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About Metaphors and Similes

Deep rhetoric analyses of the difference between metaphors and similes are pretty complicated. However, that exercise tends to be a *hair splitting* engagement. It is of minor importance which one we use in public speaking. Whether, for example, the expression that something is "hair splitting" is a metaphor or a simile, doesn't play a crucial practical part. The meaning is the same. Metaphors and similes both describe comparisons. The easiest way to understand the difference is to see the metaphor as a statement based on "is" and the simile as a statement based on "is like". Example - a metaphor "*my darling is a rose*", - a simile "*my darling is like a rose*".

A metaphor is often false, unfeasible or unreal whereas a simile is possible. In the above example it is obvious that my darling cannot possibly be a physical plant, but she can definitely be like a plant. You will now have grasped why "hair splitting" in the introduction is a metaphor. The desired comparison cannot possibly be hair splitting in reality, but it describes pretty well what it means. The reason for the confusion between a metaphor and a simile is that, while using a metaphor when we speak, we actually "mean" a simile. If we say "my life has been a journey" we mean "my life has been like a journey" but we make a shortcut of it. From this we may draw the conclusion that some metaphors are unrealistic abbreviations of realistic similes

A simile does not require the audience to think because the comparison is obvious - "the snow was like a blanket". Here the snow is given. The metaphor, on the other hand, presents an alternative picture of a thing or occurrence and forces the audience to interpret this individually. The US literature critic, author and philosopher Kenneth Burke defines it like this - "a metaphor is a device for seeing something in terms of something else". Here follows such an example about the importance of preparations (Abraham Lincoln) - "if I had 8 hours to fell a tree, I would use 6 of them to sharpen the axe". Not a word about preparations but a clear hint!

But are these differences crucial? No, we use similes and metaphors all the time without thinking about it. We use metaphors so often that we kill them by overuse and they become common language, so called dead metaphors. Example - "*my memory is foggy*". Nowadays we don't even think about it. The difference is of little importance. It is important though, that we use both metaphors and similes in order to put life into our presentations and, above all, to make the audience fully understand our actual message from a different angle. But don't overdo it. Use them with moderation!

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