Conceptualizing the Covid-19 pandemic through similes

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Abstract
The new and shocking situation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic has stimulated the analysis of its impact in discourse. Discourse analysts have concentrated on the use of metaphor to create specific conceptualizations of the disease aimed at communicating the events and developments while influencing public opinion. Similes have been given less attention but are equally telling when it comes to the conceptualization of the pandemic. In this paper we analyze a corpus of English and Spanish similes (about 100 examples from each language) where (corona)virus is the target. The examples were searched for on the Internet and cover the two-year period, from March 2020 to February 2022. The sources, mappings and conceptual domains of the Covid-19 similes are analyzed in order to describe how the pandemic is conceptualized through the use of ‘(corona)virus is like X’ similes. The coronavirus similes are classified according to three main domains, namely, NATURAL FORCES and DISASTERS, CONFRONTATION (including WAR), and ARTS and ENTERTAINMENT (including SPORTS). Each domain conceptualizes the situation in different ways (so that citizens are presented as victims, fighters, experiencers, members of a team, etc.). Interestingly, there are many creative similes that cannot be classified into any general well-established domains and can only be accounted for by considering less conventional and more creative, culture-specific frames. The paper also analyzes the use of similes diachronically trying to uncover any evolution patterns in terms of frequency or domains in the two-year period analyzed.

Keywords: similes, Covid-19, figurative language, conceptual domains, mappings, metaphor

1. Introduction
Studies on how Covid-19 has been framed and communicated have been fruitful from the very beginning of the pandemic and are still productive two years later. Most of these studies (e.g. Charteris-Black 2021; Döring and Nerlich 2022; Filardo-Llamas, L. 2020; Gillis 2020; Haddad 2020; Morales 2020; Olza et al. 2020; Pérez-Sobrino et al.
2022; Sabucedo et al. 2020; Semino 2021; Wicke and Bolognesi 2020) have concentrated on analyzing how experts and politicians have used metaphor to create specific conceptualizations of the virus with the intention of influencing public opinion.

Similes have been devoted less attention but are equally telling when it comes to the conceptualization of the pandemic. In an empirical study on English and Spanish similes including (corona)virus either as target or as source in the first waves of the Covid-19 pandemic (end of February to August 2020), Cuenca and Romano (2022) show not only the persuasive, attention-calling power of this figurative strategy, but also its evaluative and structuring functions within Covid-19 discourse. Within this line of research, in this paper we analyze a corpus of similes where (corona)virus is the target both in English and Spanish (about 100 examples retrieved in each language). The corpus includes all the examples of the string ‘(corona)virus is like X’ found on the Internet from March 2020, when the pandemic started, to February 2022.

As for the theoretical approach, we follow empirical work coming from socio-cognitive approaches to figurative language (Bernárdez 2009; Dancygier and Sweetser 2014; Gentner and Bowdle 2008; Glucksberg 2008; Israel et al. 2004), as well as recent psycholinguistic studies (Roncero et. al 2021) that argue that similes show both cognitive and discursive specificities in contrast to metaphors, the so-called non-equivalence approach (see also Romano 2017).

Starting from previous analyses on the structural and defining features of a prototypical simile (Cuenca 2015; Romano 2017; Cuenca and Romano 2022), a simile can be defined as a construction including a target (A) and a source (B) linked analogically (is like). As an optional, but important, constituent, similes often include an elaboration (E), which makes explicit the mapping between source and target. The construction --A is like B, (E)-- is exemplified in (1):

(1) ‘The virus is like rain,’ President Jair Bolsonaro has said. ‘It will reach you.’
(www.washingtonpost.com, 28/09/20)

In (1) virus (target) is related to rain (source), within the domain of NATURAL FORCES, and the mapping between them (unavoidable) is expressed by the elaboration (It will reach you).

Within this line of research, the paper analyzes the sources, mappings and conceptual domains of the Covid-19 similes in order to describe how the pandemic is conceptualized through the use of ‘(CORONA)VIRUS is like X’ similes. The research questions are the following:

1. Which are the sources and mappings used to conceptualize the Covid-19 pandemic?
2. Which are the domains involved?
3. To what extent are the sources and domains similar to those reported in the literature on metaphor?
4. Are there any cross-linguistic differences?
5. Are there any changes in the frequency and domains of the similes over the two-year period analyzed?

To answer these questions, this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents a general overview of previous work on figurative approaches to the pandemic. Section 3 details the data and methodological process followed. Section 4 describes the sources and mappings involved in the conceptualization of the target (corona)virus. Section 5 analyzes the most productive domains identified in the corpus. Section 6 illustrates the diachronic patterns found in the 2-year period analyzed. Finally, in section 7, the main results and conclusions are summarized.

2. **Figurative language and the Covid-19 pandemic: A general overview**

Discourse studies on the Covid-19 pandemic have focused on metaphor in the main. Several metaphors have been repeatedly used to conceptualize the new situation with the intention of influencing public opinion and persuading citizens to do or not do something, e.g. actions and measures to protect themselves or the community. In pursuing these aims, analysts have also unraveled persistent socio-cultural and ideological patterns attached to the metaphors deployed.

The first studies (e.g. Gillis 2020; Haddad 2020; Nerlich 2020; Sabucedo et al. 2020; Wicke and Bolognesi 2020) analyzed the pandemic metaphors in mainstream mass media and different social networks, concluding that there has been a pervasive use of war metaphors which have created very clear danger, violence and threat cognitive frames. While people were almost literally being ‘bombarded’ by the mass media with a ‘war’ that had to be ‘fought’ against an ‘invisible and deadly enemy’, in March 2020 a group of cognitive linguists1 started a crowd-sourced database of creative metaphors, #ReframeCovid, with the objective of collecting Covid-19 metaphors that could challenge the strong war and confrontation frames dominating Covid-19 discourse worldwide. 550 metaphors and similes from over 30 languages were identified in the first 6 months of the pandemic, as published by Olza et al. (2021), Semino (2021) or Pérez-Sobrino et al. (2022), with the clear intent to reconceptualize the prevailing war frame with mappings projecting other alternative frames, such as solidarity, cooperation, responsibility, resilience or empathy. Scholars working within this commitment to reframe the discourse on Covid-19 and resist war metaphors (e.g. Bates 2020; Gurnham 2022; Hanne 2022; Serhan 2020) have proposed alternative metaphorical mappings, such as environmental-based or journey-movement metaphors, which can help to avoid the pressure and guilt of those who catch the virus and/or do not manage to ‘defeat’ it.

A second line of research within Covid-19 metaphorical mappings has concentrated on metaphors in specific contexts (cultures, languages, genres). The range

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1 Iraide Ibarretxe Antuñano, Veronika Koller, Inés Olza, Paula Pérez-Sobrino and Elena Semino.
of languages (English, Spanish, Catalan, Italian, Romanian, Serbian, Chinese, French, German, Portuguese, etc.), as well as discourse types (political speeches, press conferences, news articles, scientific journals, ‘expert’ blogs, Twitter, etc.) is too vast to summarize the contributions here. Many of these studies have been compiled in three monographic volumes on the pandemic: *Discurso y Sociedad* 15(1) (2021), edited by Maria Carmen Aires Gomes and Kleber Silva; Musolff et al.’s. book *Pandemic and Crisis Discourse: Communicating COVID-19 and Public Health Strategy* (2022), and the special issue *Metaphor and Symbol* 37(2) (2022), edited by Martin Döring and Brigitte Nerlich.

A third area comprehends comparative studies in which, as expected, many source domains for the understanding and explanation of the virus coincide, but also culture specific idiosyncrasies are identified, as in Neagu’s (2022) analysis of Romanian and British press statements, or Baider and Constantinou’s (2022) analysis of the representation of Covid-19 in the political discourse of France, Greece, Denmark and Germany. Brugman et al. (2022) have conducted an online experiment in three languages (German – Italian – Dutch) in three country contexts (Germany – Italy – The Netherlands) to compare the effects of non-metaphorical vs. metaphorical frames (the virus as a beast, a dance, a flood, a horror movie, a marathon, a roller coaster, a ship, a train or war). In this work, they identify different ratings depending on the source domains and the country with regard to frame liking, aptness, complexity, conventionality and credibility.

Other discursive strategies such as similes have also started to be analyzed. In an empirical study on English and Spanish similes including *(corona)virus* both as target or as source, Cuenca and Romano (2022) analyze the discourse features of Covid-19 similes, namely, genre type they appear in, text location, the structuring properties that some similes show and their use in relation to the presence of the subject as a stance taker.

Beyond identifying the domains and mappings activated during the Covid-19 similes, the previous contributions have put forward how metaphors and similes conceptualize the Covid-19 pandemic and their effects on the population. The specific results of these contributions will be detailed in the sections devoted to the analysis of the domains (Section 5).

In late 2022 metaphorical research on Covid-19 remains a fruitful source for fresh and creative data. Experts in critical discourse analysis continue to produce work on Covid-19, as they closely follow how the virus continues to spread and mutate, the development and socio-political effects of the different phases of the pandemic or how Covid-19 metaphors are contested by citizens.
3. **Methodology**

The research presented here is based on two corpora containing instances of the string ‘(corona)virus is like X’ in English and Spanish. The data were searched for on the Internet by means of Advanced Google Search tools by typing the string: ‘virus is like’ (and its counterpart in Spanish: ‘virus es como’) during a two-year period, from March 2020, when the pandemic started, to February 2022, when it started to recede. The examples were cleaned for mere comparisons (e.g., the virus is like a flu or a bad cold) or similes where (corona)virus was included but did not correspond to the whole target (e.g., catching the virus is like playing Russian roulette). The final number of samples identified in the two-year period amounts to 98 similes in English and 95 in Spanish.

The similes were analyzed by considering the whole text. The relevant data were included in an Excel database containing the following information: article title, link, date, simile construction, source, domain, elaboration, mapping and several discourse features. The corpus was annotated separately by each researcher and language, and then double checked.

This paper focuses on the sources, mappings and conceptual domains of the Covid-19 similes. As for sources, three types of concepts were differentiated, following Lyons’ (1977) proposal:

1. **First order entities**, including people, animals and objects (e.g. terrorist, burglar, bat, bomb, iceberg, chain, car)
2. **Second order entities**, including activities, events, processes and some abstract concepts (e.g. blackout, lottery, war, wildfire, game of telephone, sin)
3. **Propositional concepts**, including complex sources and targets implying states of affairs, not single concepts (e.g. living in a Kafka novel, being hit by a truck)

The sources were then classified conceptually into harmful to people or animals, harmful or frightening objects and activities, and dangerous or (potentially) harmful situations. Some sources could not be classified conceptually, since they relate to various aspects, generally non-negatively marked (see Table 2).

The mappings between target and sources were identified by considering the elaboration of the simile or, when absent, the general context. The mappings can be grouped together into three areas: actions by the virus (1), qualities of the virus (2-5) and other mappings, which are generally neutral or positive (6):

1. Harming or killing potential: e.g., destroying, striking, affecting, sickening, polluting, invading, attacking
2. Spreading potential: e.g., spreading, contagious, replicating or mutating nature
3. Difficult to recognize: e.g., invisible, unnoticed, hidden
4. Difficult to control, predict or cure: e.g., persistent, not removable, resilient, resistant, adaptable, unpredictable, incurable
5. Dangerous and frightening
6. Neutral or positive mappings

Finally, the similes were classified into four domains:

1. Natural forces and disasters (including natural and non-natural disasters)
2. Confrontation and violence (including war)
3. Arts and entertainment (including sports)
4. Miscellaneous

The three specific domains coincide with those identified for metaphor in the literature (e.g. Charteris-Black 2021; Döring and Nerlich 2022; Semino 2021). In contrast with metaphor, many simile sources cannot be easily classified into conventional domains and have been classified in the miscellaneous group (see Cuenca and Romano in print).

In the following sections we describe the main sources and mappings identified in the data (Section 4) and discuss these domains in relation to previous contributions on the figurative representation of the Covid-19 pandemic (Section 5).

4. ‘(Corona)virus is like X’: Sources and mappings

4.1. Sources

SARS-CoV-2, which metonymically represents Covid-19, in the ‘(corona)virus is like X’ construction, is conceptualized through an array of sources. Table 1 groups together those that can be included in general categories (generic people that can harm or annoy, harmful or frightening objects and activities and harmful situations). The sources that are common in both languages are bold-faced in English.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ENGLISH</th>
<th>SPANISH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Harmful people or animals</strong></td>
<td><strong>ENGLISH</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>enemy, invader, <strong>terrorist</strong>, Mafia</td>
<td>francotirador “sniper”, terrorista “terrorist”, agente subversivo “subversive agent”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dangerous driver, burglar, criminal, loan shark</td>
<td>hacker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>devil, ghost, unseen hand, ninja, a character in a horror/SciFi movie, ‘angel of death’</strong></td>
<td>diablo “devil”, fantasma “ghost”, vampiro “vampire”, el fanático burócrata de Fahrenheit 451 “the fanatical bureaucrat in Fahrenheit 451”, ángel exterminador “angel of death”, Frankenstein</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>annoying people (e.g. a drunk at a party)</td>
<td>una institutriz amargada “a bitter governess”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>monster, bat out of hell</strong></td>
<td>monstruo “monster”, perro que te va a atacar “a dog about to attack you”, rinoceronte a bordo de un transatlántico “a rhinoceros aboard an ocean liner”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1. General sources of (corona)virus similes

The more general sources are attackers and criminals, evil characters, explosives and bullets, horror movies and fiction, war and natural forces.

There are other sources, generally neutral, used in (more) descriptive contexts, shown in Table 2.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>lottery, game of telephone</strong></th>
<th><em>lotería</em> “lottery”, juego azar “gambling”, montaña rusa “roller coaster”,</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>your wife, chauffeur, ‘maha maya’, (Budas’ mother), katappa (movie character)</strong></td>
<td><em>esposa</em> “wife”, Tenorio, alguien que busca pareja “someone searching for a partner” equipo de fútbol “soccer team”, equipo “team”, el Barça, Messi and Maradona policia “police”, tío que va con un manjo de llaves “guy carrying a bunch of keys”, amigo imaginario “imaginary friend”, bicho raro “freak’, votantes “electors”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>rain, wind, wave, seasons</strong></td>
<td><em>lluvia</em> “rain”, <em>ola</em> “wave”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>sin</strong></td>
<td><em>religión</em> “religion”, <em>inseguridad</em> “insecurity”, <em>envidia</em> “envy”, insulto a la inteligencia “insult to intelligence” amor “love”, luna de miel “honeymoon”, turrones el Almendro “nougat El Almendro”, tango and rock and roll, truco “trick”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>town on Smith’s map, Whac-A-Mole</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Table 2. Other sources of (corona)virus similes** |

As Table 2 shows, less conventionally, the virus is compared to several entities, such as vehicles and machines, to smoke and smells, to games or to people with a marked behavior, and specific situations causing surprise or damage, among other sources. Some sources, such as love or honeymoon, are even positive.

## 4.2. Mappings

The most frequent mappings between (corona)virus and the sources identified are actions performed by the virus and some of its qualities.

a) The harmful or killing potential is often mapped onto the virus, as in (2) and (3):

(2) This virus is like **sin**, in that it *can* negatively affect the lives of people – both can bring about death. The virus *can* cause some to die from a physical illness, while the consequences of some sin can lead to physical death and the consequences of sin if not dealt with will lead to eternal spiritual death.

(www.bryancountynews, 08/03/20)

(3) Este virus es como un **Hacker** que instala órdenes de autodestrucción a nuestro propio cuerpo al **activar en forma caótica y excesiva** todos los sistemas de defensa, sistema de coagulación, provocando sustancias dañinas que dañan cada una de nuestras células, tejidos, órganos y sistemas.

(diarioroatan.com, 19/06/20)

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2 For clarity, the source will be bold-faced whereas the elaboration or those parts of the simile relevant for the interpretation of the mapping and domain will be underlined.
“This virus is like a ‘Hacker’ that installs self-destruction orders in our own body by chaotically and excessively activating all the coagulation system, defense systems, causing harmful substances that damage each of our cells, tissues, organs and systems”.  

In (2) the virus is compared to ‘sin’ based on their killing potential (of the body and soul, respectively), whereas in (3) it is compared to a hacker installing auto-destruction orders in a body conceptualized as a computer.

b) The virus is compared to sources that are difficult to recognize, such as a ghost (see example 4):

(4) ‘Ni la vi venir [la neumonía]’, asegura este superviviente de la COVID-19. ‘Este virus es como un fantasma, muy traicionero. Te crees que estás tocado de la fiebre, de la garganta y del estómago y te centras en eso. Pero mientras, el bicho ya te ha pillado los pulmones. Y todo esto, sin darte cuenta’.

(www.niusdiario.es, 05/05/20)

“I didn’t even see it coming [pneumonia]’, says this COVID-19 survivor. ‘This virus is like a ghost, very treacherous. You think you’re touched by fever, throat and stomach and you focus on that. But, meanwhile, the bug has already caught your lungs. And all this, without realizing it’”.

c) Another group of qualities mapped onto the virus is related to the difficulty to control it because of its fast spreading (contagious) and the fact of being resilient, persistent, adaptable, pervasive and unpredictable (examples 5 – 7):

(5) This is my first year out of residency as an anesthesiologist, and I wasn’t prepared for something like this. This virus is like an accelerant in a fire. It just robs you of time that you would normally have. I don’t want to sound childish, but I feel like this virus is really mean. It takes things away from you, and it takes them away so fast. (nymag.com, 05/05/20)

(6) She told her youngest the virus is like glitter. It gets everywhere. You have no idea how much it spreads or to whom or how you ended up with so much glitter in so many places. (www.theitem.com, 01/04/20)

(7) El virus es como un disparo de postas, multiplica los heridos y damnificados. El ciudadano como terrorista en potencia, el contagiador universal. (elperiodico.com, 13/06/20)

“The virus is like a lead shot, it multiplies the wounded and victims. The citizen as potential terrorist, the super spreader”.

In the examples above, the virus is compared to an accelerant in a fire (fast), to glitter (sticky), and to a shot that expands in different directions (multiplying victims). All these characteristics relate to the spreading power of the virus and its long-lasting action.

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3 Natural English translations are provided for Spanish examples between double quotation marks. Single quotation marks are used for direct speech.
d) Directly related to mapping a), i.e. the harmful or killing potential of the virus, the link between source and target can be related to the reactions of fear or danger (examples 8 and 9):

(8) Coronavirus is like a disaster film running on fast forward, each day bringing worse news. (thehindubusinessline.com, 07/04/20)
(9) El coronavirus es como los juegos de azar, con ambos hay que tener precaución (elperiodico.com, 23/12/21)

“Coronavirus is like gambling; you have to be careful with both”.

As expected, when the target is the pandemic, most mappings are negative. However, some similes imply a neutral or even a positive interpretation, as shown in (10) and (11):

(10) The virus is like an animal capable of thinking and will eventually live in peace with humans. (entechpost.com, 11/02/20)
(11) How it works is that a virus is like a key that only fits into the right lock, called a receptor. It must bind to that receptor on the outside of a cell to gain entry and unleash an infection (insider.com, 09/03/20)

Neutral sources are frequent in specialized discourse with pedagogical purposes in order to explain how the virus acts, as in (10) or (11).

In (12), the speaker uses a very positive source, the honeymoon, because the speaker, a former winner of the reality Big Brother, declares that thanks to lockdown she could spend more time with her partner, which, by the way, infuriated many of her followers, as the article reports.

(12) ‘Para mí el Coronavirus es como una luna de miel’ (larazon.es, 20/03/20)

“For me Coronavirus is like a honeymoon”.

Finally, it is worth noticing that the same sources can activate different mappings, as in the following examples sharing the source diablo “devil”:

(13)a. El virus es como el Diablo, no se le ve pero está. (www.diariosur.es, 14/01/21)

“The virus is like the devil; you can’t see him but he’s there”.
b. El virus es como el diablo; nos ha pillado de sopetón. (www.elespanol.com, 19/01/21)

“The virus is like the devil; he took us by surprise”.

The two similes in (13) exhibit two different mappings. In (13a) the mapping refers to the difficulty to recognize both the devil and the virus (invisible). The mapping in (13b) refers to the difficulty to control a harmful agent.
It is not unusual for a simile to activate multiple mappings, as example (14) clearly shows.

(14) Let’s face it, in the U.S. we are playing catch up to containing the spread of COVID-19 but the virus is like a moving iceberg. We only see the tip of it: the rapidly increasing number of new infections confirmed cases and deaths. It is scary and placing a sudden burden on health systems and families. What we don’t see is the submerged part of the iceberg. The vast swath of the population that is silent or mildly infected and transmitting the virus to others. (thehill.com, 08/04/20)

In (14), the virus is conceptualized as an iceberg. The mappings are varied: it spreads (moving), it is difficult to see (we only see the tip of it, what we don’t see is its submerged part) and it is frightening (it is scary) and harmful (placing a sudden burden on health systems and families).

The analysis of sources and mappings highlights thus some repeated domains, namely, CONFRONTATION, NATURAL FORCES AND DISASTERS, and ARTS and ENTERTAINMENT, which will be described in the next section.

5. ‘(Corona)virus is like X’: Domains
The coronavirus similes identified can be classified according to three main domains, which are mostly shared with metaphors. However, a significant number of similes cannot be easily grouped together This is due to the fact that similes tend to be based on novel, creative analogies, in contrast with metaphors, which prefer more conventional domains (see Cuenca and Romano in print). Figure 1 shows the number and proportion of similes according to domains in English and in Spanish.

Figure 1: English/Spanish domain percentage
Figure 1 displays a preference for similes linked to NATURAL FORCES and DISASTERS, and CONFRONTATION in English, whereas in Spanish the ARTS and ENTERTAINMENT domain outnumbers the aforementioned. The fact that non-conventionalized examples are so numerous can be linked to the creativity and novelty that many similes exhibit.

We will now review each group of similes by summarizing the main contributions found in the literature and analyzing the examples in the corpora.

5.1. Confrontation and violence: The war frame
A frequent source domain for \textit{(corona)virus} similes is that of CONFRONTATION and VIOLENCE (EN: 25 cases, 25.5\% of the cases in English; SP: 16, 16.8\% of the cases in Spanish). The virus is conceptualized as a threat to our health and life, and people are seen as victims of or fighters against a dangerous enemy. Most sources in this domain are directly related to the PANDEMIC MANAGEMENT AS A WAR metaphor/simile (Musolff 2022), whereas others relate to a more general confrontation situation.

The WAR metaphor is pervasive in the conceptualization of many different target domains. It has been used to understand many diseases, from cancer (Sontag 1978, Semino et al. 2018) to old and new pandemics (Chiang and Duann 2007 on SARS-CoV-1; Ribeiro et al. 2018 on zika in Brasil in 2015 and 2016), and other threatening situations, such as climate change (Flusberg et al. 2017) or linguistic conflict (Cuenca 2009). Many authors have highlighted the frequent use of the war metaphor in communication, also related to the Covid-19 pandemic (e.g. Brugman et al. 2020; Hanne 2022; Musolff 2022; Semino 2021).

Stephen J Flusberg et al. (2018) review the main contributions to the use of war metaphors in political discourse and point out why it is so frequently used:

There are clearly good reasons to use war metaphors. They capture people’s attention, trigger emotional responses, tap into a rich source of schematic knowledge, and lead people to take a stand and form particular opinions on a wide range of issues. (Flusberg et al. 2018: 9)

These authors identify the factors that make the war metaphor so effective (Flusberg et al. 2018: 4):

1. It implies salient knowledge. War involves a well-defined frame, including a confrontation between opposing forces corresponding to ‘us’ (the good ones) and ‘them’ (‘the enemy’). The frame is prominent and activates emotional reactions.
2. Knowledge about war is shared since it is part of our experience (“war metaphors are meaningful because exposure to war is frequent in our everyday experience”, Flusberg et al. 2018: 4).

3. War establishes an apt analogy in all cultures because many situations share structural relations with it (arguments, sports, politics and so on) and evoke similar emotions.

As a result, war metaphors have become so conventional that “they are easy for people to process and understand in context” (Flusberg et al. 2018: 4). In addition, the war metaphor moves the population to act (or not to act) responsibly and as a member of a community because its frame is linked to urgency and danger. However, most scholars and journalists insist that the war frame is dangerous and manipulative.

These critics suggest that war metaphors are misleading at best, and harmful at worst, resulting not only in increased political and cultural polarization, but in risks to personal and social well-being as well. (Flusberg et al. 2018: 2)

Andreas Musolff (2022) shows how the war metaphor, when used hyperbolically to promise the future ‘victory’ of governments (the British government in his research) against the virus, can be reversed ironically or sarcastically by critics (e.g. politicians, journalists and experts). This can erode the trust of citizens in their political leaders, who are held responsible for the outcome, as well as increase fantasies and conspiracy theories.

...the repeated victory promises run the risk of being perceived as hollow if they are not matched by policy successes and become vulnerable to denunciations by critics who can easily achieve an ironic, sarcastic, or satirical debunking effect by comparing them with publicly perceived policy failures. (Musolff 2022: 84)

Elena Semino (2021) concludes that the point is not whether war metaphors should or shouldn’t be used, but how they are used. Within this line of thinking, Flusberg et al. (2018: 11) propose some guidelines to rightly use the war frame:

1. Hyperbolic uses of the metaphor should be avoided, especially when applied to non-negative domains (e.g. war against salad). The target domain must imply a real and imminent threat.
2. The war frame can be inefficient or even negative in some cultures and some moments or situations (e.g. people dying from cancer).
3. The mappings should be correctly articulated. Otherwise, the metaphor should be changed.

José-Manuel Sabucedo et al. (2020: 619) deal with the social effects of the war metaphor. The authors point out that “[t]he metaphor of war is also associated with
obedience, the identification of an enemy and defense of the in-group”. They classify the effects of the war metaphor into two groups, namely effects on social behavior and effects on political climate and democratic values. As for social behavior, war metaphors provoke anxiety, lack of solidarity, hostility and obedience to authorities. Regarding political climate and democratic values, the war frame justifies authoritarianism and censorship, and, thus, limits freedom of opinion and clashes with basic democratic values. Sabucedo et al. (2020: 620) conclude that the war metaphor “should be replaced by another one whose core cognitive and emotional features are care for others and cooperation”. In the same line of reasoning, Semino (2021), in her paper with the telling title “Not Soldiers but Fire-fighters”, suggests the use of the fire metaphor, where soldiers are substituted by firemen, in order to avoid metaphors that “legitimize authoritarian measures that could in fact be disproportionate, and that could go well beyond the specific response to the pandemic” (2021: 4).

Similarly, Philipp Wicke and Marianna Bolognesi (2020), after analyzing the high frequency and relevance of the war metaphor in Twitter, identify alternative frames such as a storm or a tsunami, which “relate to events and actions associated with the arrival and spreading of the pandemic” (2020: 20), or the conceptualization of the virus as a monster, which personifies the virus and loads its behavior negatively.

In our corpus, war is a very vivid source of analogy (25% of English examples: war, fighting a war, wartime situation, etc.; 16.8% of Spanish ones: guerra ‘war’, una guerra mundial sin armas ‘a world war without weapons’, una guerra silenciosa ‘a silent war’, enfrentar una guerra ‘confront a war’, etc.). It is often elaborated in a complex way, as in (15) or (16):

(15) The coronavirus pandemic is truly like a war. Maybe this sounds dramatic, but the coronavirus is like a war. The soldiers are health care workers. The enemy is the virus. The battlefield is the hospitals. We are finding out that life can turn on a dime. (kevinmd.com, 29/03/20)

(16) Este virus es como una guerra: se cobra más víctimas entre la gente más débil. (mamagazine.es, 19/05/21)

“This virus is like a war: it causes most victims among the weakest people”.

In (15), several mappings are activated at the same time: the virus is the enemy that is fought against in hospitals (the battlefield) by health care workers (our soldiers). In (16) the mapping points to the inequalities of a war (the weaker die more often than the stronger).

Objects or people linked to war, such as bullets, shots, bombs, mines, explosions, invaders or enemies, are often the source of the simile.

(17) Los campos de refugiados griegos, ante el coronavirus: ‘Es como una bomba’ (niusdiario.es, 20/03/20)

“The Greek refugee camps facing coronavirus: ‘It’s like a bomb’”.

(18) The virus is like a foreign invader, which perpetuates social hierarchies and power inequities. (ncbi.nlm.nih.go, 30/04/21)
More generally, the source often represents someone or something dangerous, including criminals and offenders (EN: a dangerous driver, Mafia, a terrorist, a criminal, a loan shark, the door to death; SP: francotirador ‘sniper’, terrorista ‘terrorist’, disparo de postas ‘lead shot’):

(19) So the virus is like a dangerous driver fleeing the scene -- the virus has moved on to the next victim long before we either recover or die. (bbc.com, 22/10/20)

(20) ‘El virus es como un terrorista que tiene una llave para abrir una puerta y un arma para secuestrar a la célula y obligarla a hacer más copias del virus’. Las vacunas lo que buscan es dar ‘armas’ al sistema inmune para combatir eficazmente la infección. (gk.city, 21/03/20)

“The virus is like a terrorist who has a key to open a door and a gun to hijack the cell and force it to make more copies of the virus.’ What vaccines seek is to give ‘weapons’ to the immune system to effectively combat the infection”.

We can see that the WAR domain can be linked to a more general (or primary) domain, that of CONFRONTATION. When the confrontation frame is active, we are conceptualized as potential victims but also as fighters. Thus, if we do not fight back, we can be held responsible for the consequences. In addition, when the source relates to war, citizens are considered members of a hierarchic organization, who must obey their commanders. Therefore, seemingly contrary attitudes, such as activity and passivity or reaction and acceptance, can be combined in several, sometimes manipulative, ways.

5.2. Natural forces and disasters

The most frequent domain in the corpus is NATURAL FORCES and DISASTERS, especially in the English data base (31 examples, 31.6% of the cases in English) which doubles the Spanish ones (16 examples, 16.8%).

Natural forces are very frequently used as sources causing disasters. As a widely accessible and image-rich source domain (Grady 2017), fire is not only highly productive in the metaphorical conceptualization of conflictive situations, as social protests (Hart 2018), or in religious and political discourse (Charteris-Black 2017), but also in the conceptualization of fast-growing disasters such as Covid-19, both in its metaphor (Charteris-Black 2021: ch. 3; Semino 2021, Pérez Sobrino et al. 2022) and simile (Cuenca and Romano 2022) forms. Jonathan Charteris-Black (2017: 3-18) explains that, because fire metaphors derive from very common bodily experiences of heat, they are especially prone to communicate powerful psychological and emotional responses such as those found in discourses of awe and authority; that is, discourses clearly related the expression and imposition of power relationships. The relation with contagious diseases and Covid-19 comes naturally:
although not the most frequent [fire metaphors] are the most prototypical of all metaphors. Fire offers a complex and rich frame for understanding the interrelationships between the bodily experience and society. (Charteris-Black 2017: 6)
An expert reminds us that the pandemic is not over, though it might seem so (June 2020). He warns of the need to stay alert as the virus can rapidly increase and spread anytime, like a fire which has not been put out completely and thus can soon become active again if not under control. We can see that this simile is based on the conceptualization of the evolution of a fire.

The data in our corpus include a cline of fire sources that range from simple one such as fire or forest fire to more complex ones such as a human version of a forest fire, un fuego que no se acaba de extinguir (‘a fire that has not been extinguished’) or a fire breaking out in a large building, as (23) shows:

(23) The virus is like a fire breaking out in a large building. The cytokines are like the alarm. …It’s like the smoke alarm never turns off. And you keep having firefighters, like, coming, coming, coming …… Spraying water on the walls, chopping through doors, doing all kinds of damage to the building even if the fire is out. The name for this is a cytokine storm, and it can be deadly. (ehighvalleylive.com, 15/06/20)

In (23) two similes are combined: the virus is conceptualized as a fire and cytokines are compared to a smoke alarm that never stops, causing damage even though they are supposed to fight the virus. Less conventional or more complex mappings, as the one in (23), call for longer elaborations to understand the intended meaning of the writer.

Other potentially destructive concepts are those related to disasters caused by water (24) and by wind (25) or both (EN: storm, hurricane, typhoon, tsunami, iceberg or wave; SP: tormenta “storm”, tornado or ola “wave”), as destructive, fast and uncontrollable forces:

(24) Coronavirus is like a storm about to hit. (smith.queensu.ca, 18/03/20)

(25) El virus es como un tornado. Cuando aterriza, se arremolina a través del cuerpo, causando caos, confusión, tos y daños en cada órgano que toca. Algunos no sobrevivirán su visita. (paginasiete.bo, 12/07/20)

“The virus is like a tornado. When it lands, it swirls through the body, causing chaos, confusion, coughing, and damage to every organ it touches. Some won’t survive its visit”.

Although most mappings in this domain are negative, some are neutral. We can compare the Spanish simile in (26) with the English simile in (27):

(26) Los picos de coronavirus registrados en países europeos recientemente se han descrito típicamente como segundas oleadas, pero el virus es como ‘una gran ola’ que ‘va a subir y bajar un poco’. (ceutatv.com, 29/07/20)

“Coronavirus spikes in European countries recently have been typically described as second waves, but the virus is like "a big wave" that "is going to go up and down a little bit"”
This virus is like a wave. Just one case can wipe out many people.

The simile projects a neutral mapping explaining the irregular evolution of the virus based on the image-schema that a wave suggests and that graphs use; whereas the mapping in (27) is clearly negative, referring both to its spread and to its capacity for harm.

Other singular sources related to natural forces, most of them non-conventional sources, are English plague, asteroid or sinkhole and Spanish mancha venenosa “poisonous stain”, meteorito “meteorite” or explosion de estrellas “stellar explosion”:

(28) El coronavirus es como la caída de un meteorito en la economía española.

(29) New York Governor Andrew Cuomo: Coronavirus Is Like 9/11

(30) The virus is like being hit across the head by a 2x4.

(31) Paco Sanz, tras su positivo en coronavirus: ‘Es como si te pasase un tren por encima’.

In short, sources from the domain of NATURAL FORCES and DISASTERS have a clear preference for the danger and harm conceptualization of the virus, that is, its devastating, even deadly, effects, as well as for its enormous spreading and persistent nature. When resorting to natural forces and disasters, citizens are conceptualized as experiencers of some inevitable event. As in the case of the war analogy, within this domain, people are portrayed as (potential) victims. However, this domain lacks the agentivity attached to the WAR domain, except those cases in which prevention measures, as in fires, are supposed to be taken by the government and professionals, not by citizens.

5.3. Arts and entertainment: The sports frame

There are some sources that belong to the ARTS and ENTERTAINMENT domains, including sports (EN: horror movie, a disaster film, living in a Kafka novel, etc. SP: equipo de fútbol “soccer team”, jugarle al Barcelona con diez hombres “playing against Barcelona with 10 players”, partido de tenis “tennis match”, Tenorio, el fanático)
burocrata de Fahrenheit 451 “the fanatical bureaucrat in Fahrenheit 451”, tango and rock and roll). These sources are scarce in English (7 cases, 7.1%), but are the most frequent in Spanish (20, 21%).

SPORTS can be considered as a mixed (sub)domain. It is linked to entertainment but it can also be considered a variant of the WAR/CONFRONTATION metaphor, since competitors can be seen as opponents that need to be combated in order to win (Flusberg et al. 2018). Sports terms are frequent sources of coronavirus similes, especially in Spanish (8 examples), as exemplified in (32):

(32) El virus es como un equipo de fútbol, realiza cambios para seguir ganando.
(lanacion.com.py, 14/07/20)

“The virus is like a soccer team, it makes changes to keep on winning”

In these cases, the virus is generally conceptualized as a strong player or team and we humans play the role of the opponent in an uneven situation suggesting that we are going to lose unless we ‘play’ really well. This confirms Flusberg et al.’s (2018: 5) assertion that “sports metaphors are often linked to a salient structure like the value of teamwork to achieve a common goal, as seen in statements such as ‘team player’ and ‘quarterback’ when referring to individuals working together on a project.”

The SPORTS (sub-)domain also allows for complex and novel analogies relying on the addressee’s encyclopedic knowledge. Flusberg et al. (2018: 5) assess this ‘cultural resonance’ as “an important limitation of sports metaphors”: “Metaphorical ‘handoffs,’ ‘touchdowns,’ ‘punts,’ and ‘fumbles’ are meaningful only to people who know the basics of American football.” The same holds for soccer or tennis:

One study tested whether sports metaphors would affect how students responded to an argument about whether their university should require a senior thesis project (Ottati, Rhoad, and Graesser 1999). The results suggested that students who liked sports found the argument framed with a sports metaphor more engaging than its literal counterpart, whereas students who did not like sports showed no effect of the metaphor. (Flusberg et al. 2018: 5)

Consequently, sports analogies often depend on shared knowledge, which restricts their use and efficiency, while enhancing their effectiveness among the members of an intended group.

More generally, the domain of ARTS and ENTERTAINMENT is also active to establish analogies. The pandemic is often equated to a disaster or horror film or novel, or to a character of this kind of film or book. In these cases, the mapping is related to fear and danger (33 - 34):

(33) Coronavirus is like a disaster film running on fast forward, each day bringing worse news. (businessgreen.com, 07/04/20)
El virus es como el fanático burócrata de Fahrenheit 451.
(carasycaretas.org, 22/05/20)
“The virus is like the fanatical bureaucrat in Fahrenheit 451”.

One outstanding feature of the sources related to art and entertainment is that they are often culture-specific, as in (34), and rely heavily on specific knowledge to be fully interpreted, as shown in (35) or in (36):

El virus es como el rinoceronte a bordo del gran transatlántico Gloria N de la película Y la nave va (1983) de Fellini, una bestia en el interior de un barco que, como un Arca de Noé, parte del puerto de Nápoles en 1914 justo antes de la Primera Guerra Mundial con destino a la isla de Erimo.
(20minutos.es, 16/04/20)
“The virus is like the rhinoceros aboard the great cruise ship Gloria N in Fellini’s film And the ship sales on (1983), a beast inside a ship that, like Noah’s Ark, leaves the port of Naples in 1914 just before the First World War bound for the island of Erimo”.

As explained in detail in Cuenca and Romano (2022: 283), there are several very culture-specific similes in this domain, such the one referring to a 19th century famous Spanish play, Don Juan Tenorio by José Zorrilla or the simile referring to the motto of an advertisement repeated on Spanish TV for years, which is part of Spaniards’ shared cultural knowledge:

Este virus es como los turrones ‘El Almendro’. Volverá a casa por Navidad.
(eleconomista.es, 03/03/20)
“This virus is like nougat ‘El Almendro’. It will come back for Christmas”.

The simile in (36) maps the return home of family members for Christmas (a positive fact) onto a possible new wave of the disease (a negative fact), since December is a critical period for Covid-19: Cold weather (in Spain) and celebrations outside the coexistence bubble increase the expansion of the virus (the virus ‘comes back’ after a period of lower rates of contagion). The addressee needs encyclopedic knowledge to make sense of the, otherwise opaque, simile.

In short, many similes resort to sports, books, films or audiovisual products well-known in each community. Since these sources are not as general and well-established as those of NATURAL FORCES or CONFRONTATION, they tend to be more culture specific. When sports are active as a source domain, the situation is conceptualized in terms of a collective endeavor in which there are winners and losers. We citizens are presented on the loser’s side at the moment. The idea of teamwork as a means to reverse the situation is also highlighted.

5.4. Non-conventional domains
The (corona)virus similes reviewed in the previous sections are generally conventionalized. Speakers and hearers share salient knowledge about their frames and
the analogy established is apt and more or less general because the source and target domains share structural relations and evoke similar emotions, as clearly explained in Flusberg et al. (2018) or Semino (2021).

However, the highly flexible and creative nature of the similes used in the conceptualization of the pandemic includes a set of sources that, unlike those belonging to the NATURAL FORCES, DISASTERS, WAR or SPORTS domains, do not project a wide-scope domain, since the analogy is non-conventional and often unexpected or even shocking. For instance, in (37) the virus is conceptualized as a vehicle that can transport a molecule to a body:

(37) ‘The virus is like a **vehicle**’, Dr. Uddin said of the vector method. “We get the mRNA in the virus, and we take that to the body to protect.”

(den.mercer.edu, 03/12/21)

There is a great variety of sources belonging to this ‘miscellaneous’ group (EN 35 examples, 35.7% of the cases in English; SP 43 examples, 45.3%), often used by experts to explain the behavior of the virus. They range from more image rich mappings --such as ball, car, machine, knotted rope, water valve or Kinder egg-- to sources that come closer to quasi-scientific comparisons like aerosol, smoke or sourdough, and to completely unexpected ones such as “a guy who goes out at night looking for a partner” (38) or Whac-A-Mole (39):

(38) Un virus es como **un individuo que sale de noche a buscar pareja**: cuanta más gente haya en los bares más probabilidades tendrá. (codem.es, 01/03/21)

“A virus is like a guy who goes out at night looking for a partner: the more people in bar the better his chances”.

(39) ‘This virus is like **Whac-A-Mole.**’ Glatt said. “This community has a Covid problem and it gets addressed, then this will pop up in another community in the county’. (wvi.org, 01/04/20)

By avoiding the potential loss of rhetorical power of more conventional metaphors (Flusberg et al. 2018), the creative source domains deployed by experts --and non-experts-- served both the persuasive and didactic functions required for the communication of the pandemic during the two years under study.

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4 Wide-scope analogies are those where the relationship being expressed between source and target is quite conventional or easily understandable vs. the more creative, unexpected analogies of the miscellaneous group.

5 See Pérez Sobrino et al. (2022) for a reference to several creative source domains for Covid-19, similar to the ones commented on here. Interestingly, the selected examples of creative source domains in their article correspond to similes, not to metaphors, as it is the case of wide-scope domains.
6. **Do similes evolve?**

A last interesting question addressed by our research is how the use of similes has evolved throughout the pandemic. Although the number of similes is reduced, a diachronic analysis can shed light on some interesting tendencies, which did not match our initial hypotheses.

The initial hypotheses that we made were that: (i) the use of similes (frequency and domain) would evolve according to the evolution of the pandemic, and (ii) war similes would be reduced in favor of natural forces similes and other analogies with time.

Figures 2 and 3 show the evolution of the similes according to domains in three-month periods in English and in Spanish, respectively.

![Figure 2. Evolution of similes by domains (English)](image_url)
In both languages, the first period, including lockdown, is the most productive for similes. In Spanish, the second period is still productive. From the second period onwards, the number of similes retrieved is modest. The general results are consistent with the idea that similes are produced to conceptualize a novel situation. From a cross-cultural perspective, it is worth noting that, in the case of Spanish, as shown in Figure 3, the ARTS and ENTERTAINMENT domain was very active from the very beginning of the pandemic.

Since the evolution of the pandemic was different in diverse Spanish speaking countries, we also selected the similes produced exclusively in Spain (70 in total) to check any diachronic evolution regarding domains not distorted by geographical diversity. The results are shown in Figure 4.
Figure 4. Evolution of similes according to domains (Spain)

The evolution is parallel to the general cases in both languages and does not match the evolution of the pandemic, as represented in Figure 5.
We can conclude that (i) similes concentrate in the first period(s) of the pandemic and then decline, and that (ii) the only evolution identified regarding domains is the increase in non-conventionalized analogies.

The fact that similes based on ‘classical’ domains, i.e., NATURAL FORCES AND DISASTERS and CONFRONTATION, are very frequent initially, partially confirms the idea that:

War metaphors could be argued to have been appropriate at the beginning of the pandemic, to convey the dangers posed by the virus, justify the need for radical changes in lifestyle, and generate a sense of collective responsibility and sacrifice for a common purpose. (Semino 2021: 3-4)

In fact, what seems to happen from a diachronic point of view is that the most well-established and general analogies seem to be resorted to first when we face an unknown situation. Later, the use of similes decreases, more creative similes are used and sources and domains diversify in order to keep readers’ attention on the virus.

7. Conclusions
Discourse studies on the role of figurative strategies in the conceptualization and communication of the Covid-19 pandemic are still highly productive two and a half years after its outbreak. This paper shows how ‘(corona)virus is like X’ similes have been used to conceptualize and communicate the Covid-19 pandemic in English and Spanish in a two-year period since its outbreak.

Most of the sources identified, as expected, are drawn from the lexicon of harmful people, animals, objects and situations, like attackers and criminals, evil characters, explosives and bullets, horror movies, war and natural forces, among many others. The main mappings also relate to the harmful or killing potential of the virus, its spreading capacity, the difficulty to recognize and thus to control it and its dangerous and frightening nature.

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Sources and mappings point towards NATURAL FORCES and CONFRONTATION-WAR as general domains including wide-scope sources causing disasters. NATURAL FORCES-DISASTERS is the most frequent domain (24.3%), especially in the English dataset. The second most frequent domain is CONFRONTATION-WAR (21.2%), also higher in English. These two domains have become conventional in the conceptualization of many different target domains, so that they are easy to process in relation to the pandemic. Both source domains are image-rich and widely accessible and imply well-defined frames that are shared as part of our experience. Consequently, they establish apt analogies in all cultures, are prominent and evoke basic emotional reactions. In fact, they are recurrent in forming both metaphors and similes.

The NATURAL FORCES-DISASTERS domain focuses on the dangerous and devastating nature of a force and allows communication of its evolution. Humans are conceptualized as passive victims or experiencers of an inevitable, supervening situation that can only be prevented, sometimes partially. The CONFRONTATION-WAR domain also focuses on devastation, but citizens are conceptualized both as potential victims and as fighters in a hierarchic organization. This difference has an effect on the population, thus transferring the responsibility of protecting people from governments to citizens and legitimizing authoritarian measures that, in the end, could lose effect.

The ARTS-ENTERTAINMENT domain is also resorted to significantly (13.9%). It exhibits ‘cultural resonance’ and cultural variation. In our corpus, this domain is far more frequent in Spanish (21% of examples) than in English (7.1%). Similes based on films, books, audiovisual products or sports are not as general and well-established as those of NATURAL FORCES or CONFRONTATION and tend to be more culture-specific. When sports are the source domain, the situation is conceptualized in terms of a collective endeavor in which there are winners and losers, as in the war frame, but the focus is on teamwork, not on individual responsibility or obedience to a superior authority.

The (corona) virus similes belonging to these domains, therefore, can be considered megasimiles, in the sense of Werth’s (1994) concept of megametaphor, as they are deployed repeatedly not only for didactic and persuasive reasons, but also as an evaluative, structuring strategy, permeating coronavirus discourse. Nevertheless, our analysis has pointed out a great proportion of non-conventionalized analogies, especially used by experts to describe (often neutrally) how the virus behaves. The non-conventional sources for Covid-19 or ‘miscellaneous’ group represent 40.2% of the data, with a similar percentage in Spanish, 45.3% vs. 35.7% in English and increase in time.

Diachronically, the use of more conventional similes is concentrated in the first periods of the pandemic and they decrease and lose their rhetorical force as the pandemic evolves. In other words, more well-established and general analogies seem to be resorted to first when we face an unknown situation. Later, the use of similes decreases, more creative similes are used, and sources and domains diversify. A more specific analysis of creative similes and the interplay between the simile and the
metaphor construction (‘coronavirus is like X’ or ‘coronavirus is X’) will shed some light on how these figurative mechanisms are used in discourse (see Cuenca and Romano in print).

In short, discourse analysis proves that Covid-19 similes are powerful ideological weapons as they help to construe specific cognitive and social frames intended to impact on public opinion and, in the case under study, also on social behavior. As the situation stabilizes, more conventional ideologically loaded analogies decrease, whereas more neutral and creative similes are more frequently deployed.

References


