

## COMPARISON

1. **Definition:** Traditional c.s such as (1) 'As cold as ice' or (2) 'Like a bull in a china shop' are a special type of verbal clichés which are generally known and widely used among the members of a given culture. Such c.s are supposed to "belong to the simple forms and structures of proverbial utterances" (Röhrich 1977c: 23), and it is also claimed that they are "the simplest and most original form of the proverbial saying" (Otto 1890: viii). In fact, such traditional c.s have usually been included in proverb collections, often, however, without explicitly being distinguished from \*proverbs and proverbial sayings. Yet, there are some rare cases when special categories have been set up for c.s as for example as early as 1670 in John Ray's *Collection of Proverbs* under the heading of 'similes', a name which is very much in use for this form still today.

2. **Examples and Analysis:** Comparing, i.e. the process of perceiving either similarity or identity on the one hand, or divergence, on the other hand, is one of the basic human cognitive activities; in fact, "it permeates the whole human activity" (Lekomceva 1983: 173). Traditional c.s, just like any comparison in general, have a three-part rational structure: the *comparans*, *comparandum*, and *tertium comparationis*. In a c. of the kind 'A is as x as B', for example, A would be the object or person being compared (the *comparandum*), B would be the person it is compared to (the *comparans*, sometimes called the *vehicle* of a c.) on the basis of some feature or quality x which is common to both of them (the *tertium comparationis*). The difference between traditional and individual c.s is found in the extralinguistic background. Ordinary c.s are regarded as belonging to individual speech, whereas popular, traditional c.s are "current in some linguistic community for an extended period of time" (Norrick 1986: 39); consequently, Ogot'cev (1978: 52) treats them as part of language as a system. C.s such as (3) 'A is as cool as a cucumber' or (4) 'A is as white as snow' are verbal stereotypes which are transmitted from generation to generation in a more or less constant shape; they are not created anew each time they are used, but reproduced in their fixed form. The c. (5) 'As bitter as gall', for example, which exists in many languages in an identical form, has been proven to exist for more than two thousand years (Taylor 1954: 6). Therefore, in order to distinguish individual from traditional c.s (which is often hardly possible), the question of origin, i.e. whether or not a c. can be traced back to a concrete individual author, is of much less importance than questions of usage and currency.

Traditional c.s, just like c.s in general, have often been discussed in terms of their relationship to metaphor, in particular since the latter has been referred to as *abbreviated comparison* since the times of Aristotle.

Indeed, an expression such as 'John is an eel' seems to be very similar to the c. 'John is as slimy as an eel'. In the first case, however, there is a seemingly full equation underlying A and B; the c. renders the partial identification of some of their elements explicit. Yet, this need not necessarily always be the case: some traditional c.s such as (6) 'As black as pitch' can be turned into asyndetic, parasyntetic compounds such as *pitch black*. The question of whether metaphor was originally prior to an explicit c. or vice versa has been very much debated. It seems reasonable to side with Klein's (1936: 13) view that, "if one expression is older than the other one, then it is rather metaphor than comparison", although Norrick (1987b: 153) has recently argued in favour of the view that comparative noun-adjective compounds (such as *sky blue* or *razor-sharp*) are elliptical similes.

According to Taylor (1954: 8), a traditional comparison "owes its effectiveness to its obvious pertinence to a situation". This observation comes very close to the ideas of Permyakov (1970: 20) who terms such traditional c.s (and other similar forms) 'by-words', because they are construed around particular central (or rather focal) key words; in his view, proverbs and proverbial phrases are "signs of situations or of a certain type of relationship between two objects". And just like proverbial expressions in general should be regarded as models, according to Permyakov, proverbial c.s (or 'by-words', respectively), too, can be considered to be models. This view coincides with Norrick's (1986: 46) assumption that similes count as 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate' rather than as 'true' or 'false': depending on the character of the situation applied or referred to, all of these expressions function beyond intrinsic logical verification. Like proverbial sayings, c.s are, in terms of their grammatical form, not a complete cliché, i.e. they take their final shape only in a concrete context; unlike proverbs and proverbial phrases, however, they are motivated directly, i.e. they are not metaphorical as a whole, although the internal link between the *comparans* (vehicle) and the *tertium comparationis* may be (but need not be) metaphorical.

Traditional c.s tend to exhibit further specifications, what Taylor (1954: 5) calls embellishment or elaboration. Thus, one usually does not simply say (7) 'As quiet as a mouse', but (7a) 'As quiet as a church mouse' or (7b) 'As quiet as a dormouse'. Such specifications reinforce the overall intensifying function which is inherent in traditional c.s. Thus the common c. (8) 'As hungry as a wolf' can be turned into (8a) 'As hungry as a she-wolf with pups'. Examples like these display a profound humorous tendency for which Norrick (1987a) has named four major sources: whimsical (improbable) vehicles, irony, punning, and overstatements. This humouristic tendency may not only lead to what has been called 'proverbial exaggerations' such as (9) 'As much chance as a snow ball in hell'; it may also lead to absurd c.s such as (10) 'As clear

as mud', which expresses the obviously more logical c. (11) 'As clear as glass' in its contradictory form. Very often, such absurd c.s in particular are based on merely linguistic (surface) features such as rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, etc. These poetic devices, however, are frequently exploited in c.s of all kinds, e.g. in (12) 'As busy as a bee' or, even more evidently, in (13) 'As big as a barn', (14) 'As big as a bull', or (15) 'As big as a bear', and many others. In such cases, it actually seems that the more absurd such a c. is, the more its intensifying function (Burger 1973: 49). Still, intensification is but one of a wide range of textual and pragmatic functions of traditional c.s (cf. Norrick 1986: 46ff.).

Traditional c.s seem to be predominantly applicable to the sphere of human beings. According to Ogol'cev's (1978: 126) analysis, ca. 70% of all traditional c.s are applicable exclusively to human beings, 20% can, but need not be applied to human beings, and only 10% cannot be applied to humans. Consequently, Ogol'cev's (*ibid.*) conclusion is that "the system of fixed comparisons as a whole ... turns out to be a predominantly *anthropological* system".

**3. Typology:** There are several ways to classify traditional c.s. One of these possibilities is according to the grammatical form of the c. Thus, in English one can distinguish between c.s involving formulaic structures of the following types: (i) 'as ... as ...', (ii) '... like ...', (iii) '...than ...', (iv) 'so ... that ...', (v) 'too ... to...', (vi) 'enough ... to ...', etc. Such distinctions, however, as useful as they may be, are only valid for c.s in a particular language - corresponding c.s in other languages might be expressed in a completely different form, which limits the usefulness of such a typology.

A different attempt to subcategorize traditional c.s is based on formal-structural criteria (cf., e.g., Pilz 1978: 735ff., 1981: 83ff.; Röhrich 1977c). Within this framework, c.s are subdivided according to their grammatical function in a given text, as for example:

- (1) adjectival comparisons;
- (2) verbal comparisons;
- (3) adverbial comparisons;
- (4) nominal comparisons.

The various types within this classification (which can be subdivided into more detailed classes) can be realized in different language with various degrees of frequency.

Still another approach is advanced by Ogol'cev (1978: 118ff.) who distinguishes traditional c.s in terms of the sphere from which the *comparans* is taken, as opposed to the sphere to which the whole c. is applicable. Ogol'cev has isolated certain groups:

- (1) human beings, e.g. child, idiot
- (2) tools, instruments, etc., e.g. bullet, arrow
- (3) domestic appliances, food, e.g. blaze, honey
- (4) domestic animals, e.g. cow, horse
- (5) domestic birds, e.g. chicken, pigeon
- (6) wild birds, e.g. parrot, raven
- (7) animals, reptils, fish, e.g. wolf, bear
- (8) insects, e.g. bee, spider
- (9) nature, elementary phenomena, e.g. fire, water
- (10) vegetable kingdom, e.g. grass, flower
- (11) substances and their qualities, e.g. iron, steel
- (12) objects from church life, religious and superstitious ideas, e.g. hell, paradise, angel

Unfortunately, Ogol'cev provides no analysis of frequency or distribution of the various categories, which would give much insight into the nature of traditional c.s. Arora (1977: 15ff.) who has analyzed several collections of such c.s using this approach concludes that they "are dominated by common domestic or farm animals" (*ibid.*: 17). This observation is supported by Norrick's (1986: 40f., 1987b: 147f.) analysis of 'stock similes' in the OEDP; in this standard collection of English \*proverbs, c.s involving animals as the *comparans* account for 38% of the whole corpus, followed by natural products (19%) and artifacts (14%). This result is comparable with Andersson's (1971: 225) analysis of similes employed in literary texts; according to his study, ca. 40% of the similes refer to animals, the remaining 60% are based on "words of top frequency". Norrick's (1986: 41, 1987b: 146) subsequent analysis of the *tertium* displays that nearly 25% of the traditional c.s in the OEDP are centred on colour and other directly perceived properties; Norrick concludes that similes in general offer an analogue mode of expression, and that "stock similes cluster around concepts members of the linguistic community find difficult for cognitive and/or cultural reasons". - This picture is mirrored by Norrick's (1987b: 146f.) analysis of comparative noun-adjective compounds; according to him, ca. 75% of them name colours or directly perceived properties. This obvious coincidence with the character of traditional comparisons cannot, however, be confirmed with regard to the *comparans* (vehicle). Perhaps this kind of typology, which of course depends very much on the degree of abstraction of the various classes, would be most suitable for the international study of c.s.

**4. History:** It would seem reasonable to assume that traditional c.s came into existence as soon as human language began to evolve. Yet, it is hardly possible to clarify the history of traditional c.s, since, first of all, their history can only be deduced from written documents which need not necessarily reflect authentic origin, and, secondly, they have not been

consciously and systematically collected until recent years. Consequently, it is wise to agree with Taylor's (1954: 1) more careful statement: "Comparisons and similes are as old as the earliest literary records" and to add 'if not older ...'. Some traditional c.s, such as, for example, the above-mentioned (5) 'As bitter as gall', have been documented for more than two thousand years throughout the world (Taylor 1954: 6); c.s involving colours, in particular, can be readily traced through centuries of use (Taylor 1931: 223; Zingerle 1864; Klein 1936). Other c.s are of relatively recent origin; the above-mentioned (2) 'Like a bull in a china shop', for example, is only documented as far back as the 19th century. In this particular case the lack of earlier examples can be explained by the fact that, in 1773, a bull actually invaded a London china shop (Taylor 1968: 236). More often than not, however, it is impossible to clarify the sources of most traditional c.s. It still seems relatively easy in case of some c.s involving proper names of well-known historical or Biblical persons as in (16) 'As old as Methuselah'. Yet, proper names do not always provide good explicatory background. This is particularly true when they involve names of persons who are only locally known or whose authenticity can not be proven such as (17) 'As nervous as Sam Hill' or the very common German expression (18) 'Frech wie Oskar'. Historical changes in the form of particular c.s can be observed; in English, for example, (19) 'As white as milk' was once more widely used than it is today, while (20) 'As white as a sheet' seems to be a relatively recent invention (Taylor 1934: 35). Such changes, however, have not been systematically studied and demand more thorough investigation.

**5. Related Forms and Transformations:** Traditional c.s are commonly used in other folklore genres, such as the \*märchen, the \*ballad, the riddle, the \*proverb, or the folksong (Taylor 1954: 6f.; Sackett 1963; Tinnis 1971). Additionally, traditional c.s may transport particular culturally accepted beliefs also enshrined in genres such as \*fables, legends, tales etc., as for example, (21) 'As bold as a lion'. It would be incorrect, however, to assume any genetic link between such c.s and any of these genres on this basis. Sometimes, proverbs employing c.s are regarded to be a special type of traditional c.s, as, for example 'Like master, like man' (Taylor 1954: 5; Pilz 1978: 742). Additionally, proverbs may converge into c.s, as for instance (22) 'Like bringing coals to Newcastle' which is based on the proverbial phrase 'To bring coals to Newcastle' (Taylor 1954: 5). Yet, proverbs, proverbial phrases, and c.s are clearly kept apart and separated in folk speech, and when a proverb is turned into a c., the latter is usually felt to be an adaptation. On the other hand, c.s, in particular very old ones, may converge into compounds, as in the above-mentioned 'pitch black', which is used as frequently as (23) 'As black as pitch'. This does not imply, however, that such pairs always occur equally in both forms: thus, for example, a

compound like 'sky blue' is freely used today, whereas the corresponding c. (24) 'As blue as the sky' is of infrequent occurrence; on the other hand, (25) 'As sweet as honey' is still much in use, whereas 'honey sweet' has more or less disappeared by now. The question why this may be the case remains unsolved and requires further study.

**6. Geography:** Traditional c.s are known and used all over the world, and they seem to be a phenomenon in all languages. Since many c.s of different cultures are very similar, often even identical, the question of their origin which is clearly formulated by Klein (1936: 6) naturally arises: "When we find the same expression in various languages, does this reflect a parallelism of thought, which may be caused by the similarity of mental constructs in related peoples, or is this monogenesis?" Klein (1936: 24) himself concludes that several comparisons such as (26) 'As black as coal' or (27) 'As white as snow' are, in terms of their character, so self-evident and obvious "that they could arise independently anywhere and in any culture". Other c.s are more likely to have arisen locally and only later to have expanded to larger areas. The existence of such (loan) translations, however, does not seem to be the only and exclusive explanation for the similarity of c.s throughout various cultures: the German c. (2a) 'Wie ein Elefant im Porzellanladen' and the English equivalent (2) 'Like a bull in a china shop', are, as Röhrich 1977c: 23) conclude, "the same thought model, but no translation". Therefore the question of whether similarities are the result of parallelism of thought or cultural transmission can only be solved from case to case (Klein 1936: 9). In order to solve this kind of problem concrete data have to be collected and investigated not only concerning the origin of a c. but also its particular history. This is complicated, however, by the above-mentioned lack of detailed studies; as Taylor (1934: 35) complained some fifty years ago: "On the whole, distinctions dealing with time and place have not been made in the study of proverbial comparisons."- A different, synchronic approach was advanced by Permyakov in the 1970s. On the basis of empirical research, Permyakov published a list of 75 traditional c.s familiar to all Russian native speakers (Permyakov 1975), to which Kuusi has supplied an appendix of English, French and Finnish equivalents. This shows that many of them have general European currency. Mieder (1982: 342) concludes: "It is this type of statistical research that helps to establish the truly international expressions still in use in the modern age."

**7. History of Interpretation / 8. Collections:** The earliest collections of c.s, which, quite naturally, make no distinction between folk and art products, were primarily intended to aid authors. This is the case, for example, with Desiderius Erasmus' (Erasmus of Rotterdam's) *Liber parabolarum* (1516). Usually, traditional c.s have been included in

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collections of proverbs and proverbial phrases. Yet, there are several collections which include special sections for c.s exclusively; this is the case, for instance, already in John Ray's *Handbook of Proverbs* (1670), which contains a list of about 250 "proverbial similes", in Hazlitt's *Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases* (1869), or in Lean's *Collectanea* (1902-1904) vol. II of which contains about 140 pages of c.s entitled *A New Treasury of Similes*. Exclusively traditional c.s were well-documented in the last decades of the 19th century, in particular in the Romance languages, and several important studies investigating the form and history of traditional c.s subsequently appeared in the first half of this century (Svartengreen 1918; Widmer 1929; Klein 1936). Qualitatively different approaches have only recently been made by scholars who have investigated traditional c.s within a phraseological framework, e.g. Pilz (1978, 1981) and, in particular, the Soviet scholar Ogol'cev (1978). These studies have tried to categorize various types and subtypes of comparisons on a linguistic and logical basis.

**9. Bibliography:** ANDERSSON 1971; ARORA 1977; BURGER 1973; ERASMUS OF ROTTERDAM 1516; GRZYBEK 1984a; HAZLITT 1869; KLEIN 1936; LEAN 1902-4; LEKOMCEVA 1983; MIEDER 1982; NORRICK 1986, 1987a, 1987b; OGOL'CEV 1978; OTTO 1890; PERMYAKOV 1970, 1975; PILZ 1978, 1981; RAY 1670; RÖHRICH 1977c; RÖHRICH, MIEDER 1977; SACKETT 1963; SHEN 1989; SVARTENGREEN 1918; TAYLOR 1931, 1934, 1954, 1968; TINNIS 1971; WIDMER 1929; ZINGERLE 1864.

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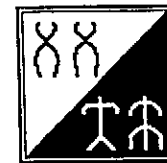
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