

‘Like a god’/‘resembling a god’/‘equal to a god’/‘god-like’

Making sense of the syntactic variety of similitive expressions in Homer

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Similes in Homer have attracted great interest among scholars of Greek literature with respect to their function as part of the epic narrative, but a comprehensive linguistic analysis and typology of their syntax and semantics is still lacking. When dividing the different simile types into subcategories, some scholars (claim to) apply linguistic criteria (Coffey 1957, Larsen 2007, Ready 2011), but the basic theoretical assumptions behind these criteria often lack a solid foundation.

This paper provides an overview of all existing syntactic structures with which not just similes but all kinds of comparisons whose outcome is a similarity (i.e. *similatives*) are expressed in Homeric Greek, and explores their distribution from a semantic perspective. For best possible comparability, only the largest thematic group of similatives will be considered, namely those in which a human character is compared to a god. In an ancient Greek version of the statement ‘Achilles is like a god’, the marker of comparison, i.e. ‘like’, can be expressed by an adjective (‘equal’), an adverb (‘equally’), a verb (‘equals’), a particle (‘like’/‘as’), or not at all (if the comparison is expressed by a compound of the type ‘crystal-clear’). The aspect with regard to which the comparison is made can be expressed by a noun (‘Achilles is like a god in might’), an adjective (‘Achilles is beautiful like a god’), or a verb, which can be modified by an adverb (‘Achilles fights (mercilessly) like a god’).

The different syntactic variants for the expression of similatives broadly align with the three major word classes, thus the basic semantic properties of nouns, adjectives, and verbs provide a starting point for an investigation into the distribution of the different types of similatives. A central point of interest with regard to the function of similatives in the Homeric epics concerns their precise interaction with the narrative context in which they appear. From the perspective of semantics, this question can be phrased in terms of time stability: the more time stable, i.e. generally applicable, a feature is, the less dependent is its meaning on the context, while less time stable features interact more closely with the narrative moment. Time stability is often adduced as a semantic means of distinguishing between the major word classes (Vogel 1996, Givón 1984, Wetzer 1996); on a scale of time stability, nouns are located at the upper end, verbs at the lower end, and adjectives in the middle: the entity to which the word ‘horse’ refers remains a horse, but a horse ‘is running’ only until it stops doing so, and it can be called ‘wild’ under certain conditions or until someone tames it.

This paper demonstrates that the expected correlations apply at least tendentially: similatives that involve mostly nominal structures tend to have a higher degree of time stability and a lower degree of interaction with the unfolding of the narrative. These features are often reversed when the aspect of comparison is verbal and the marker is an adverb or particle. But since the feature ‘word class’ on its own does not yield a satisfyingly clear picture, I also discuss other factors such as how explicit the aspect of comparison is, and whether the comparison appears in a metrically more or less fixed formulaic expression or other conventional structure like a catalogue, an address, or a genealogy.

References

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