

Seem like a N constructions and genericity

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Summary. It is tempting to regard similarity as modal. For one, even if all linguists were Italians and all Italians were linguists in the actual world, “she looks like a linguist” would not be equivalent to “she looks like an Italian”. In this abstract, I present an analysis that treats constructions like “seem like X_e ” extensionally and reduces all modality of “seem like a N ” constructions to the presence of a generic indefinite. I argue that “seems like X_e ” is best analyzed as “shares such and such properties with X_e ”. This provides the most straightforward way to restrict the properties relevant for a given similarity statement, which is necessary because what aspects are relevant for a similarity statement can (i) depend on the context, (ii) be explicitly specified, and (iii) restricted by the verb itself. Once this is taken account of, “seem like a N ” constructions can be reduced to “look like X_e ” with genericity on top.

1. “Seem like X_e ”. **1.1 Similarity respects** (i) **CONTEXT:** One can utter both (1a) and (1b) if respectively color or shape are contextually salient.

(1) a. This banana looks like that lemon. b. This banana doesn't look like that lemon.

(ii) **EXPLICIT RESTRICTION:** With a sentence like (2b), speakers can explicitly specify why there is a reading under which (2a) is not contradictory.

(2) a. This banana looks like that lemon and it doesn't.

b. With respect to color, this banana looks like that lemon; w.r.t. shape, it doesn't.

(iii) **RESTRICTION BY THE VERB:** While “seem like” is liberal with the admitted similarity criteria, “look like” is restricted to visual properties, “sound like” to auditory ones, “walk like” to ambulation-relevant ones, and so on. “Look like” presupposes that the subject of the sentence is visible, “sounds like” that they emit sounds, “walk like” that they can walk, and so on. **1.2 Analysis.** Define an **attribute** as a set of mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive properties, a partition (cf. one of the two partitions in Fig. 1) over the subset of individuals who satisfy the presupposition of the verb. A property is a **value** for an attribute to which it belongs. For instance, suppose that $color_{\langle e,t \rangle,t} = \{red_{\langle e,t \rangle}, green_{\langle e,t \rangle}, \dots\}$. Then, $color$ is an attribute and red is a possible value for $color$. I propose that x seems like y iff a has the same value as b for a contextually salient set of perceptually accessible attributes.

(3) $\llbracket \text{seem like} \rrbracket = \lambda y. \lambda x. \forall \underline{A}_{\langle e,t \rangle,t} \in \mathbf{D}_{\langle \langle e,t \rangle, t \rangle, t}. \iota P_{e,t} (P \in \underline{A} \wedge P(x)) = \iota Q_{e,t} (Q \in \underline{A} \wedge Q(y))$

In words, x seems like y iff for a set \mathbf{D} of salient attributes \underline{A} , x has the same value as y , i.e. the property that is a member of \underline{A} and holds of x is identical to the property that is a member of \underline{A} and holds of y . An intuitive way to see this is that x and y fall in the same cell of the \underline{A} -induced partition(s) over the universe of individuals, as exemplified in Figure 1. \mathbf{D} can be provided by context or explicitly via “with respect to” constructions. It is constrained by the verb: $color$ in \mathbf{D} with e.g. “sound like”. **1.3 Modality?** Rudolph (2019) proposes that predicates of the type “It looks like $S_{w,t}$ ” are true iff $S(w)$ at all similarity worlds. As suspected by Rudolph, this doesn't extend to similarity statements: if John looks like Mary and Bob, John *is* both Mary and Bob in all similarity worlds, which creates problems with counterpart theory.

2. “Seem like a N ”. **2.1 Genericity** Similarity statements of the form “seem like a N ” can have two different readings, call them the specific and the general one. Under the specific reading of (4), John looks like a specific person who happens to be a lawyer. Under the general reading,

he has the general appearance of a lawyer.

(4) John looks like a lawyer.

I argue that while the specific reading involves a run-of-the-mill indefinite, the general reading involves a generic indefinite. Adding restrictors like “typical” to a sentence and checking whether the meaning changes radically is a well-established test for genericity (Krifka et al., 1995). The general reading passes the “typical”-test.

EXISTENTIAL INDEFINITE

GENERIC INDEFINITE

(5) a. A bird is flying.

(6) a. A bird flies.

b. $\not\approx$ A typical bird is flying.

b. \approx A typical bird flies.

SPECIFIC READING OF SIMILARITY

GENERAL READING OF SIMILARITY

(7) a. John looks like a lawyer I know.

(8) a. John looks like a lawyer.

b. $\not\approx$ John looks like a typical lawyer I know.

b. \approx John looks like a typical lawyer.

This explains why the general reading is non-distributive and generally non-monotonic (cf. (9) and (11)), just like genericity (cf. (10) and (12)), while the specific reading is monotonic (“he looks like a Parisian I know” \models “he looks like a Frenchman I know”).

NON-INCREASING/NON-DISTRIBUTIVE:

(9) a. John looks like a British judge.

(10) a. A British judge wears a wig.

b. $\not\models$ John looks like a judge.

b. $\not\models$ A judge wears a wig.

NON-DECREASING:

(11) a. John looks like a bird.

(12) a. A bird flies.

b. $\not\models$ John looks like a penguin.

b. $\not\models$ A penguin flies.

2.2 Analysis Take GEN to be an underspecified dyadic operator that relates a restrictor and a matrix sentence, and specifies which variables it binds (Krifka et al., 1995). “A bird flies”, then, is $\text{GEN}[x](\text{bird}(x))(\text{fly}(x))$. Then the LF for “John looks like a duck” is (13a), paraphrased in (13b) and (13c). Any interpretation of GEN that ensures non-monotonicity of characterising sentences like (10) yields non-monotonicity for similarity statements, too.

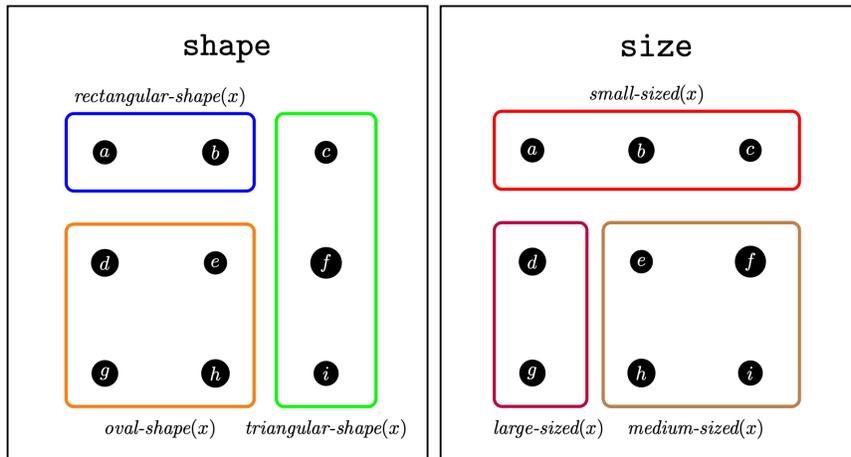
(13) a. $\text{GEN}[x]\left(\text{duck}(x)\right)\left(\forall \underline{A} \in \mathbf{D}.\iota P(P \in \underline{A} \wedge P(j)) = \iota Q(Q \in \underline{A} \wedge Q(x))\right)$

b. ‘A (typical) duck is such that John looks like it’

c. ‘John has the same value as a typical duck for a salient set of attributes’

Extensions and discussion. (i) The present theory coheres with psychological accounts of similarity. For instance, Tversky (1977) views objects as sets of properties, and similarity is about shared properties. In a given context, typically only a subset of the features of an object is relevant for similarity. (ii) The present account offers a new perspective on a range of other semantic phenomena that intuitively incorporate notions of similarity. One such example is privative adjectives: a “fake gun” is intended to seem like a gun but isn’t one. “Fake” is often said to be intensional (Morzycki, 2016), but to this day no explicit modal analysis has been provided (Partee, 2010 and Del Pinal 2015, 2018 are the most prominent proposals). Under the paraphrase given above combined with the present account, a fake gun is something that is intended to have the same value as a typical gun for a salient set of attributes and isn’t one. “Fake” is thus reduced to an interaction between bouletic modality (“is intended to”), non-modal similarity (“for a salient set of attributes, have the same value as”), and genericity (“a (typical) gun”). The presence of genericity seems justified: an object isn’t a fake gun in virtue of resembling a specific object that happens to be a gun.

Fig. 1



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