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EDITOR'S CORNER



By Andrew P. J. Byrne



Unpacking the Literary Device of

Simile

The topic of simile is fourth and last in my editorial series on the literary devices in the narratives and poems of ASL. People use similes in everything from their daily conversations and public speaking to drama and literature. Similes are, simply put, ubiquitous. Some similes have become so common that they have become part of our everyday discourse. A few such examples are “I am mad as hell!”, “He is as busy as a bee”, and “You are sweating like a pig.” Similes can be used to convey meaning quickly and effectively or to intentionally make works of literature more vivid and impactful. An example of simile in an English literary work by Vladimir Nabokov (2004) is “Elderly American ladies leaning on their canes listed toward me like towers of Pisa” (p. 10). This example produces a humorous effect and creates a vivid mental image of the comparison between old ladies leaning on walking sticks and the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

Similar to the literary devices of hyperboles, caricatures, and foreshadowing (that I unpacked in the previous three issues), similes in American Sign Language (ASL) literature are not well understood. Phyllis Wilcox, who wrote the book entitled *Metaphor in American Sign Language* (2000), claimed that Clayton Valli’s original poem called “Lone Sturdy Tree” may be an example of simile, however this is not settled. Simile is reportedly in use in British Sign Language literature (Sutton-Spence & Kaneko, 2016).

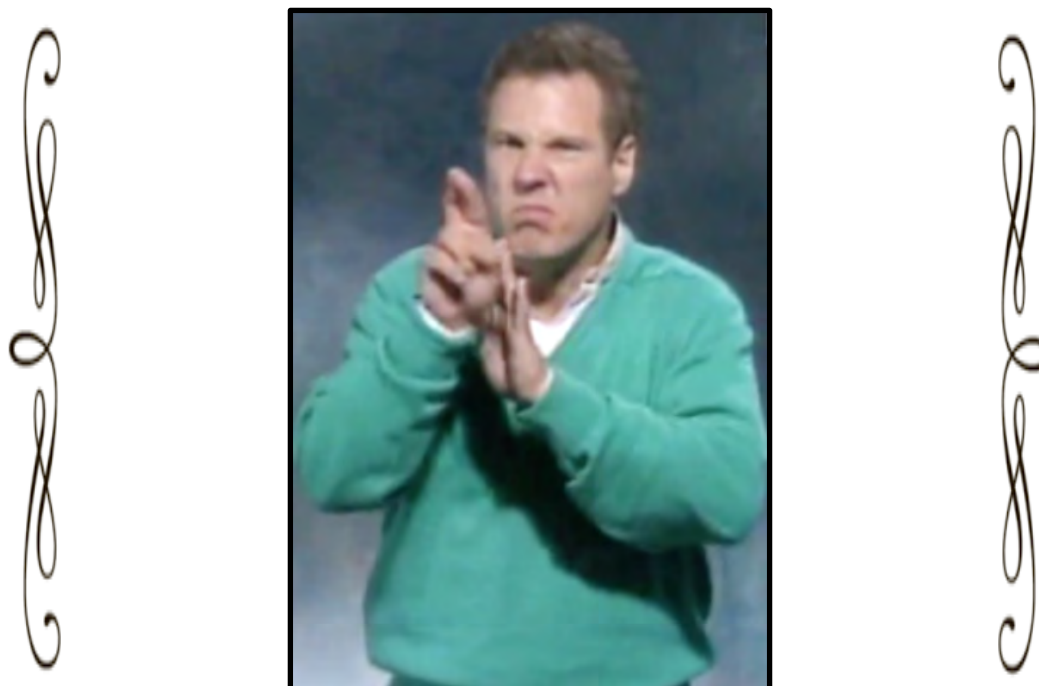
In this editorial, I will discuss similes in more detail. I will rely on two video examples in ASL to demonstrate how Ben Bahan and Mary Beth Miller, both well-known ASL storytellers in the United States, effectively use similes in their narratives. The respective narratives are “Bird of a Different Feather” in Sam Supalla and Ben Bahan’s DVD called *ASL Literature Series: Bird of a Different Feather & For a Decent Living* (1994) and “Grandpa’s Radio” in Miller’s DVD called *Live at SMI!: Mary Beth Miller* (2010).

Defining the term “simile” is difficult due to the ever-so-slight difference between similes and metaphors. Some

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people mistakenly perceive them as interchangeable, however they are not. Crystal (1987) states that similes involve “two unlike things being explicitly compared in order to point out a similarity, while using a marker such as *like* or *as*” (as cited in Wilcox, 2000, p. 12). By contrast, a metaphor is an implicit comparison without using “like” or “as” (Cuddon, 2013). The two statements “Tom is like a shark” and “Tom is a shark” are good examples. The former is a simile because it uses the word “like,” and the latter is a metaphor because it does not contain either “like” or “as.” In ASL, the signs SAME-AS and LOOKS-LIKE can be used to show the similarity between two unlike things.

I will now discuss how Bahan utilizes similes in his narrative, “Bird of a Different Feather”. Specifically located in the 55th strophe of the 11th topic unit entitled “The Hunting Lesson”, Bahan assumes the role of the Eagle teacher who is charged with teaching baby Eagles how to dive through the air properly and quickly, head first. The simile occurs when Bahan uses the ASL rendition of ‘same as a rocket’ when referring to the high speed of diving from the sky to the ground. The singing bird who is in the class with all other Eagles was clearly intimidated by the teacher’s expectation. As a storyteller, Bahan succeeds in creating a vivid mental image of the comparison between the feeble and clumsy singing bird with the sleek and powerful rocket. Below is his video that employs a simile.



[\(Click here\)](#)

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Source: Supalla, S., & Bahan, B. (1994). *ASL literature series: Bird of a different feather & for a decent living: Teacher’s guide*. DawnSignPress.

Miller’s narrative, “Grandpa’s Radio”, serves as the second example of a simile in ASL literature. She shares her recollection of her hearing grandfather who loved his radio so much that he listened to it every night. The simile appears when Miller uses the sign LOOKS-LIKE when comparing the shape of the radio to the exterior architecture of an old church. Like Bahan, Miller succeeds in creating a vivid mental image of the comparison between her grandfather’s radio and the architecture of a church. Below is her video to give you an idea of how she uses the simile in her narrative:

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"Reproduced with permission from Sign Media, Inc."

Source: Miller, M. B. (2010). *Live at SMI!: Mary Beth Miller* [Film; DVD]. Sign Media, Inc.

Just like the hyperbole, the caricature, and the use of foreshadowing, that I discussed in the previous issues, simile is a critical literary device. I believe that we can now confidently say that Bahan and Miller rely on similes to add vividness, complexity, and depth to their ASL literary works.

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