

# Lies, indexicals, and metaphors in language evolution: The view from science fiction

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Sturtevant (1947) argues that lies, indexicals, and metaphors developed before spoken language, and are what made it possible. Specifically, both indexicals (which stand for unrealized actions) and metaphors are lies that are used to inform. I suggest that the key to testing this hypothesis lies in the relation between metaphors and similes. Davidson (1978) famously points out that, literally, metaphors are (usually) lies whereas similes are true. Other comments by Davidson can be interpreted to mean that, figuratively, metaphors are indexical but similes are existential.

Here is a "method" to test this claim. Construct a language without lies and indexicals, and see if it has similes and/or metaphors. Add lies and indexicality to it, and see if it has similes and/or metaphors now. Such an experiment cannot, of course, be conducted in practice. But it can be carried out in science fiction

China Miéville, in his novel *Embassytown*, creates aliens whose language has no lies and no indexicals. Interestingly, their language is portrayed as having similes but no metaphors, but the author's own interpretation of the language he imagines is dubious. In fact, the aliens only acquire similes together with metaphors and lies, when they acquire indexicals.

Science fiction authors, even when they construct an alien language, are still humans, and are bound by the constraints of human languages. Hence, Miéville's failure to construct a language that contains similes but not metaphors tells us something about real human languages: that the two phenomena are fundamentally very close.

I propose that a simile is existential, but its domain is contextually restricted (cf. Camp 2006) like an indexical. Therefore, similes, just like metaphors, are indexical and can be lies. Thus, indexicals, metaphors, and similes are all informative lies: lies that can be used to tell the truth in a "deeper" sense.

**References:** • Camp, E. 2006. Metaphor and that certain 'je ne sais quoi'. *Philosophical Studies* 129. 1–25.  
• Davidson, D. 1978. What metaphors mean. *Critical Inquiry* 16. 43–57. Sturtevant, E. H. 1947. *An introduction to linguistic science*. New Haven: Yale University Press.