronavirus is like a silent war]

As the previous examples illustrate, similes are pronounced by people who have authority, either overt (scientists, politicians) or covert (sportsmen, journalists, people who have suffered from the disease), to express an opinion or provide experiential information about the disease. Covert authority, from popular people, is more frequent in the Spanish dataset than in the English one.

5.3. Text location

In addition to being basically conceptual in nature and one of the most basic human thought-structuring devices together with metaphors, as mentioned in Section 3, similes perform very specific linguistic-discursive functions within the texts they appear in, as they are “integral elements of the text itself” (Bernárdez 2009). Their main discursive functions, namely, evaluative-attention calling and descriptive-structuring are related to their location within the texts they appear in. When a text includes a simile, it is not uncommon that it occurs either as the headline or in another prominent location (sub-headline, caption, text opening, coda or text closing), as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Location of the simile

	English			Spanish		
	VIRUS is like X	X is like VIRUS	Total	VIRUS is like X	X is like VIRUS	Total
Headline	18 (36%)	7 (14%)	25 ¹⁴	14 (28%)	6 (12%)	20
Other prominent position	6 (12%)	--	6	10 (20%)	6 (12%)	16
Only body	26 (52%)	43 (86%)	69	26 (52%)	38 (76%)	64
Total	50	50	100	50	50	100

About one third of the texts (31% in English and 36% in Spanish) include the simile as a headline or in other prominent positions. This is especially the case in ‘(CORONA)VIRUS is like X’ constructions, in which salient position reaches 48% of cases in both languages; results that corroborate the evaluative-attention calling function of similes in the texts under study. The chi square test showed a significant relation between

¹⁴ Three cases in English and one in Spanish do not include the simile in the headline but a metaphor or an expression that is a direct variant of the simile included in the body.

prominent / non-prominent text location and construction type, $X^2(1, N = 200) = 18.8, p = 0.0001$.

For instance, example (22) in Spanish catches readers' attention by means of an original construction in which the simile appears as the article's headline and the elaboration as its subheadline.

- (22) *El coronavirus es como la marihuana. A cada país le pega diferente* (SP20, www.cenital.com, 27/02/2020)
[*Coronavirus is like marihuana: It hits each country differently*]

Another interesting case of prominent text location is example (23), where the simile is used in initial position as an attention-calling device in the title of the announcement of an on-line conference.

- (23) *'Like a Virus' —Disinformation in the Age of COVID-19* (EN34, australiaathome.com.au, 23/04/20)

In (24), the simile is construed in a very original way as a question-answer format in the headline, where the source, *virus*, is included as a direct question and the target, Jeff Bezos, as the answer; a very direct invitation to keep reading the article:

- (24) *¿Es como un virus?: Jeff Bezos iría por la mayor cadena de cines del mundo* (SP55, www.mdzol.com, 19/03/2020)
[*Is he like a virus?: Jeff Bezos may be after the largest cinema chain in the world*]

In addition, it is not unusual that a simile is repeated. The simile in (25) appears in the headline and it is also repeated in the text's body.

- (25) *"Coronavirus Is Like Tsunami": Rahul Gandhi Warns of Economic Devastation*
[...] "I will tell u a story... In Andaman and Nicobar, before the tsunami came, the water went out. When the water went out, everybody went to get the fish. When they went, the water (levels) came up. I have been warning the

government. They are fooling around... they are not clear about what to do,” adding that “*Coronavirus is like tsunami*” (EN74, www.ndtv.com, 18/03/20)

In (25), the headline includes the simile (*Coronavirus is like tsunami*), the enunciator (*Rahul Gandhi*) and the general interpretation of the simile (*economic devastation*). The body elaborates the simile by explaining in what sense coronavirus is like a tsunami —the government is not acting quickly enough when they see the first signs of an upcoming disaster.

In summary, similes often appear in prominent text location (over one third of all cases, and 52% when (CORONA)VIRUS is the target domain), which proves their persuasive, attention-calling functions.

5.4. Structuring properties

Some similes are not only textually prominent but also structure the whole text or a significant portion of it. During the outbreak of the pandemic, the effects of coronavirus and how to protect ourselves needed to be explained as clearly as possible to people, and politicians, experts and communicators resorted to similes to both describe and call attention. Interestingly, viruses, in general, and coronavirus, in particular, become salient and active for people (a ‘trending topic’, so to speak). As a result, they are also used as key concepts to structure a subjective description or negative evaluation of other kinds of concepts, as explained in Section 4.2.

Interesting cases from the dataset ‘(CORONA)VIRUS is like X’ are examples (26) and (27) below. Example (26) is an English advertisement of a mask, which resorts to a cascade of analogies in order to explain how the mask works:

- (26) The KN95 respirators, popularized by a spread of COVID-19 (Coronavirus), are still misconstrued when it comes to their true functionality. KN95 work to block particles. For example, suppose a *virus is like coffee grounds*, and *KN95 is like a coffee filter*. When you use a coffee filter, grounds don’t get in a coffee mug below (your lungs). Only liquid (the clean, quality air) can get through (EN 29, friscorailyard.com/kn95-mask-with-valve-vs-without-valve/, 16/05/2020)

The seller explains how the mask blocks particles by using two complementary similes whose source is a coffee machine: The virus is like coffee grounds and the mask is like a coffee filter. The analogy expands: The lungs are the coffee mug and the coffee (as opposed to the grounds) is the clean air (as opposed to the infected air). The similes are used to better describe the function of the mask to the general public on the basis of a shared everyday experience, making coffee. This fragment is at the beginning of the text. The rest of the text goes on explaining the characteristics and types of masks in a more objective fashion.

A much richer and complex example is (27), where an expert biologist explaining different issues related to Covid-19 structures the whole article around soccer strategies:

- (27) Hice la analogía con el Milan de Capello porque aquel equipo nos sorprendió a todos por su *forma de correr y presionar* y era un fútbol *sencillo, pero asfixiante*. Otro símil es la Grecia de Charisteas que ganó la Eurocopa de Portugal: *el virus es como un equipo que se encierra bien y tiene un delantero peligroso arriba* [...] La respuesta es que es *extraordinario y poco frecuente*, por eso el símil con el Maracanazo de Uruguay en el Mundial de Brasil, el Alcorconazo o la victoria del Dépor en la final de Copa del Centenario del Madrid. Pasa poco... pero es importante decir que esto ya ha pasado [...] *COVID-19 no es como un virus FIFA estacional sino que ha venido para quedarse y de recurrir a la “cantera” para combatirlo* una vez que tengamos que convivir con él. Es decir: buscando vacunas, mejorando nuestro sistema inmunitario y también invirtiendo en ciencia y conocimiento. [...] “Puede que *llegemos a los penaltis*, pero *ganaremos al Coronavirus jugando como un equipo*” (SP 1, www.cope.es, 13/03/2020)

[I made the analogy with Capello's Milan because that team *surprised* us all with the way they *run and press* and it was a *simple* kind of football, but *suffocating*. Another simile is the Greek case of Charisteas that won the Portuguese Eurocup: *the virus is like a team that locks up well and has a dangerous front striker* [...] The answer is that it is *extraordinary* and *rare*, that's why (I used) the simile with the Maracanazo Uruguay in the World Cup in Brazil, the Alcorconazo or the victory of Dépor in the final of Madrid's Centennial Cup. Little happens [...] but it is important to say that this has already happened [...] *COVID-19 is not like a seasonal FIFA virus but has come to stay and to resort to the “quarry” to fight*

it once we have to live with it. That is: looking for vaccines, improving our immune system and also investing in science and knowledge. [...] “We may get to penalties, but we will beat the Coronavirus playing as a team”]

The text in (27) includes a simile (‘the virus is like a team that locks up well and has a dangerous front striker’) and a negative variant of a simile (‘COVID-19 is not like a seasonal virus’), along with indirect references to other analogies. Some of the virus’ main qualities mapped from the source domain SOCCER and highlighted by the biologist are its unpredictability (‘the team surprised us all’) and its rapid spreading capacity (‘the way they run and press..., simple but suffocating’). As for the actions mapped from SOCCER to VIRUS, we are told that the virus, like the different teams mentioned, is unpredictable (‘extraordinary and rare’), as well as long lasting (‘it is not seasonal FIFA, ... it has come to stay’). Finally, as in soccer, if we want to win (beat/cure the virus), we have to work as a team. As in many sports similes and metaphors, we see how the mappings clearly overlap with those of war, as the virus, like soccer *opponents*, needs to be *combated* in order to *win* (see Flusberg *et al* 2018).

A relevant example portraying the structuring features of ‘X is like A VIRUS’ similes is a text with a telling headline: “Corona is the virus. Capitalism is the disease: May Day Speech”. The author in this 1st May speech gives a negative opinion about capitalism by comparing it with coronavirus, a highly contagious and destructive agent threatening the planet.

- (28) We could take it as a metaphor: that capitalism is a disease that has infested the world and is destroying human lives, societies, eco-systems and the planet. All of that is true. *Metaphorically capitalism is like a virus*. Capital does not want anything – it has no desires, no emotions, no values. It does not care about human beings. *Like a virus, all capital “wants” is to multiply, grow and expand*. It will expand until it fills up as much space as it can, and it will *kill* the living beings that it needs. Because capitalism needs us to reproduce it. We are the hosts of capitalism. *It lives in our minds and bodies, and we reproduce it in our relations with each other* (EN 39, <https://iwwisland.org/>, 01/05/2020)

The basic mapping in (28) is based on the virus’ capacity of expanding and killing its hosts, after they have reproduced it. Metaphors and similes continue throughout the

text, where the conditions of an epidemic and the spread of capitalism are compared and directly related (historically, according to the author, pandemics are related to empires and capitalism). The final step is to relate capitalism and coronavirus: “So yes, the virus made have come from a bat somewhere in China. But it was capitalist production that created the conditions for it to mutate and become aggressive, and it was global capitalism that that caused it to spread around the world.” This example shows the alternation of similes and metaphors to structure a speech and effectively express a bold opinion. It also shows how a very relevant topic, Covid-19, overlaps and mixes with other, apparently unrelated, topics.

6. Cross-linguistic analysis

The study conducted here has been illustrated with examples both in English and in Spanish; an analysis which shows many coincidences between the two datasets, as well as some quantitative differences, as shown in Section 5.¹⁵ There are some other interesting differences as for mappings and the frequency of some discourse features, that will be further illustrated and discussed in this Section.

As for sources in the ‘(CORONA)VIRUS is like X’ construction, some culturally-specific mappings have been identified. Spanish similes often refer to soccer, as shown in the following examples from Colombia, Spain and Argentina, respectively (see also example (4) in Section 4 and (27) in Section 5.4):

(29) a. “Este virus es como *jugarle al Barcelona con diez hombres... duro, duro*”
(SP11, www.elheraldo.co, 11/04/2020)

[This virus is like *playing against Barcelona with 10 players...hard, hard*]

b. El virus es como *un equipo que se encierra bien y tiene un delantero peligroso arriba* (SP1, www.cope.es, 31/03/2020)

[This virus is like *a team that locks up well and has a dangerous front striker*]

¹⁵ Some of the similes are identical or almost identical in English and Spanish, which shows the impact of globalization on figurative language. This is the case, e.g., of “Corona is like your wife. Initially you tried to control it, then you realize that you can’t. Then you learn to live with it” (EN11) and “El coronavirus es como una esposa con la que uno finalmente se acostumbra a vivir tras haber intentado hacerle cambiar” [Coronavirus is like a wife who you finally get used to live with after trying to make her change] (SP28).”

c. Este virus es como *Messi y Maradona juntos*. Se nos escondió un poco. A los expertos nos trituró. Nos llevó para todos lados, nos gambeta (SP16, www.ole.com.ar, 11/06/2020)

[This virus is like *Messi and Maradona together*. It hid for a while. It crushes us as experts. It took us everywhere, it dribbles us]

SOCCER activates a frame which is similar to that of WAR in that it also contains elements such as opponents, competition and winning and losing (Flusberg *et al.* 2018: 5). In addition, it is well-defined, widespread in Spanish-speaking communities and it evokes emotions. Arguments, politics, and sports, for example, are like war because they involve a conflict between opposing forces, they require strategic decisions to be made about how to allocate resources, they unfold over time, and they have identifiable winners and losers.

Typical music styles are also deployed as sources (*tango*) or targets (*flamenco*) related to the virus:

(30) a. El virus es como *el tango y el rock and roll*, le gusta la ciudad, en las ciudades grandes el virus se acantona y hay mucha transmisión de persona a persona (SP23, www.chacodiapordia.com, 27/03/2020)

[The virus is like *tango and rock & roll*, it likes cities, in big cities the virus is quartered and there is a great transmission from person to person]

b. *El flamenco* es como un virus, una vez inoculado no hay manera de quitarlo; es una música poderosísima (SP51, www.deflamenco.com.com, 01/03/2020)

[*Flamenco* is like a virus, once inoculated, it can't be removed; it is a very powerful music]

In (30), two typical dances, Argentinian tango and Spanish flamenco, are compared to a virus (contagious and resistant).

The simile in (31), another highly culture-specific example, compares *coronavirus* to *turrón*, a typical Spanish Christmas sweet. The elaboration that allows intertextually for the analogy refers to the motto of an advertisement by the brand “El Almendro”.

(31) Este virus es como *los turrones “El Almendro”*. Volverá a casa por Navidad (SP8, www.eleconomista.es, 03/03/2020)

[This virus is like *turrón 'El Almendro'*. It will come back for Christmas]

While a song repeats the words *Vuelve a casa, vuelve, por Navidad* ('Come back, come back, for Christmas'), we watch the scene of a son coming back home to celebrate Christmas with his family,¹⁶ This ad, repeated in different formats but with the same tune year after year during decades on Spanish TV, is already part of Spaniards' shared cultural knowledge. The simile reminds the addressee that Christmas is a critical period for the disease, since cold weather (in Spain) and celebrations outside the coexistence bubble increase the virus expansion (the virus 'comes back' after a period of lower rates of contagion).

Finally, example (32) instantiates another highly cultural mapping referring to a 19th century famous Spanish play, *Don Juan Tenorio* by José Zorrilla.

(32) ¡Qué osadía manifiesta la del virus! Es como *el Tenorio*, que a las cabañas bajó y a los palacios subió. No está bien que una cosa tan pequeña escale la muralla de un palacio de tanta historia.

[How bold is the virus! It is like [*Don Juan*] *Tenorio*, who went down to the huts and went up to the palaces. It is not right for such a small thing to climb the wall of a palace with so much history].

The example uses some famous lines of the play (*a las cabañas bajó y a los palacios subió* "down to the huts and went up to the palaces") to establish a shocking comparison between a fictional (evil) character (the womanizer Tenorio) and the coronavirus.

The English examples do not tend to be culture-specific, yet it is interesting to notice the repetition of RACISM as a target in the 'X is like A VIRUS' construction. This is clearly not an accident, since the first months of the pandemic coincide with a highly relevant social event taking place within the Anglo-American community, namely the killing of George Floyd by the Minneapolis police on 25 May 2020. The fact that this event and the 'Black Lives Matter' movement were active in the community's mind

¹⁶ 2020 version can be watched at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8wMVFMDIT40>.

clearly triggered the creation of the similes by mixing the two most salient domains during that same period.

Finally, the analysis of the discursive features of the similes also highlights some differences between the two datasets already described in Section 5. The similes in the Spanish dataset seem to be more linked to subjective genres, where there is an explicit stance-taker, than in the English one. Spanish similes are more frequent in opinion and interview genres (68%) than in the English dataset (50%), where similes are more frequent in news (45% in English vs. 31% in Spanish). The difference is higher in the ‘X is like A VIRUS’ construction (78% in Spanish vs 58% in the English dataset). This difference can also be seen in the fact that the ‘voice’ behind the simile (i.e. the person to which the simile is attributed) is slightly more frequently explicit in Spanish (58%) than in English (51%). This ‘voice’ corresponds to a covert authority, popular people (sportsmen, journalists, authors), more often in Spanish than in English, which tends to resort to a more overt authority or experts, especially in the ‘(CORONA)VIRUS is like X’ construction.

7. Conclusions

Discourse reflects the impact of a critical situation such as a pandemic. The efforts of politicians, communicators and ordinary people resort to a variety of discourse strategies to conceptualize and communicate the new shocking situation. Discourse analysts have focused mainly on metaphors, but similes also prove interesting to analyze as strategies that help to explain this new disease and its devastating effects among the world’s population.

This paper has classified the main sources, targets and mappings in ‘TARGET is like SOURCE’ similes containing the word *coronavirus* or *virus* as a previous step to describe their discourse features by analyzing corpus examples in English and Spanish digital discourse during the first half of 2020, when the pandemic expanded all around the world. An important novelty of the research conducted is that (CORONA)VIRUS is not only considered as a target but also a source of the simile, which allows to compare both constructions as for conceptualization and discourse effects.

A first finding of the research performed is the great variety of source and target domains deployed in the media to call citizens’ attention on one of the most threatening events taking place worldwide in the last years. The complexity of the new virus, as well

as its long-term nature, requires the use of highly creative mappings in order to maintain citizen's awareness and get health-carers' and scientists' messages across to a very wide audience as clearly and quickly as possible. This is why we find source domains such as WAR and NATURAL DISASTERS, linked to the idea of harming and danger. As in the case of metaphor, more 'neutral', everyday domains such as SPORTS are also deployed. Targets also show great conceptual variety, proving that the pandemic is a highly salient event in the community's mind, therefore being used to conceptualize domains that range from more complex ideological concepts and feelings, such as RELIGION, FAITH, RACISM, POPULISM or HATE, to more concrete —but nonetheless unexpected ones—, such as A HAIR IN THE CRIME'S SCENE or NETFLIX. The common feature to most similes including (CORONA)VIRUS, both as source and as target, is thus that of destruction, danger and confrontation.

The hypothesis that similes have clear persuasive discursive functions is also corroborated in the case of (CORONA)VIRUS similes. The examples in the corpus frequently occur in opinion genres and also in news, in which they add an emotional bias that sometimes creates the overlapping of news and opinion articles. Similes are also often linked to an explicit stance-taker, thus adding subjectivity and allowing for an implication of the reader or listener in what is being communicated. In addition, over one third of our samples appear in highly prominent text locations as headlines, subheadlines, captions, text initiations or codas. The interaction of all these contextual and textual factors prove that (CORONA)VIRUS similes are important persuasive strategies, intended to make readers or listeners want to discover the information contained in the body of the text, and not only browse over the headlines. Moreover, similes tend to be repeated within the article, where they serve as information expanding and structuring devices. These conclusions are consistent with the general descriptions of similes in previous research with real-text examples not restricted to a single concept (e.g. Bernárdez, 2009, Cuenca 2015, Romano 2017

The cross-linguistic analysis conducted here has shown the tension between situatedness and globalization in the use of figurative language during the pandemic. The mappings and the discourse features of the similes are mostly common in the two languages compared. Yet, when the English and the Spanish examples were contrasted, some specificities were identified in the Spanish dataset as for specific cultural mappings and a certain tendency to relate the use of similes to more subjective genres. Even though

the data seem consistent in the corpus, further cross-linguistic research needs to be conducted to corroborate them.

All in all, similes help to clarify how the new pandemic is conceptualized and communicated. Being a topic that currently supersedes and overshadows all the others, the coronavirus pandemic also serves as the source to explain and express an opinion on a variety of other topics in a salient and attention-calling way.

References

- Addison, C. (1993). From literal to figurative: An introduction to the study of simile. *College English* 55(4), 402-419.
- Aisenman, R. A. (1999). Structure mapping and simile-metaphor preference. *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity* 14(1), 45-51.
- Ashby J., Roncero C., de Almeida R.G. & Agauas S.J. (2018). The early processing of metaphors and similes: Evidence from eye movements. *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology* 71(1): 161-168.
- Bernárdez, E. (2009). Comparaciones explícitas con *wie* en *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, de Robert Musil. Una aproximación cognitiva. *Revista de Filología Alemana* 1, 57-72.
- Bowdle, B. F. & Gentner, D. (2005). The career of metaphor. *Psychological Review* 112(1), 193-216.
- Breeze, R., Musolff, A. & Villar-Lich, S. (in press). *Pandemic and Crisis Discourse. Communicating COVID19*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Chiappe, D., Kennedy, J., & Chiappe, P. (2003). Aptness is more important than comprehensibility in preference for metaphors and similes. *Poetics* 31, 51-68.
- Croft, W. & Cruse, D. A. (2004). *Cognitive Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cuenca, M. J. (2015). Beyond compare: Similes in interaction. *Review of Cognitive Linguistics* 31(1), 140-166.
- Dancygier, B. & Sweetser, E. (2014). *Figurative Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Deignan, A. (2005). *Metaphor and Corpus Linguistics*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

- Filardo-Llamas, L. (2020). Tsunamis, waves, Quixotes, and KO-vid: Metaphors about the pandemic as seen in cartoons. *Mètode Science Studies Journal - Annual Review* 11.
- Flusberg, S. J., Matlock, T. & Thibodeau, P. H. (2018). War metaphors in public discourse. *Metaphor & Symbol* 33(1), 1-18.
- Gentner, D., & Bowdle, B. F. (2008). Metaphor as structure-mapping. In R. Gibbs, Jr., R. (Ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought* (Cambridge Handbooks in Psychology), 109-128. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gillis, M. (2020). Ventilators, missiles, doctors, troops ... The justification of legislative responses to COVID-19 through military metaphors. *Law and Humanities* 14 (2). 135-159.
- Glucksberg, S., (2008) How metaphors create categories –quickly. In R. Gibbs, Jr., R. (Ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought* (Cambridge Handbooks in Psychology), 67-83. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Glucksberg, S. & Keysar, B. (1990). Understanding metaphorical comparisons: Beyond similarity. *Psychological Review* 97, 3-18.
- Glucksberg, S., & Haught, C. (2006). On the relation between metaphor and simile: When comparison fails. *Mind & Language* 21(3), 360–378.
- Grady, J. (2017). Using metaphor to influence public perceptions and policy: How metaphors can save the world. In E. Semino & Z. Demjén (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Metaphor and Language*, 343–354. New York: Routledge.
- Israel, M., Riddle Harding, J. & Tobin, V. (2004). On simile. In M. Achard & S. Kemmer (Eds.) *Language Culture, and Mind*, 123-135. Stanford: CSLI Publications.
- Johnson, M. (Ed.) (1981). *Philosophical Perspectives on Metaphor*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. (1980) *Metaphors we Live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Langacker, R. (1987). *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar, Vol.1: Theoretical prerequisites*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Langacker R. (2013). *Essentials of Cognitive Grammar*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Moder, C. L. (2012). *Two puzzle pieces*: Fitting discourse context and constructions into cognitive metaphor theory. In B. Dancygier, J. Sanders & L. Vandelanotte (Eds.)

- Textual Choices in Discourse: A View from Cognitive Linguistics*, 157-183. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Olza, I., Koller, V., Ibarretxe-Antuñano, I., Pérez-Sobrino, P. & Semino, E. (in press). The #ReframeCovid initiative: From Twitter to society via metaphor. *Metaphor and the Social World* 11 (1): 99-121.
- Pérez-Sobrino, P., Semino, E., Ibarretxe-Antuñano, I., Koller, V., & Olza, I. (in press). Acting like a hedgehog in times of pandemic: Metaphorical creativity in the #ReframeCovid collection. *Metaphor and Symbol*.
- Romano, M. (2017). Are metaphor and similes interchangeable? A case study in opinion discourse. *Review of Cognitive Linguistics* 15(1), 1-33.
- Roncero, C., Almeida, R. G., Pissani, L. & Patalas, I. (2021). Metaphor is not like a simile: Reading-time evidence for distinct interpretations for negated tropes. *Metaphor & Symbol* 36(2), 85-98.
- Sabucedo, J. M. Alzate, M. & Hur, D. (2020). COVID-19 and the metaphor of war. *International Journal of Social Psychology* 35(3), 618-624.
- Semino, E. (2021) “Not Soldiers but Fire-fighters” – Metaphors and Covid-19. *Health Communication* 36(1): 50-58.
- Tay, D. (2021) Is the Social Unrest like COVID-19 or Is COVID-19 like the Social Unrest? A Case Study of Source-target Reversibility, *Metaphor and Symbol*, 36(2): 99-115.
- Tversky, A. (1977). Features of similarity. *Psychological Review*, 84, 327–352.
- Utsumi, A. (2007). Interpretative diversity explains metaphor-simile distinction, *Metaphor and Symbol*, 22(4), 291-312.
- Wicke, Ph. & Bolognesi, M. M. (2020) Framing COVID-19: How we conceptualize and discuss the pandemic on Twitter. *PloS One*. 15 (9). <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0240010> (last accessed: 27 January 2021).