

ON THE NOTION OF SIMILARITY

VANDA BOŽIČEVIĆ
Filozofski fakultet u Zadru

UDK: 18
Izvorni znanstveni rad

Primljeno: 1987-02-09

After stressing the importance of the notion of similarity for the theories of meaning, the author discusses the definition of similarity as 'feature matching' and proves it inadequate, offering another operational definition of similarity derived from late Wittgenstein's idea of 'family resemblances'. Similarity is understood as a 'perceived' pattern of relation correspondances that precedes the abstraction of common features and cannot be reduced to it.

The notion of similarity is common enough to be used in our everyday conversation, common enough to be regarded as comprehensible to any speaker of a language. But at the same time this notion seems to be theoretically overloaded, namely, it is treated as a presupposed *explanans* of the emergence of meaning by a wide range of theories — psychological theories, art theories, linguistic theories etc. Similarity seems to carry a heavy burden of explanation in theories that deal with metaphorical and pictorial meaning, with our imaginative and conceptual skills.

The traditional approach to metaphor as an abbreviated simile sees the connection between the terms as based on similarity, namely on some common properties of the objects compared. According to the comparison view of metaphor¹ — interpretation of metaphorical meaning consists of singling out those common properties, thus revealing the hidden basis of similarity.

The traditional theory of pictorial meaning resides on the notion of similarity as well. The picture is considered to convey meaning thanks to its similarity to the object depicted, it resembles its model by sharing some of its properties — colours, shades, proportions, etc. In fact picture-model relation is often interpreted as an illustration of what is meant by »likeness«, similarity (and mirror image as its ideal exemplification) is understood as an occurrence primarily in the visual domain.

¹ Max Black: *Models and Metaphors*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1972, p. 35

From the visual domain as its place of birth the notion of similarity shifts to more general fields. The mirror-image ideal and resemblance to the model as a way of achieving meaning govern traditional art theory as well. Art as a mirror of nature or of society, as a copy of the real world, art as an illusion or delusion, as semblance or image, all these aesthetic formulas presuppose an underlying notion of similarity which is usually taken for granted and not thematized at all.

The notion of similarity has received more theoretical attention regarding its role in the explanation of cognitive processes such as identification, classification, conceptualization. Our capacity to contemplate similarities (»*theorein to omoion*«) seems to enable us to subsume unknown objects under well-known categories, hence to identify, to abstract common characteristics, to form concepts, classes, categories.² The notion of similarity used so extensively surely becomes less intensively defined; we are tempted to identify contemplation of similarities with our most general cognitive capacities.

An attempt to redefine the notion of similarity should therefore avoid such general characterization but at the same time offer an operational definition that would preserve its applicability to different domains. Such a redefinition may also cause certain disappointment, namely — although on one hand, we intend to confirm the multifold functioning of our contemplation of similarities in the formation of metaphorical and pictorial meaning in our imaginative and cognitive processes, on the other hand, we shall restrict its explanatory power. Similarity is often a springboard but not a magic wand that solves all the problems. Raising the issue of similarity seems useful as a preparatory step for the explanation of the emergence of meaning in different domains, but should not be regarded as its substitute. It should also be noted that it is neither our aim nor domain to analyse psychological processes that lead to our similarity judgements. Our domain is restricted to theoretical dispute, our aim is to reach an operational definition that would secure a plausible ground for further semantical analysis.

Similarity is usually understood as a result of the process of comparing, as feature matching³ whereby we abstract features common to the objects that are being compared. Similarity is not »asserted in any absolute sense«,⁴ it is always similarity in a certain respect, in all other

² Concerning the role of similarity in the process of conceptualization mark the following quotation:

»Resemblance ultimately is nothing else than this rapprochement which reveals a generic kinship between heterogeneous ideas«.

Paul Ricoeur: »The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling«, Sheldon Sachs: *On Metaphor*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, p. 145

³ Andrew Ortony: »The Role of Similarity in Similes and Metaphors«, *Metaphor and Thought*, Cambridge University Press, pp. 188—201

⁴ David Novitz: »Picturing«, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol 34, No 2, 1975, p. 152

respects the objects compared are characterized as »different«. Similarity may also be interpreted as if it admitted of degrees,⁵ in which case it becomes a function of the amount of abstracted common properties. As similarity is also viewed as a symmetrical and reflexive relation, it tends to overlap with the notion of identity.

The definition of similarity as feature matching sounds rather plausible, but at the same time it raises at least two important questions, namely: How many common features do we need to treat objects as similar? Are all common features equally relevant in establishing similarity? If not — what is the criterion by which we judge certain features as relevant or irrelevant?

If similarity is to be regarded as similarity in a certain respect, only one common property should suffice. In such a case similarity would be a trivial relation, namely — everything is like everything else in a certain respect.⁶ In answer to the first question we have to state that although one common feature does not seem enough, it surely is difficult if not impossible to answer at which point does the quantity of common traits turn into the quality of similarity.

Suppose the answer to the first question was »more than one«. Is the fact that some objects share more than one attribute not only necessary but also a sufficient condition for an insight into likeness? Consider the following example: At the moment I am observing a book, a pen, a glass. They may have many common properties, for example: they belong to me, they lie on my table, they were bought the same day, sold at the same price etc. Yet, despite these common properties I would hardly be inclined to declare these objects to be similar.

From this example one could conclude that to possess more than one common property can be regarded as necessary, but not as sufficient condition for similarity. Not all the common features are equally relevant for our similarity judgements; whether two objects are considered to be similar or not — depends on the relevance of properties which are singled out as common.⁷ The final import of this example can be

⁵ Max Black, op. cit. p. 37

⁶ Andrew Ortony, op. cit. p. 192

»... what we think of as »the natural assertion of a resemblance« is a hint or characteristic or are seen as useful for purposes of grouping and categorization.«

— quotation from: Robert Schwartz: »The Power of Pictures«, *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 82, No 12, XII, 1985, pp. 711—720

»... what we think of as »the natural assertion of a resemblance« is a function of the readiness with which we single out certain aspects of a thing in virtue of which to assert a resemblance between it and something else.«

— quotation from: David Novitz, op. cit. p. 152

formulated as follows: *The definition of similarity as feature matching implies a criterion by which we single out features relevant for comparison.*

The further task would surely be the definition of such a criterion. The search for an established criterion that discerns relevant from irrelevant features may drive us to the essentialist position that reduces similarity to conceptual correspondance. Such a position is untenable for two reasons: first — there are too many counter cases where not essential, but arbitrary, contingent features of objects become relevant for similarity, and, second — the idea that conceptual relevance of features should account for similarity is opposed to our previous assumption about the role of similarity in the process of conceptualization. Namely, if similarity is understood as the ground for the formation of concepts, it cannot at the same time be explained by conceptual correspondance.

Another way in the attempt to establish a criterion of relevance would be to insist on the primacy of the visual domain and stress the relevance of phenomenal, perceptual characteristics of objects. Indeed, although similarity cannot be restricted to the visual domain, its primacy cannot be ignored. Pictorial meaning by its very nature depends on visual correspondances; metaphors and art in general are often praised for their »ability to set *'before the eyes'* the sense they display«⁸; our cognitive capacities are often metaphorically characterized in terms of visual experience (insight, seeing, vision, light of reason etc.)

The fact that most common cases of similarity judgements are based on visual perception also supports the idea that the criterion of relevance should imply the preference of visual, or more generally, perceptual features. One obvious weakness of such a criterion would be the fact that it could not account for similarities on a more abstract level. It is also not determinate enough because it offers no criterion of choice among the phenomenal properties themselves. Namely, which perceptual properties are to be regarded as high-salient and which as low-salient depends on the context, on our interests etc.⁹, consequently, the preference of phenomenal characteristics is too weak a determination.

The definition of similarity as feature matching that implies a criterion by which we abstract features relevant for matching seems thus to approach a dead-end. The attempt to establish such a criterion from an essentialist point of view contradicted the previously formulated

⁸ Paul Ricoeur: op. cit. p. 142

⁹ »... the distinction between salient and nonsalient predicates is not a sharp one. In extreme cases, however, it is obvious. There are doubtless large individual differences resulting from the different conceptions and experiences that different people have of things.«

— quotation from: Andrew Ortony, op. cit. p. 193

empiristic interpretation of concept formation. Furthermore, it contradicted the evidence, i. e. common cases of similarity judgements that imply primacy of visual and preference of perceptual domain. Although obvious, such a preference still does not offer a single criterion; it is either too narrow — giving no account of the similarities on the conceptual level, or too broad — giving no account of the choice among phenomenal features. Without an established criterion of salience of features our similarity judgements seem to be arbitrary or based on subjective affinities.

Nevertheless this conclusion is not supported by the evidence; most people agree in their similarity judgements and are able to give standard answers about the supposed objective ground of similarity, abstracting common features of the objects compared. If there is no single criterion for the abstraction of features the question is: *what enables us to single out relevant common properties in each case?* The answer we are suggesting is: *the perception of similarity itself*; it is after we have noticed the similarity that we are able to analyse our experience, to single out common features and thus to try to justify our impression.

To stress the primacy of the perception of similarity and the aposteriority of feature matching seems to engage us in a futile discussion about »the ultimate terminus of explanation that will yet itself be explained.«¹⁰. Such a discussion may also be interpreted in terms of the realist — antirealist struggle, as if the most important question was — Does similarity exist before it is perceived?¹¹ Questions like this one imply further discussions about the cognitive import of our similarity judgements and persist in the debates upon »creativity«¹² in metaphors and in art.

As it is rather obvious that all-embrasive topics like these cannot be adequately discussed within the limits of this article, we shall have to put them aside and leave the latter remark unanswered. As far as the former remark is concerned, it surely would bear some weight if the perception of similarity could be identified with feature matching, that we claim is not the case. Namely, the perception of similarity not only precedes feature matching, but also cannot be reduced to it, or, for those who prefer the other way round — the list of abstracted common properties is irreducible to the perception of similarity. Our similarity judgements are not based on already abstracted common pro-

¹⁰ Renford Bambrough: »Universals and Family Resemblances«, *Wittgenstein — The Philosophical Investigations*, Notre Dame, London; University of Notre Dame Press, 1968, p. 204

¹¹ Max Black, op. cit. p. 37

¹² Max Black: »More about Metaphor«, *Metaphor and Thought*, Cambridge University Press, p. 36

perties, but on the perception of a relation pattern that represents a precondition for the abstraction of common features and their conceptual matching.

The view of similarity we are defending here is inspired by Ricoeur's rehabilitation of similarity in the interpretation of metaphorical meaning¹³ and is derived from late Wittgenstein's idea of 'family resemblances'. We see the definition of similarity as feature matching to be inadequate because it does not answer the vital questions that it raises, namely — how many and what specific features do objects need to share to be regarded as similar. Maybe the fact that these questions are impossible to answer suggests that the questions themselves were wrong, that we cannot expect our perception of similarity to be explained in terms of feature matching, of abstracting common traits.

Let us recall the well-known Wittgenstein's words: »Don't say: »There *must* be something common, or they would not be called 'games'« — but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all. — For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don't think, but look!«¹⁴

Applied to our topic these words may be understood not only as methodological instructions, but read *vice versa* as an implicit answer to the question about the notion of similarity: Similarities, relationships are what we see and not what is common to all (games); i. e. they may not be identified with lists of common properties, nor with a single common denominator. To ask whether two things are similar is not the same question as to ask whether they have something in common; similarities are discovered by 'seeing', lists of common properties by 'thinking'.

As we have already mentioned before, it is not our intention to ask about the nature of the psychological process whereby we 'perceive' similarities. (Uneasiness about this may also be noticed in our vocabulary.) We only claim that this process (contemplation, insight, intuition, perception, or whatever it be¹⁵) cannot be identified with the abstraction of common features. It precedes such an abstraction and it occurs primarily on a phenomenal level.

So we have finally reached our operational definition: Similarity is a 'perceived' pattern of relation correspondances. This pattern may *aposteriori* be analysed by the matching of common traits, but such an analysis cannot replace the perception of similarity itself. The per-

¹³ in: Paul Ricoeur: *La métaphore vive*, du Seuil, 1975, Chapter VI

¹⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford, 1953, p. 31e

¹⁵ George A. Miller uses the term »apperception« in: »Images and Models, Similes and Metaphors«, *Metaphor and Thought*, Cambridge University Press, pp. 202—249

ception of similarity precedes feature matching and enables it by offering a criterion for the abstraction of relevant features. What the perception of similarity does not account for is the very abstraction of features, as well as their comparison, these being processes that already occur on the conceptual level. Similarity may thus be understood as a precondition for the processes on a more abstract level, but neither as their *explanandum*, nor as their *explanans*.

The perception of similarity does not result from the process of comparing common features abstracted according to an unknown criterion. It is an instant grasp of a recognized relation pattern that itself represents a criterion for further abstraction or inferences. It is not a result of an exclusive mental process, but is itself included in some of the important cognitive capacities.

VANDA BOŽIČEVIĆ: O POJMU SLIČNOSTI

Sažetak

Naglasivši značaj pojma sličnosti za teorije značenja, autorica raspravlja o definiciji sličnosti kao podudaranju svojstava, te dokazavši njenu neprikladnost nudi drugačiju operacionalnu definiciju sličnosti izvedenu iz ideje 'obiteljskih sličnosti' kasnog Wittgensteina. Sličnost je ovdje shvaćena kao 'opažen' uzorak relacijskih podudarnosti koji prethodi lučenju zajedničkih svojstava i na njega je nesvodiv.