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MacCoinnigh, M. (2017). The Irish proverbial comparison 'chomh + ADJ + le + NP'. *Zeitschrift fur celtische Philologie*, *64*(1), 207–254. https://doi.org/10.1515/zcph-2017-0006

Published in:
Zeitschrift fur celtische Philologie

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
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Download date:24. Apr. 2024

The Irish proverbial comparison '*chomh* + ADJ + *le* + NP'[1]

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Aufsatz bietet eine qualitative und quantitative Analyse eines Korpus sprichwörtlicher Vergleiche in der neuirischen Sprache – mit dem Muster *chomh* + Adj + *le* + Np – auf der Grundlage mehrerer Materialsammlungen, die im 20. Jahrhundert erschienen sind. Nach einem Überblick über Form und Funktion von Vergleichen werden 585 solcher irischen Redewendungen daraufhin untersucht, wie häufig die jeweiligen Vergleichsadjektive (‚Themen', ‚grounds') und verglichenen Nominalphrasen (‚Bildspender', ‚vehicles') im Gesamtkorpus belegt sind. Dem folgt eine qualitative Analyse dieser Ausdrücke, insbesondere danach, welchen Wortfeldern sie enstammen, und die häufigstbelegten Verbindungen zwischen ‚ground' und ‚vehicle' erlauben einen Einblick, zu welchem Grad der Aspekt der Funktion – sei sie erklärend oder humoristisch – die Auswahl der verwendeten Wörter beeinflusst.

1. Introduction

The "proverbial comparison"[2] is a proverbial sub-form based on the structure of the simile which commonly occurs in the form (*as*) + ADJ + *as* + NP,[3] (or in Irish as *chomh* + ADJ + *le* + NP), e.g. as black as *night*, as busy as a *bee*, as quick as *lightening*, as sly as a *fox*, etc. Of all the proverbial forms identified by SEILER 1922, TAYLOR 1931, WHITING 1932, RÖHRICH & MIEDER 1977 and MIEDER 2004, the comparison is arguably one of the most collected and least analysed in international languages. In spite of a clear interdisciplinary relevance to scholarly fields such as linguistics, paremiology, folkloristics and ethnology, and a plethora of material in seminal sources such as ERASMUS' *Parabolarum, sive Similium liber* (1514), RAY's *A collection of English proverbs* (1670), HAZLITT's *English proverbs and proverbial phrases* (1869) and *Lean's collectanea* (LEAN 1902),[4] the proverbial comparison remains a relatively under-analysed form. One could argue that a certain linguistic pretentiousness may be partly responsible for this neglect, as the comparison is viewed to be syntactically less complex (it follows the formula *as* + ADJ + *as* + NP), lexically unvaried (ADJ and NP), and more semantically transparent (the majority of comparisons appear to be literal) than other multi-word fixed-expressions such as idioms, proverbs, and proverbial expressions.[5]

[1] I wish to thank Dr. Fionnuala Carson Williams, Dr. Kathrin Steyer and Dr. Lillis Ó Laoire for sharing their expertise on various technical issues contained in this article, as well as the anonymous reviewer for many helpful comments and suggestions. I am also indebted to Dr. Jürgen Uhlich for his valuable feedback on linguistic questions and for his meticulous editing of the article.

[2] The term "proverbial comparison" was first coined by Archer TAYLOR (1931) in *The proverb*, but numerous other academic terms have been applied to this concept, of which the most common are: "folk simile" (HENDRICKS 1960: §§245–62); "simile" (ANDERSSON 1971: §223); "conventional modifier" (ARORA 1977: §1); "stock simile" (NORRICK 1986b: §§39–52), "idiomatic similes" (CARTER 1998: §67), "familiar similes" (FERNANDO 1996: §19), "frozen similes" (MCCARTHY 1998: §131), and "stereotyped simile" (MOON 1998: §§150–2). These categorisations are largely discipline-dependent and relate to terminological conventions rather than to any type of functional distinction. For example, the term "simile" features heavily in the field of phraseology, whilst "proverbial comparison" is much more common in paremiology.

[3] PIIRAINEN (2012: §43) argues that these are all similes in that the adjectives remain literal although they are intensified by the comparative structure. Other common syntactic formulae for comparisons across a range of languages are *to x like y* and *not worth an x* (see HARRIS & MIEDER 1994: §83).

[4] See Peter GRYZBEK 1994: §§73–4.

[5] We include here proverbial expressions, proverbial exaggerations, binary formulas, and Wellerisms.

Paradoxically, however, it is exactly these structural and lexical limitations that make the proverbial comparison so suitable for corpus linguistic studies, as MOON (2008: 3) has pointed out previously.

In the main scholarly studies of comparisons to date, namely, TAYLOR 1954, ANDERSSON 1971, ARORA 1977, OGOL′CEV 1978, and NORRICK 1986b, 1987a, the general tendency has been to examine the elements that occupy the ground (ADJ) and vehicle (NP) slots, and to see why these combinations are used in particular languages.[6] For example, why is *night* used as an example of blackness; or *bee* as an example of busyness, or *snow* as an example of whiteness?[7] The scholarly consensus is that vehicles, at the very least, illustrate the adjective to a highly salient degree or, at most, are actually the epitome of the adjectival trope. Moreover, it is generally accepted that comparisons are, for the most part, literal, although figurative comparisons are also used for the purposes of humour. While these are valid conclusions, recent studies of idiomatic source domains by DOBROVOL′SKIJ & PIIRAINEN (2005; 2006) and PIIRAINEN (2012) have also shown that many figurative expressions are actually based on long-standing, literary and cultural semiotisations, which, through intertextuality, have embedded themselves in the lexicon of major European languages (this is generally referred to as "Conventional figurative language theory" (CFLT)). If we accept the idea that proverbial comparisons fall under the umbrella of "figurative language", it is clear that these forms may also have been imbued with these ancient literary and cultural symbolisations.

In light of international scholarship on comparisons and the recent innovations in "Conventional figurative language theory" (CFLT), this paper seeks to provide a comprehensive qualitative and quantitative analysis of the nature of Irish comparisons to investigate if they follow the general pattern observed in the other studies (TAYLOR 1954; ANDERSSON 1971; ARORA 1977; OGOL′CEV 1978; and NORRICK 1986b), i.e. are the ground and vehicle elements based on similar adjectival tropes and noun phrases, or are Irish comparisons significantly different? Relationships between the ground and vehicle elements will also be analysed to determine the extent to which Irish comparisons are literal propositions, and to identify how literary and cultural semiotisations manifest themselves (as identified by DOBROVOL′SKIJ & PIIRAINEN 2006; PIIRAINEN 2012; PIIRAINEN & SHERRIS 2015). Finally, correlations between form and function will be examined to see the degree to which the function, either explicatory or humorous, motivates the choice of lexical elements. The results will not only shed light on the form, function, and motivation of Irish-language comparisons, but will also facilitate cross-linguistic analyses to provide a more over-arching perspective on this popular, yet neglected, formula.

2. Literature review

Although proverbial comparisons have been collected for centuries in some of the major scholarly compendia, the form was rarely differentiated from other proverbial material, for example in Desiderius ERASMUS' *Parabolarum, sive Similium liber* 1514 whilst other renowned collections such as John RAY's *A collection of English proverbs* (1670), HAZLITT's *English proverbs and proverbial phrases* (1869) and *Lean's collectanea* (LEAN 1902),[8]

[6] These studies have typically been language-specific (e.g. Spanish, English, Russian) and rarely engaged with cross-linguistic comparisons.

[7] While some, such as NORRICK (1986), have quantified the occurrence of vehicular elements, others such as OGOL′CEV (1978) have also tried to locate the source domains for vehicle according to a typological framework, such as human beings, tools, instruments, wild birds, etc.

[8] See GRYZBEK 1994: §§73–4.

merely separated what the authors termed "similes" from other material without a strict typological distinction. The lack of any clear classification of the material is likely to have obstructed, or at least deterred, any subsequent analysis of the proverbial comparison as a distinct form, as Arora has stated in relation to Spanish collections:

> '… published material on comparisons is for the most part mingled indiscriminately with proverbs and proverbial phrases in the various proverb dictionaries and collections, some of which include more in the way of comparisons than do others. Here the problem is that of locating the comparisons, since there is no standard method by which they are incorporated into the collections: arrangement may be by quality, by object, by verb, or even by the sign of comparison itself', ARORA 1961: 229.

Archer Taylor's *The proverb* (1931) went some way to alleviating typological headaches by including an entire subsection devoted to the history and development of the proverbial comparison. This work was followed two decades later by a more exhaustive subject-specific study entitled *Proverbial comparisons and similes from California* (TAYLOR 1954), which offered seventy-six pages of examples collected from fieldwork (over 22,000 entries), together with variant and parallel forms, and ancillary information relating to the provenance, history, use, and interpretation of the comparisons. This work was received positively by members of the folklore fraternity as 'the first substantial collection of comparisons published outside of journals' (ETTLINGER 1954: 173).[9] Encouraged by the submission of comparative contributions from scholars in other languages, Taylor published a series of supplements in journal articles in subsequent years.[10] More significantly, however, his methodological framework became the gold standard for the discipline and was subsequently adopted by a range of other American scholars examining comparisons in states as diverse as California, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas and Vermont.[11] It is interesting that the focus of these studies was primarily on the collection of material, and thus the analysis is often cursory, merely looking at loose categorisations relating to the sphere of life to which the comparisons relate, particularly the "human vs. animal" and "urban-rural" dichotomies.[12]

The most significant of these, however, was ARORA's (1977) pioneering examination of Spanish comparisons, namely *Proverbial comparisons and related expressions in Spanish. Recorded in Los Angeles, California*.[13] This study, due to the nature and size of the actual fieldwork project – 2,114 separate entries from 517 informants – set a benchmark for the academic study of comparisons. Moreover, the methodological approach – particularly the use of statistics to quantify typical referent classes, the analysis of origin, and the comparative frequency of parallel forms in other languages – has become the standard template for cross-linguistic analyses of typical classes, patterns, and distribution networks (these will be discussed in Section 5 below). Others, particularly OGOL′CEV 1978 and

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[9] See further reviews by Margaret M. BRYANT 1954: §§212–13 and Stuart A. GALLACHER 1955: §§256–7.

[10] For example, see TAYLOR 1956 for a brief discussion of a select number of Japenese proverbial comparisons.

[11] Arranged chronologically – Bartlett Jere WHITING 1947 [N.B. collected before TAYLOR 1954] (North Carolina); Herbert HALPERT 1951a, 1951b, 1952 [N.B. collected before TAYLOR 1954] (Tennessee and Kentucky); Frances BOSHEARS 1954 (Tennessee); Martha Dell SANDERS 1951 [N.B. collected before TAYLOR 1954] (Kentucky); Muriel HUGHES 1958 (Vermont); George HENDRICKS 1960 (Texas); Jan BRUNVAND 1961 (Indiana); Shirley L. ARORA 1961, 1966 (California); Mac E. BARRICK 1963 (Pennsylvania); Frances BARBOUR 1965 (Illinois); and Cathy ORR 1976 (Colorado).

[12] See for example HENDRICKS 1960.

[13] It should be noted that eleven years prior to this, Shirley L. ARORA (1966) published a significant examination of comparisons in the writings of the Peruvian author Ricardo Palma, namely *Proverb comparisons in Ricardo Palma's "Tradiciones peruanas"*.

NORRICK 1986b, have benefitted greatly from ARORA's (1977) work and have expounded on typological and lexical questions with their analyses of vehicle-types (or what also may be termed *comparans*; see 4.1. below), although not always adhering as rigidly to ARORA's qualitative approach: OGOL′CEV (1978), for instance, does not provide any statistics relating to frequencies.

3. Methodology: corpus creation and analytical framework

In order to analyse the Irish comparisons rigorously, a significant corpus of authentic examples was required. The most authentic and comprehensive published source of Irish proverbial material is to be found in three dialect-specific collections of the early to mid-twentieth century, which cover the main dialects of Modern Irish over the period 1856–1952.[14] (1) The first, *Seanfhocla Uladh* (Ó MUIRGHEASA 1907; 2nd edition, 1936; 3rd edition, ed. Ó HURMOLTAIGH 1976), when first published in 1907, was the largest printed collection of proverbial material in Irish and included over 1600 entries.[15] The second edition of this work, published in 1936, is marginally different as it contains over 300 new entries. This is counterbalanced, however, with the omission of 150 items of the original collection that were judged to be lacking in proverbial wisdom.[16] The proverbial comparisons in the first edition are located in a section entitled *Ráidhte le céill samhalta* 'Figurative sayings' (1907: 162–90) and in a miscellaneous section entitled *Seanfhocla a fuair mé go mall* 'Proverbs I received too late [for classification]' (1907: 245–55). The 1936 edition incorporates the miscellanea into appropriate thematic classifications, and this is retained in Ó HURMOLTAIGH's (1976) edition with normalised orthography. (2) The second collection, *Seanfhocail na Muimhneach* (Ó SIOCHFHRADHA 1926; 2nd edition, *Seanfhocail na Mumhan*, ed. UA MAOILEOIN 1984), contains over 2000 entries, and an additional four hundred were added by the editor of the second edition, Pádraig UA MAOILEOIN (1984),[17] of which a significant number were proverbial comparisons gleaned from *Caint an Chláir* (MAC CLÚIN 1940).[18] (3) The final collection, *Sean-fhocla Chonnacht* (Ó MÁILLE 1948 and 1952; 2nd edition, *Seanfhocla Chonnacht*, ed. Donla Uí BHRAONÁIN 2010), contains over 11,500

[14] This material constitutes the most comprehensive published collection of authentic proverbial material in Modern Irish. For an examination of these dialectal collections, see MAC COINNIGH 2008. It should also be noted that O'RAHILLY 1922 is another valuable source of proverbial material from an earlier period. His collection features proverbs (Chapter 1) and triads (Chapter 2) from the collection of Mícheál Óg Ó Longáin (*circa* 1800), as well as proverbs (Chapter 3) and proverbial phrases (Chapter 4) gleaned from literary sources 'from the earliest times down to about the end of the eighteenth century' (O'RAHILLY 1922: §79). O'RAHILLY 1922 does not contain any proverbial comparisons of the form *chomh* + ADJ + *le* + NP.

[15] It is worth noting that this collection also included over 600 proverbs collected by Robert Mac Adam 'chieftly in the counties of Antrim, Derry, and Donegal, prior to the year 1858' (Ó MUIRGHEASA 1907: §xiii).

[16] 'Ar an iomlán tá níos mó ná trí chéad de sheanfhocla ins an leabhar seo anois nach rabh ins an chéad leabhar. Acht, ar an taoibh eile, scuabas amach tuairim is 150 a bhí san tsean-leabhar, cinn nach rabh mórán céille nó eagna ionnta, cé gur sean-ráidhte iad gan amhras.' ['In total there are more than three hundred proverbs in this book that were not in the first one. But, on the other hand, I removed around 150 from the older edition, namely those that did not contain much sense or wisdom, although they undoubtably were old expressions'] Ó MUIRGHEASA 1936: §VII.

[17] There are 2607 individual entries.

[18] 'Dheineas aon bheart bheag amháin eile leis an mbailiúchán seo nár mhiste liom a lua; is é sin, dul go dtí *Caint an Chláir* leis an Athair Mac Clúin agus cuid mhaith a thógaint as faoi Chosúlóidí agus Comortáis, chomh ... le ..., agus mar sin de' [I made one amendment to this collection that I wish to mention: and that was to consult *Caint an Chláir* by Father Mac Clúin agus borrowed a lot of material from the section entitled 'Similarities and Comparisons', *as ... as* ..., and the like], UA MAOILEOIN 1984:§x.

entries.[19] The proverbial comparisons are scattered throughout this edition in line with the alphabetic headword classification adopted by Ó MÁILLE. Although they are often grouped together, comparisons are not explicitly distinguished from proverbs and proverbial sayings in any of the dialectal collections.[20] Moreover, proverbs that contain some explicit comparison, particularly those featuring the formula of a proverbial maxim [COP + SUPL. ADJ. + NP + CONJ 'NÁ' + NP], e.g. *Is treise oiliúint ná dúchas* (*C* §886)[21] 'Stronger nurture than nature', or *Is fearr lúbadh ná briseadh* (*C* §2886) 'Better (to) bend than (to) break', are often classified as proverbial comparisons (TAYLOR 1954: 5), even though the proverbial comparison should have a flexible form that enables the use of different persons, tenses, and moods, depending on the context.[22] The two Irish collections based on a thematic classification (*M* and *U*) follow this general pattern. In addition to these sources, *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla* (Ó DÓNAILL 1977), which also contains a significant amount of authentic proverbial comparisons collected from native speech, was gleaned for comparisons and these added to the corpus.[23]

Comparisons were collected from these four sources (Ó DÓNAILL 1977; Ó HURMOLTAIGH 1976; UA MAOILEOIN 1984; UÍ BHRAONÁIN 2010) and arranged alphabetically in tabular form, together with information on source and page number(s). Multiple occurrences of the same proverb are annotated after the entry using these abbreviations, but only one canonical form is included in the table, e.g. *chomh crua(idh) le clo(i)ch* (*M* §2415) (*C* §3070) 'as hard as a stone' (*FGB s.v. crua*). In the case of orthographical variation due to dialectal differences, one canonical form was entered and the spelling variation noted in parentheses with the abbreviation *var.*, e.g. *chomh gnóthach (var. gnoitheach) leis an drochaimsir* (*C* §251) 'as busy as bad weather'. Frequencies of the ground and vehicle items were then calculated and arranged in tabular forms (see Table 1 for ground items and Table 3 for vehicle items in the Appendices) outlining both frequency (n) and percentile (%) of the total population. In total there were 585 individual tokens.

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[19] 'There are more than 11,500 proverbs in the latest edition: the core material was expanded to include material in the appendices and many variant forms were indexed as individual entries', UÍ BHRAONÁIN 2010: §XII.

[20] GRZYBEK (1994: §68) has pointed out that John RAY's 1670 *Collection of proverbs* uses 'similes' as a title – 'a name which is very much in use for this form still today'.

[21] The following abbreviations will be used to refer to the sources of proverbial comparisons: *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla* (*FGB*); *Seanfhocla Uladh* (*U*); *Seanfhocail na Mumhan* (*M*); *Seanfhocla Chonnacht* (*C*). I will provide my own English translation for each proverbial comparison.

[22] 'The *proverb* is a traditional figurative saying which can form a complete utterance on its own. Its ability to constitute a complete utterance distinguishes the proverb from another traditional, characteristically figurative form, the *proverbial phrase*, which cannot stand on its own … A special sort of proverbial phrase is the proverbial comparison (or proverbial simile) with *as*, *like* or *than*, for example *as brown as a berry*, *like a house afire*, and *older than the hills*', NORRICK 2014: §8.

[23] As a caveat, it should be acknowledged that the lack of context is an obstacle to any significant, systematic analysis of meaning as, for example, adjectives are typically polysemous. As a result, it is not always clear which meaning is being referred to, for example in *chomh buí le cos lachan* 'as yellow as a duck's foot' it may not be entirely clear if *buí* refers to the primary literal meaning of 'yellow' or to the secondary figurative meaning of 'cowardly'. Context is essential to confirm meaning, and so the parameters of this current study were limited to the most common adjectival meaning as understood by the researcher, and, whenever possible, native speakers were queried on usage. Secondary meanings or ironic usages were only considered when the collector had explicitly made reference to them in annotations.

4. The proverbial comparison: form and function

4.1 Form

A prototypical "proverbial comparison" follows the general structure of the simile and commonly occurs in the form (*as*) + ADJ + *as* + NP,[24] or in Irish as *chomh* + ADJ + *le* + NP.[25] The NP may be a single noun (e.g. *dreoilín* 'wren') or the head of a complex NP such as a genitive construction (e.g. *mála an phíobaire* 'bagpipe') or a relative construction (e.g. *cearc a mbeadh ubh aici* 'a hen that would/might have an egg'). Typically a complete comparison, be it a regular equative form (no. 1) or a proverbial comparison (no. 2), has a quadripartite structure containing the topic [*comparandum*] (T = NP, the object to be compared), the vehicle [*comparans*] (V = NP, object to which T is compared), the ground [*tertium comparationis*] (G = ADJ, feature or quality that is shared by both and which is the basis of the analogy), and the comparison marker (M = MARKER, an explicit indicator which indicates an analogous relationship between the topic and vehicle)[26]. This can be illustrated schematically as follows:

1. *Tá Áine chomh cliste le Mícheál* 'Áine is as clever as Mícheál'
   [T = *Áine*] [M = *chomh* * *le*] [V = *Mícheál*] [G = clever]

2. *Tá an oíche chomh dubh le pic* 'The night is as black as pitch'
   [T = *an oíche*] [M = *chomh* * *le*] [V = *pic*] [G = black]

There is, however, a fundamental difference between a regular equative comparison (no. 1) and a proverbial comparison (no. 2): whilst the syntactic unit of a regular comparison is capable of generating an infinite number of possible comparisons by the insertion of tokens into the adjectival and NP-slots, e.g., *chomh bán le solas* 'as white as a light'; *chomh crua le casúr* 'as hard as a hammer'; *chomh sean leis an dochtúir* 'as old as the doctor', the proverbial comparison is a pre-fabricated and conventionalised unit, the constituent elements of which are fixed by combinatorial constraints. The concatenation of a particular ground and vehicle usually indicate a particular conventionalised meaning, typically the primary meaning of the adjective, and this relationship is relatively stable. For example, the adjective *bán* 'white'[27] is highly polysemous in Irish, but the proverbial comparisons show a clear correlation with the primary salient reference to 'colour' in vehicles (no. 3):

3. *chomh bán le bainne/le cailc/leis an bhfalla/leis an eala/leis an sneachta* (*M* §2384)
   'as white as milk/as chalk/as the wall/as the swan /as the snow'

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[24] Other common syntactic formulae for comparisons across a range of languages are 'INF + CONJ 'like' + NP, e.g. 'to leave like a streak of lightning'; 'not worth NP', e.g. 'it is not worth a pin'; 'as ADJ as VP', e.g. 'as sure as there is a sun in the sky', but these have been omitted from the present study as they have low frequencies in Irish proverbial expressions.

[25] In English the initial 'as' is optional and may be omitted without affecting the grammaticality of the expression. For example, 'as deaf as a bat' could be used in either of the following grammatical sentences withour changing the meaning (a) 'Jack is as deaf as a bat', (b) 'Jack is deaf as a bat'. In Irish, the 'as' element works in conjunction with the preposition 'le' (= like) and is obligatory, and its omission would leave the sentence ungrammatical. For example, *Tá Seán chomh bodhar le slis* (lit. 'Seán is as deaf as a block') is acceptable, whilst *Tá Seán bodhar le slis** ('Seán is deaf like a block'*) is ungrammatical.

[26] The comparison marker (M) in Irish is *chomh* + *le*.

[27] **bán**, 1. White. 2. White-headed. 3. Fair. 4. Pale. 5. Albinotic. 6. (of speech) fair-spoken, plausible. 7. Clear. 8. **Sioc** ~ hoar-frost. 9. Blank. 10. Empty. 11. Idle. 12. Wild, crazy. 13. Fallow (*FGB*).

The fixed meaning in these proverbial comparisons prohibits polysemous use; for example, it would be infelicitous to say #*tá an baile chomh bán le bainne* #'the town is as white as milk' if one wished to invoke the secondary semantic meaning of 'empty/wild/clear'. The choice of ground and vehicle elements is not arbitrary, but instead is motivated by either (i) observable or tactile vehicular qualities (usually relating to speed, shape, strength or colour), e.g. *chomh bán leis an sneachta* (*M* §2384) 'as white as the snow'; *chomh crua le cloch* (*C* §3070) 'as hard as stone'; (ii) culturally-based perceived qualities (usually relating to perceived personality traits), e.g. *chomh foighdeach le cat* (*U* §1299) 'as patient as a cat'; or (iii) culturally-based knowledge/ stereotypes,[28] e.g. *chomh cneasta leis an sagart* (*U* §1303) 'as honest as the priest'; *chomh Gaelach le muca Dhroichead Átha* (*U* §1301) 'as Irish as Drogheda pigs'. The notion that the comparison is "proverbial" also requires the fulfilment of certain extra-linguistic pre-requisites. Firstly, the comparison is required to demonstrate *currency* amongst a particular language community (occurring in the *active vocabulary*), or at the very least to be recognised by speakers (stored in the *passive vocabulary*). Secondly, the comparison must demonstrate *traditionality*, which is the acknowledgement of its validity as a traditional item of folklore as accrued by transmission, usually intergenerational, and/or *recognisability*, in that its traditional use is widely acknowledged within the linguistic community.

4.2 Function

The main functions of a comparison are to emphasise a particular adjectival quality by the use of a typical example, or, when used ironically, to amuse through an incongruous comparison. It follows logically that in the emphatic function, the vehicle should be more accessible than the topic – the topic can be clarified or emphasised by comparing it to another object with more accessible or recognisable traits. Whilst the surface structure means that the primary focus is on the relationship between the ground (G) and the vehicle (V), if examined at the level of deep structure, the vehicle may be construed as a prototypical example, or epitome, of the adjectival ground (see MOON 1998). If we take the example of *chomh dubh le pic* 'as black as pitch' (*FGB s.v. dubh*), we can see that 'pitch' is being used as a archetypal example of something that is 'black', i.e. the trope of *BLACKNESS* is one of its salient features. Moreover, we can see that the entire phrase acts as a semantic equivalent of 'extremely black' or what could be rendered in Irish very simply as *an-dubh*. The entire phrase functions as a periphrastic superlative construction in which the basic adjectival meaning is intensified by explicitly stating a prototypical example of the attribute. This, in general, is the case for proverbial comparisons, and we can see that, in broad terms, the vehicle typically is either something well-known to the linguistic community, for example an everyday item, such as flour in *chomh mion le plúr* (*M* §2487) 'as fine as flour', or something that is culturally-embedded, such as in *chomh fada le scéal an ghamhna bhuí* (*C* §4714), literally 'as long as the story of the yellow calf'.[29] In direct contrast to this, however, the humorous function relies on the violation of these operative/interpretive rules through the use of incongruous vehicles that demonstrate a 'salience imbalance'[30] with the ground adjective. For example, in the expression 'as clear as mud',[31] the adjective 'clear' is of negligible salience in the noun

[28] These are a key feature of DOBROVOL′SKIJ & PIIRAINEN's (2006) "Conventional figurative language theory" (CFLT).

[29] This is a popular euphemism for a long-drawn out story or tale.

[30] ORTONY 1979: §162.

[31] TAYLOR (1954: §4) notes that although there does not appear to be an older parallel for this in English, the comparison 'as clear as ink' has been common in German and Dutch for several centuries. It is worth noting, however, that a simple search of *Das Deutsche Referenzkorpus – DeReKo* (http://www1.ids-mannheim.de/direktion/kl/projekte/korpora.html?L=1) only reveals 2 hits for the comparison *klar wie Tinte*, but *ca*. 30 hits for a variant with the internal extension *klar wie* ***dicke*** ('turbid'; 'thick'; 'opaque') *Tinte*. To

'mud' and also violates the combinatorial norms that govern proverbial comparisons. As a result, the actual meaning is the opposite of what is normally expected from a conventional proverbial comparison. The salience imbalance is an intentional exploitation of the linguistic norm for the purpose of humour.[32]

When one considers the fixed nature of these comparisons, it is doubtful that these vehicles, or indeed the ground-vehicle relationship, are processed after the comparison is conventionalised, i.e., after the phrase is recognised as having proverbial status amongst a linguistic community. Evidence to support this comes in the form of proverbial comparisons that contains unconventional, foreign, or out-dated vehicles, e.g. a vehicle that the speaker/hearer may not be readily able to understand or define. We can mention such examples as *chomh dubh le Poll Tí Liabáin* (*FGB s.v. dubh*) 'as black as the hole of the house of Liabán' (i.e. the lower world); *chomh bán le lítis* (*M* §2451) 'as white as a (*literary use*) white colour' and *chomh fada le Lá Shan Seáin* (*M* §2437) 'as long as Judgement Day'. These archaisms exist freely in language without any recourse to definition; the meaning is already clear due to our understanding of both the typical function of the syntactic formula and the unique concatenation of the vehicle-ground items. In general, although one may view these to be 'time-worn clichés whose impact is little more than that of the adjective alone' (ARORA 1977: 2), the fact remains that knowledge of such comparisons is an integral part of the general cultural literacy of the speech community and a key indicator of linguistic ability.[33]

5. Analysis of findings

5.1 The *ground* (*tertium comparationis*)

In the 585 individual proverbial comparisons in the Irish corpus, there are a total of 206 individual adjectives in the ground position, which suggests a wide distribution and lack of clustering. The distribution of these various adjectives ranged from a maximum frequency of 16 tokens for the colour *dubh* 'black' to a minimum of one occurrence, for example *baoth* 'foolish', *beadaí* 'fastidious', *beathaithe* 'well-fed', etc. This can be seen in Table 1.[34] We can see that as individual ground frequencies decline, there is, in broad terms, a correlational increase in the number of types within the ground category.

Table 1. Frequency of *ground* type in the Irish corpus

search for these forms, public access of COSMAS II https://cosmas2.ids-mannheim.de/cosmas2-web/ is activated and then the relevant subcorpora selected using the 'Archive' button, e.g. W – Archiv der geschriebenen Sprache or W2 – Archiv der geschriebenen Sprache. In this instance, the search query for 'klar wie Tinte' is **$klar /+w1:1 wie /+w1:1 Tinte**; this performs a search for the word 'klar', both upper and lower case entries, directly followed by 'wie' and 'Tinte'. The search query for 'klar wie dicke Tinte' is **$klar /+w1:1 wie /+w1:1 &dick /+w1:1 Tinte**, which locates the additional lemma 'dick' with all its inflectional forms.

[32] From my analyses, it appears that these are uncommon in the Irish material that was collected from twentieth-century sources (see 5.4 for a discussion), but there is a possibility that these transformations are a relatively new phenomenon cross-linguistically.

[33] This falls under the general umbrella of the Irish "paremiological minimum", which we may define as the minimum set of phraseological units required by a speaker of a language (See PERMIAKOV 1973, 1982, 1989).

[34] The extended table with all individual adjectival frequencies can be seen in the Appendices as **Table 1 (extended). Frequency of *ground* type in the Irish corpus.**

		Frequency		
Ground (*n* of ADJ in rank)	Rank	*n*	*n***n*ADJ	%[35]
dubh (1)	1	16	16	2.7
fada, geal (2)	2	15	30	5.1
díreach (1)	3	13	13	2.2
géar, ramhar (2)	4	12	24	4.1
láidir (1)	5	11	11	1.9
bréagach, éadrom (2)	6	10	20	3.4
ard, fuar (2)	7	9	18	3.1
cam, glic (2)	8	8	16	2.7
ciúin, fairsing, righin, sean(da), sleamhain, tiubh, *etc*. (6)	9	7	42	7.2
bán, crua(idh), dall, dána, fliuch, glan, glas, lag, *etc.* (9)	10	6	54	9.2
beag, bodhar, buí, caol, críonna, daingean, *etc*. (10)	11	5	50	8.5
beo, binn, bréan, cantalach, domhain, dúr, *etc*. (17)	12	4	68	11.6
bog, caoch, corrthónach, daor, díomhaoin, *etc*. (17)	13	3	51	8.7
aerach, aibidh, aosta, balbh, beannaithe, *etc*. (38)	14	2	76	13.0
baoth, beadaí, beathaithe, bisiúil, bleachtmhar, *etc*. (96)	15	1	96	16.4
TOTAL			**585**	**100**

The findings show that certain *tertia* are more frequent than others. *Dubh* 'black' is the most-used adjective in Irish comparisons with 16 tokens, and is followed by *geal* 'bright, white coloured', *fada* 'long' [15 tokens], *díreach* 'straight' [13 tokens], *géar* 'sharp', *ramhar* 'fat, thick' [12 tokens], *láidir* 'strong' [11 tokens], *bréagach* 'false', *éadrom* 'light' [10 tokens], *ard* 'high, tall', *fuar* 'cold' [9 tokens] and *cam* 'bent, crooked', *glic* 'clever, shrewd' [8 tokens]. It is significant that out of the 13 most frequently-occurring adjectives in Irish, 11 relate to directly observable qualities, the remaining two being *bréagach* 'false' and *glic* 'clever, shrewd'. These top results mirror those of quantitative examinations by NORRICK (1987b: 146) and TAYLOR (1954: 10–11) of the ground in English comparisons,[36] with adjectives like 'sharp', 'straight' and 'bright' dominating the top frequencies. With such similarities, it is no surprise that the most common adjective in Irish, i.e. 'black' (2.7%), is also the most frequent adjective in NORRICK's corpus, and in second position (1.9%) in TAYLOR's collection. Moreover, NORRICK's general conclusion[37] – that comparisons typically relate to adjectives that are difficult to describe digitally – is also applicable to Irish where these adjectives have high frequencies. For example, colours, such as 'black' and 'white', and grammatically abstract nouns like 'brightness', 'sharpness', or 'lightness', cannot be analysed according to attributes so they must be understood in relation to prototypical objects that demonstrate the quality in question. The recall of the salient qualities of the object is the rationale for the comparison. It is striking that colours appear as ground elements in almost the exact same frequencies in English (9.0%)[38] and Irish (9.4%).[39] Of

[35] These are combined percentages that reflect the total share of each rank.

[36] NORRICK's (1987b) corpus was based on the *ODEP*.

[37] '… similes offer an analog – as opposed to a digital – mode of expression, and stock similes cluster around concepts speakers find difficult to digitize for cognitive and/or cultural reasons', NORRICK 1987b: §146. Norrick's use of 'digital' and 'digitize' refers to a mode of expression in which properties are described through an analysis of the presence or absence of individual attributes. In contrast, in an 'analog' mode of expression properties cannot be analysed into sets of attributes and are therefore illustrated by prototypes.

[38] NORRICK 1987b: §146: '... colours appear as tertia in 33 of the total 366 entries for similes in the ODEP'.

[39] *dubh* 16, *geal* 15, *bán* 6, *buí* 5, *dearg* 5, *liath* 4, *gorm* 2, *rua* 1.

equal note is the divergence between the two languages when the issue of 'directly perceived *tertium* properties' (NORRICK 1977: 2) is introduced (i.e. visually or tactilely observable, e.g. *straight, sharp, hot*, as opposed to subjective character judgements, e.g. *lazy, shy, playful*). Whilst colours and directly perceived properties are attested in 25% of the English corpus, the Irish data show significantly higher frequencies and account for nearly half of the entire corpus (46.9%). We can infer from this data that although Irish comparisons share a similar frequency of colour *tertia* with English, directly perceived properties are distinctly much more common in Irish comparisons.

While cognitive processes clearly motivate the choice of ground element, the studies of TAYLOR 1954, ANDERSSON 1971, MOON 2008 and WIKBERG 2008, have shown that metrical or syllabic patterns play an equally important role. The data in Table 2 show that there is a negative correlation between syllable length and token frequency: the more syllables in the ground adjective, the less numerous the token.

Table 2. Syllabic structure of *ground* adjective

		Frequency	
	Rank	*n*	%
Monosyllablic	1	304	51.9
Disyllabic	2	231	39.6
Trisyllabic	3	48	8.2
Tetrasyllabic	4	2	0.3
TOTAL		**585**	**100**

Monosyllabic adjectives are the preferred choice of ground in Irish and occur in over half of the comparisons (52%); yet, whilst this is noteworthy, comparative analyses of American English have shown a significantly greater predilection for single syllables (72%) (ANDERSSON 1971: 224). There is also an observable trend in Irish for high frequency adjectives, such as *dubh* 'black', *geal* 'bright', *géar* 'sharp', *ard* 'high' and *fuar* 'cold', to be typically monosyllabic, whilst low frequency adjectives, such as *ceanndána* 'headstrong', *ceolmhar* 'musical', *ciallmhar* 'sensible', etc. are more often than not polysyllabic. The preference for commonly occurring monosyllabic adjectives in Irish comparisons could be a possible reason for the lexicalisation of the formula (*as*) + ADJ + *as* + NP as WIKBERG (2008: 135) and, to some extent, MOON (2008: 5) have argued is the case in English.[40] Of the remaining, polysyllabic adjectives, disyllabic adjectives are the most common (40%) (e.g. *bisiúil* 'productive', *crosach* 'black-faced', *líonmhar* 'plentiful'), whilst trisyllabic (8%) (*éifeachtúil* 'effectual', *dealraitheach* 'resplendent', *guairdeallach* 'restless') and tetra-syllabic (0.3%) (*neamhurchóideach* 'harmless', *luathintinneach* 'fickle') adjectives are infrequent.

5.2 The *vehicle* (*comparans*)

There are 323 individual vehicle tokens in the corpus. Within this total population there is a wide range of vehicle-types, with a frequency range extending from a maximum of 15 occurrences (i.e. *cat* 'cat') to the minimum of one occurrence (e.g. *aingeal* 'angel', *díle* 'flood, *mil* 'honey' etc.). In Table 3, we can see that with the exception of rank 4, as individual vehicle frequencies drop, there is a correlational increase in the number of vehicles

[40] WIKBERG (2008 §135) states that monosyllabic and polysemous adjectives promote the lexicalisation of the pattern in English.

within the rank category. Table 3 shows the most significant frequencies within the Irish corpus.[41]

Table 3. Frequency of *vehicle* types in the Irish corpus

		Frequency		
Vehicle type (*n* of N in rank)	Rank	*n*	*n**N	%
cat (1)	1	15	15	2.6
cearc, fear (2)	2	10	20	3.4
muc, madarua (2)	3	9	18	3.1
cloch (1)	4	8	8	1.4
bean, féar, sagart (3)	5	7	21	3.6
beach, scadán, gabhar, luchóg (4)	6	6	24	4.1
cnoc, diabhal, éan, eascann, easóg, *etc*. (9)	7	5	45	7.7
an té, asal, balla, bó, capall, carraig, *etc*. (15)	8	4	60	10.3
coinín, bac, bradán, breac, broc, bróg, *etc*. (23)	9	3	69	11.8
bainne, bairneach, bás, buidéal, cailc, *etc*. (43)	10	2	86	14.7
abhlainn, aingeal, áirbhiseoir, airgead, *etc*. (220)	11	1	220	37.6
TOTAL			**323**	**100**

The important role of phonological devices – or "rhythmic patterns" – in comparisons, particularly alliteration and rhyme, has been identified by the studies of TAYLOR 1956, ENET 1957, ARORA 1966, ANDERSSON 1971, NORRICK 1986b and MOON 2008.[42] Unfortunately, in spite of providing illustrative examples, few of these studies have quantified the frequencies in their respective corpora.[43] From the present quantitative analysis of Irish data, however, a clear picture emerges of how these phonological devices are used. Firstly, rhyme is entirely absent from all of the tokens (0%), which is understandable as the comparisons only contain a small number of lexical items. But more significantly, it shows that rhyme, as a common mnemonic feature, does not motivate vehicle-choice in Irish. This finding is not entirely surprising, however, as it tallies with the almost negligible occurrence of rhyme in Spanish comparisons as outlined by RODRÍGUEZ MARÍN 1899, ENET 1957 and ARORA 1966.[44] It is interesting, however, that Irish comparisons are not entirely void of phonological embellishment, as alliteration is found in almost one in ten examples (8.9%), as can be seen in the following:[45]

4. *chomh **b**uí le **b**uachalán* (*U* §1316)
   'as yellow as ragwort'

[41] The complete table of adjectives can be found in the Appendices as **Table 3 (extended). Frequency of *vehicle* types in the Irish corpus.**

[42] It has been suggested that these devices often not only motivate the choice of ground and vehicle constituents, but also sustain constituent usage long after the terms have become obsolete, e.g. the word 'door' in the phrase 'as deaf as a doornail' (see TAYLOR 1956: §8). The term *doornail* refers to a 'large-headed nail, with which doors were formerly studded for strength, protection, or ornamentation' (*OED s.v. door-nail, n.*).

[43] MOON's (2008: §6) comment that 'many' are alliterative is of little help in this regard.

[44] ARORA (1966: §10) shows that rhyme only featured in 4% of the corpus of comparisons collected from Ricardo PALMA's *Tradiciones peruanas*, and these were all comparisons of the bipartite variety, i.e. *como el ajuar de la tiñosa, donde no había cosa con cosa; como el cigarro de Guadalupe, yo fumo y usted escupe*).

[45] Altogether 52 tokens.

5. *chomh **c**aol le **c**ú* (*M* §2402)
   'as slender as a hound'
6. *chomh **f**olláin le **f**ia* (*FGB s.v. folláin*)
   'as healthy as a deer'
7. *chomh **m**ilis le **m**il* (*M* §2483)
   'as sweet as honey'
8. *chomh **f**airsing le **f**éar* (*C* §3867)
   'as plentiful as grass'

5.2.1 Category distinctions

The individual vehicle tokens were classified according to an amended version of OGOL′CEV's (1978) framework[46] – featuring sixteen distinct categories relating to the sphere of life from where the vehicle (*comparans*) is taken –, and salient examples in each of these categories were examined for patterns. The general distribution of vehicles in these categories can be seen in Table 4:

Table 4. Frequency and distribution of *vehicle* (*comparans*) categories

vehicle category (*example*)	Rank	*n*	%
nature, elementary phenomena (*fire*, *air*)	1	90	15.4%
domestic animals (*cat*, *dog*)	2	77	13.2%
human beings (*child*, *idiot*)	3	74	12.6%
animals, fish, reptiles, rodents (*bear*, *salmon*, *snake*)	4	69	11.8%
tools, instruments (*bullet*, *arrow*)	5	60	10.3%
vegetables (*grass*, *flower*)	6	52	8.9%
food, domestic appliances (*bread*, *sieve*)	7	30	5.1%
wild birds (*raven*, *eagle*)	8	22	3.8%
Irish mythology (*Fionn mac Cumhaill*, *Goll mac Moirne*)	9	20	3.4%
church life, religious and other beliefs (*hell*, *angels*)	10	19	3.2%
insects (*bee*, *spider*)	11	18	3.1%
domestic birds (*chicken*, *hen*)	12	13	2.2%
materials and their qualities (*iron*, *steel*)	13	13	2.2%
time, calender customs (*Sunday*, *April*)	14	10	1.7%
house and habitation (*house*, *castle*)	15	10	1.7%
abstract concepts (*death*, *truth*)	16	8	1.4%
		58	
TOTAL		**5**	100%

Nature and elementary phenomena (earth, *water*, *air*, *fire)* (15.4%)

The belief that all matter existed in the juxtaposition of four essential "roots", i.e. earth, water, air and fire, was first introduced by Empedocles in the 5th century BC and remained accepted dogma for two millennia (KINGSLEY 1994: 236). 'Nature and elementary

[46] OGOL′CEV (1978) originally had 12 categories, but I have added an additional 4 to provide a more comprehensive and inclusive coverage of the comparisons. *Abstract concepts* (e.g. death, truth) were included as they are numerous in comparisons; *Irish mythology* (e.g. Fionn mac Cumhaill, Goll mac Moirne) provides a culture-specific category to cover the many mythological figures mentioned in Irish comparisons; *House and habitation* (e.g. house, castle) provides a category for references to dwellings, as well as their structure and content; and finally, *Time and calendar customs* (e.g. Sunday, April) includes the folkloristic traditions associated with particular days in the Gaelic calendar.

phenomena', as a category, contains an extensive range of omnipresent geophysical phenomena related to these four "roots", and it is unsurprising, due to the age, range and breadth of constituent material, that it is the most common source domain of *comparantia* in Irish proverbial comparisons (16%). Moreover, this result tallies with the general trend in the figurative lexicon of European languages to focus idioms on natural forces as identified by PIIRAINEN (2012: 323).

Geological and meteorological phenomena are ubiquitous and clearly motivate comparisons due to their observable traits. Abstract noun formations derived from adjectives denoting concrete qualities (*lowness*; *redness*; *fullness*; *brightness*) are made tangible by invoking observable, recognisable natural phenomena as vehicles: e.g. EARTH – *chomh híseal leis an dtalamh* (*M* §2465) 'as low as the ground'; FIRE – *chomh dearg leis an dtine* (*M* §2423) 'as red as the fire'; WATER – *chomh lán leis an bhfarraige* (*M* §2469) 'as full as the sea'; WEATHER – *chomh geal leis an ngréin* (*M* §2466) 'as bright as the sun'. Comparisons have also clearly developed from textual sources and reflect images that have been common cross-linguistically since biblical times, for example the reference to the great flood (*Genesis* 6:9–17) in *chomh sean leis an díle* 'as old as the flood', and also from salient elements of folkloristic belief, for example that March is a windy month in *chomh luaimneach* (var. *corrthónach*; *luathintinneach*) *leis an ngaoth Mhárta* (*M* §2477) 'as restless (*var.* changeable; fickle) as the March wind'.

If we subdivide this category (Table 5), we can see that EARTH *comparantia* are the most common and feature in over one-third of the examples (37%). Although the majority are generic vehicles such as 'chalk' – *chomh bán le cailc* (*M* §2384) 'as white as chalk'; 'coal' – *chomh dubh le gual* (*M* §2431) 'as black as coal' and 'ash' – *chomh mion le luath* (*M* §2487) 'as fine as ash', there are other examples of localised, specific topographical features; for example, the general comparison *chomh hard le cnoc* (*C* §477) 'as high as a hill' is nativised to *chomh hard le Cnoc Dabhach* (*C* §477) 'as high as Knockduff'[47] or *chomh hard le Cnoc Meadha* (*C* §477) 'as high as Knockmaa'.[48]

Table 5. Frequency of nature phenomena

		Frequency	
	Rank	*n*	%
Earth	1	37	37.4
Water	2	23	23.1
Weather	3	22	22.0
Fire	4	7	6.6
Air	5	6	5.5
Other	6	6	5.5
Total		**91**	**100**

The distribution of token-types in this category is not as varied as the relatively high number of incidents might allow, however, as the phrase *chomh X le carraig*/*cloch* 'as X as a rock/stone' accounts for a disproportionate number (n=12). The prevalence of this image is interesting if we consider that "stone" is an inanimate object with a lack of distinguishable qualities, except, one could argue, *heaviness* and *hardness*. The vehicle attracts a wide spectrum of ground tropes beyond these two qualities, however; these include *deafness*, *dumbness*, *sturdiness*, *plenty*, *coldness*, *bareness*, *deathliness*, *permanence* and *solidness* (see Table 6).

[47] Knockduff is in the barony of Moycullen, Co. Galway.
[48] Knockmaa is in the barony of Clare, Co. Galway.

Table 6. *Ground* adjectives in 'rock/stone' *comparantia*			
M^1	*ground*	M^2	*vehicle*
chomh	balbh, bodhar, crua,[49] daingean, dúr, fairsing, fuar, lom, marbh, trom, buan, tacúil	le	cloch/carraig/leac

One possible explanation put forward by SACHS (1963: 583) is that stones had religio-magical importance in ancient times and were emotionally charged due to 'associations with religious beliefs and struggles and with magical belief and practices'. This deference meant the word 'stone' may have been used as a swearword for intensification in comparisons, similar to the way Jesus, God and the Devil have appeared in Christian nomenclature in English exclamatory phrases, e.g. 'Jesus (Christ)', 'My God!'. Interestingly, these results mirror those in NORRICK's (1987b) study of comparative noun-adjective compounds (CNACs), or *Volkssuperlative*,[50] in Germanic languages, where "stone" also has high frequencies[51] (comparisons are condensed to form CNACs, e.g. *as deaf as stone* is transformed to *stone-deaf*).

Water-related *comparantia* (21%) focus on the ocean and sea: *chomh fliuch leis an bhfarraige* 'as wet as the sea' (*M* §2443); *chomh goirt le sáile* 'as salty as seawater' (*M* §2462); lakes, streams and ponds: *chomh ciúin le loch* 'as quiet as a lough' (*M* §2409); *chomh fuar le sruthán aille* 'as cold as a cliff stream'[52] (*C* §5121); *chomh ciúin le linn* 'as quiet as a pool' (*FGB s.v. ciúin*); and also other water sources, such as wells: *chomh fliuch leis an dtobar* 'as wet as a well' (*M* §2443), and bogs: *chomh leamh le huisce portaigh* 'as dull as bogwater' (*M* §2470). The sea is the most common vehicle; yet, in spite of its important role in narrative lore, as well as its ritualistic links to both unofficial and official religion, neither of these symbolic functions is emphasised; instead the comparisons are literal and deal with observable tropes of wetness, depth, width, fullness and saltiness. They reflect a tangible human experience with the sea and an acute understanding of its physical power.

Weather phenomena, particularly examples featuring the sun, the moon and snow, are also quite common (28%). The comparisons are almost entirely literal and focus on typically visually-identifiable tropes of *BRIGHTNESS – chomh geal leis an ngréin* (*M* §2451) 'as bright as the sun'; *chomh dealraitheach le solas na gréine* (*FGB s.v. dealraitheach*) 'as resplendent as the light of the sun'; *chomh geal le calthóg* (*C* §1942) 'as white as a (snow)flake', *HEIGHT – chomh hard leis an ngealaigh* (*M* §2381) 'as high as the moon', and the tactile trope of *COLDNESS – chomh fuar le sneachta* (*M* §2449) 'as cold as snow'; *chomh fuar le sioc* (M §2449) 'as cold as ice'; *chomh fuar leis an leac oighir* (*M* §2449) 'as cold as ice'. One would expect "fire", as the antithesis to "water" and, indeed, for its association with danger, to be equally common in comparisons, but this is not the case (6%). Like "weather", the few examples relate to the physical heat produced as a result of fire – *chomh te le tinte* (var. *le*

[49] The variant form 'cruaidh' (= crua) has been included here also.

[50] See BRÜCKNER 1854: §229.

[51] NORRICK's study (1987b) investigated the semantic relation between comparative noun-adjective compounds (CNACs), e.g. *razor sharp* and *sky blue*, and stock similes. The results show that CNACs largely evolve from similes as elliptical forms, e.g. *as hard as stone* can be condensed to form the CNAC *stone hard*. Other examples mentioned in his study are: *razor sharp* (as sharp as a razor), *sky blue* (as blue as the sky); *bone dry* (as dry as a bone); and *dirt cheap* (as cheap as dirt). The nature of these transformations from comparisons to CNACs, and indeed *vice versa*, is somewhat problematic on account of the lack of documentary evidence in sources across diachrony.

[52] Possibly 'a waterfall'.

tinte Ifrinn) (*M* §2509) 'as hot as fires' (*var.* 'as the fires of hell' = hellfire). It is interesting that the final category of 'air', whilst not common (5%), is more symbolic than literal. The examples centre on the belief in weather lore that March is a windy month *chomh corrthónach* (var. *luaimneach*; *luathintinneach*) *leis an ngaoth Mhárta* (*M* §2412) 'as restless (*var*. changeable; fickle) as the March wind'.

Domestic animals (13.1%)
The high incidence of domestic animals in Irish vehicles (13.1%) concurs with the general pattern found in the general studies of HENDRICKS 1960[53] and ANDERSSON 1971,[54] and also tallies with the other language-specific analyses of RODRÍGUEZ MARÍN 1899,[55] WHITING 1938a, ARORA 1977,[56] ENET 1957 and TAYLOR 1954, in which individual animal types were quantified statistically (see Table 7).

Table 7. Frequency and distribution of (domestic) animals across corpora

MMC		Arora		RM		Enet		Whiting		Taylor	
CAT	15	**DOG**	37	**DOG**	24	**DOG**	39	**DOG**	54	*CAT*	25
PIG	10	*CAT*	19	*CAT*	11	horse	18	*CAT*	25	**DOG**	16
DOG	8	PIG	19	donkey	11	*CAT*	11	bird	24	PIG	13
goat	5	donkey	13	snake	9	parrot	11	hen	24	cow	10
hen	5	rat	12	mule	5	armadillo	9	hell	21	kitten	9
horse	5	horse	12	bull	5	cow	8	horse	21	ox	8
cow	4	rooster	12	rat	5	ostrich	8	cow	16	duck	7
donkey	4	toad	11	wolf	5	PIG	8	hog	15	fish	7

In spite of slight categorisation differences,[57] there is a clear pattern of high frequencies for "cats" and "dogs" in all languages: they rank in the first three highest positions in all the studies. Like with TAYLOR's (1954) study of American English, "cat" is the most frequently occurring animal in the Irish material (almost 50% more common than "dog"), whilst "dog" is the vehicle *par excellence* in all the other studies.[58] According to KRIKMANN (2001: 12), the evolutionary explanation for this prominent position is that dogs were amongst the first animals to be domesticated, whilst others such as SACHS (1963: 596) have pointed to the dog's symbolic association with the dead and the Devil in folkloristic tradition.[59] Irish examples follow the general pattern of both ARORA 1977 and TAYLOR 1954 in having "dog", "cat" and "pig" in the top three positions, with only slight differences in the frequency order. It appears that these animals, in spite of cultural differences, were central to the figurative lexicon of all these particular languages.

[53] It should be noted that although he does not quantify the occurrence of individual animal types, HENDRICKS (1960: §260) states that 'domestic animals' are found in 58 of the 471 items, which when taken as a percentage is 12.3.

[54] ANDERSSON (1971: §224) has shown that approximately 40% of American similes feature an animal, most commonly a domestic animal.

[55] The following works are referred to in Table 7: MMC (this current contribution); ARORA 1961, RM (RODRÍGUEZ MARÍN 1899); ENET 1957; WHITING 1938; and TAYLOR 1954.

[56] Domestic animals, according to ARORA 1977: §17, appear to monopolise this category, and her general conclusion about Spanish proverbial comparisons is that 'all are dominated by common domestic or farm animals'.

[57] The classificatory systems in each of these studies varies to some degree, for example, most include non-domestic animals or birds, which are categorised separately according to OGOL′CEV's (1978) typology.

[58] HENDRICKS's study of 'Texas folk similes', although not quantified statistically, also finds that 'among all the animals, the cat, dog, and horse are clearly the most often referred to in folk similes' (1960: §262).

[59] SACHS (1963: §596) claims that the high frequency of *Hund* in CCNAs belonging to the Germanic languages is due to its links with both the dead and the Devil in folkloristic items.

If we examine these three animals (cat, dog, pig), we can see that comparisons typically focus on either (i) physical, biological or somatic traits: *CAT – chomh mín le cat* (*M* §2485) 'as smooth as a cat'; *DOG – chomh cam le cos deiridh mada* (*C* §3565) 'as bent as a dog's hind leg'; *PIG – chomh ramhar le muic* (*M* §2494) 'as fat as a pig', or (ii) perceived behavioural or emotional traits: *CAT – chomh ciúin le cat* (*M* §2408) 'as quiet as a cat'; *DOG – chomh tuirseach le seanmhada* (*C* §2145) 'as tired as an old dog'; *PIG – chomh ceanndána le muic* (*M* §2404) 'as headstrong as a pig'. There is a clear difference in these two categories, however. The former category (i) contains an accepted set of salient physical or biological features that are clearly observable to humans and are grounded in visual reality due to the proximity and frequency of interaction with the animal. These are literal comparisons that, even if often somewhat exaggerated, are grounded in factual reality, i.e. cats have smooth fur; dogs have bent hind-legs; and pigs are, generally, rotund. In contrast, the latter category (ii) contains examples in which characteristics, often relating to humans, i.e. taciturnity, tiredness and stubbornness, are stereotypically attributed to particular animals. These quasi-anthropomorphic readings reveal age-old symbolisations, or interpretations, of animals' behaviour that are based on an amalgam of literary, folkloristic and mythological sources. PIIRAINEN (2012) has shown that some of these ancient semiotisations, emanating from the Aesopic fables, are now embedded in language and occur as underlying source domains for figurative language, e.g., *CAT* = pride, fickleness, cunning; *DOG* = loyalty, friendship, obedience; *PIG* = stubbornness, greed, laziness. The processing of these "symbolic animal concepts" is thus central to the understanding of the comparison as a whole, for the vehicle is semantically autonomous – extralinguistic and even extra-pragmatic knowledge is required about the animal vehicle to process the comparison.[60]

Human beings (18%)
Human beings identified by gender designation (*man*, *woman*), age category (*child*), occupation (*baker*, *cobbler*, *carpenter*), or by some specific name (*Aristotle*), occur in almost one-fifth of the total comparisons (18%).

Explicitly-identified gender designations, i.e. *fear* 'man' (14%), *bean* 'woman' (11%) and *cailín* 'girl' (4%), are the main labels in this category, whilst neutral, non-designatory formulae occur equally frequently (8%), usually in the pattern *leis an té …* / *leis an duine …* 'as the person (who) …', e.g. *chomh sona leis an té a chodail le muc* 'as happy as the person who slept with a pig' (*C* §3880). Somewhat surprisingly, in light of the generally misogynistic nature of proverbs in patriarchal societies,[61] there is very little evidence of gender-specific stereotypes in Irish comparisons. In isolation, the vehicle 'man' appears to be semantically neutral and, consequently, sub-clausal modifiers are required to develop the vehicle into a prototypical embodiment of the *tertium*. This generally occurs through qualification via genitive construction (no. 9), a sub-clause (no. 10), or a noun phrase (no. 11), as can be seen in the examples below:

9. *chomh glic le fear na méaracán* (*M* §2460)
   'as cunning as the thimble-rigger' (i.e. man of the thimbles)
10. *chomh fial leis an bhfear a leag an tsnáthaid ar an gcoltar* (*C* §3049)
    'as generous as the man who laid the needle on the coulter'
11. *chomh gnóthach le fear bocht ar aonach* (*C* §3702)
    'as busy as a poor man at a fair'

[60] VEALE (2014: §54) has shown the relationship between the proverbial comparison (or simile) and stereotypes is in fact a symbiotic one: a prerequisite for the processing of such similes is an understanding of the underlying stereotypes, whilst proverbial comparisons may also generate new stereotypes.

[61] For analyses of misogynistic proverbs see NTSHINGA 1996 and YUSUF 1994, 1996.

Stereotypical characteristics are equally absent from 'woman' vehicles and examples follow the pattern applied to 'man' above. It is striking that over half of these are based on the structure *chomh X le bean bhocht ar aonach* 'as X as a poor woman at a market' and attribute different adjectives, albeit usually synonyms of 'restless' or 'nimble', to complete the comparison (this is the identical frame to that attached to the 'poor man' in no. 11 above). In this case, the idea of 'uneasiness' or 'desperation' is embodied in the situational incongruity of a poor woman entering an abundant marketplace (i.e. the underlying conflict of scarcity vs. plenty).

12. *chomh brúidiúil / giogach / guairdeallach / luaimneach / siúlach le bean bhocht ar aonach* (*C* §3702)
'as brutal / restless / uneasy / restless / fleet as a poor woman at a fair'

In two other examples, the woman is identified indirectly through her husband, *chomh mór ar meisce le bean an leanna* (*M* §2482) 'as drunk as a publican's wife'[62] and *chomh dána le bean tincéara* (*C* §4924) 'as bold as a tinker's wife'. Once again, these examples play on cultural and folkloristic stereotypes about the tinker and the publican. In non-gender-specific references to *leis an té / duine* 'as the person (who) …', attributes have to be inferred from the context in which that individual is placed. For example in *chomh bréagach leis an té a chuala an féar ag fás* (*C* §441) 'as deceitful as the person who heard the grass growing', the superlative attributes must be inferred from the sub-clausal context, which, from a temporal and auditory perspective, is an impossible situation – a human cannot hear grass growing – and anyone who claims such may be viewed to be untrustworthy. In contrast to both the terms 'man' and 'woman' which, as we have seen, do not display any ontologically distinct characteristics, the use of (new-born) 'child' signifies the stereotype of 'innocence', whilst another reference to 'fragility' appears more representative of the Graeco-Roman idea of the child as a delicate incomplete human (GUNDRY-VOLF 2001: 32).

13. *chomh lag le bunóic* (*M* §2466)
'as weak as an infant'
14. *chomh neamhurchóideach leis an leanbh* (*M* §2488)
'as innocent as the child'
15. *chomh soineanta le leanbh* (*FGB s.v. soineanta*)[63]
'as innocent as a child'

Parts of the body are also featured frequently in the sub-category of *Human beings* (18%), and it is interesting that the 'palm of the hand' and 'the sole of the foot' are the most frequently occurring body parts. These are essentially anthropomorphic personifications of baldness and blindness. The first, *chomh dall le bonn do choise* (*U* §1290) 'as blind as the sole of your foot', is based on the interpretation that the sole of the foot always faces the ground and, therefore, cannot "see". The second uses the idea that hair does not grow on the palm of one's hands and is an exemplar of baldness,[64] *chomh maol le croí mo dhearnan* (*M*

[62] The term "publican" is conventionally implied by the literally more neutral 'of the ale'. For an example of this usage, see "Bean an Leanna", a famous song often attributed to the celebrated Irish singer Seosamh Ó hÉanaí/Joe Heaney, which has been analysed by Ó LAOIRE & WILLIAMS 2009: §§69–78.

[63] See also *chomh soineanta leis an leanbh a rugadh aréir* (*FGB s.vv. beir*, *leanbh*) 'as innocent as the baby that was born last night (i.e. a new-born babe)'.

[64] Baldness is also explained in terms of a child's bottom – *chomh bearrtha le tóin linbh* 'as bare as a child's bottom' (*M* §2388).

§2478) ‘as bald as the palm of my hand’.[65] The use of the physical extremities indicates that we use sources of which we have an acute knowledge, an understanding both of appearance and also of function. This is confirmed by a quick survey of the other body parts mentioned in comparisons, as they are all outwardly visible: *tóin* ‘backside’, *cos* ‘foot’, *súil* ‘eye’, *lámh* ‘hand’, *colainn* ‘body’ itself and *neascóid* ‘boil’. In contrast, the five vital organs (namely, the brain, heart, liver, lungs and kidneys), which are entirely interior, i.e. not directly visible to the human eye, are absent from the corpus. This is extremely surprising, for example in the omission of *croí* ‘heart’, which is of such significance as a literary trope. It could be argued that our understanding of the functioning of the vital organs and their associated systems is also less tactile.

Vehicles often expose underlying cultural and folkloristic stereotypes traditionally applied to tradesfolk, such as the butcher – *chomh ramhar le búistéara* (*C* §1420) ‘as fat as a butcher’, the tailor – *chomh bréagach le táilliúr* (*U* §1298) ‘as treacherous as a tailor’,[66] and the weaver – *chomh smeartha le fiodóir* (*C* §1410) ‘as greasy as a weaver’.[67] Vehicles related to ecclesiastical titles do not typically feature negative stereotypes, in spite of the frequent use of the priest, or minister. Unlike proverbs, all the examples relating to ‘the priest’ are positive and reflect stereotypical characteristics such as holiness, harmlessness and neatness.[68] The minister is used less frequently, although we find both positive examples regarding devotion – *chomh láidir le ministir* (*M* §2468) ‘as strong as a minister’, counterbalanced with a more negative, mocking jibe at the minister’s portliness, which is inextricably linked to the stereotype of ‘greed’ that is found in other proverbial material (MAC COINNIGH 2008: 162) – *chomh ramhar le ministir* (*M* §2494) ‘as fat as a minister’. Prejudicial stereotypes extend beyond vocational and religious parameters, however, and racial stereotypes, which may be categorised under the umbrella term of *blason populaire*,[69] also appear in relation to the English and French: *chomh fealltach le Sasanach* ‘as treacherous as an English man’ (*U* §1313) and *chomh buí le Francach* ‘as swarthy as a Frenchman’ (*C* §2742).

Proper names also feature in the comparisons, but there is a clear preference for the local character over the international. Whilst, for example, ‘Aristotle’ appears as the classical embodiment of both wisdom and fortitude, e.g. *chomh stuama le Arastol* [*sic*] (*C* §1492) ‘as prudent as Aristotle’; *chomh láidir le Harry Statle* (*C* §2274) ‘as strong as Harry Statle (= Aristotle)’, local characters, such as *Máire Bheil, Máire de Bláma, Máiria Bláca, Máirín Chrosach, Máire Fhada*[70] also feature in particular dialects. To speech communities, such local characters clearly possess a certain identifiable trait, as evidenced by their inclusion in fixed comparisons, although the parochial nature of the comparison means that it is usually unrecognisable beyond its immediate environs. Without direct knowledge of the character, it is difficult to discern the authenticity of the comparison. Such elements of ‘local colour’,[71] whilst accessible to the particular community that spawned them, are probably not typically

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[65] *chomh lom le mo bhos*, *le croí mo bhoise* ‘as bare as the palm of my hand’ (*FGB s.v. lom*^{2}).

[66] Also in *C* §1441.

[67] Weavers would have traditionally spun yarn containing lanolin (also known as ‘wool grease’) and their hands would have become greasy or oily as a result.

[68] *chomh beannaithe leis an sagart* (*M* §2387) ‘as blessed as the priest’; *chomh cneasta leis an sagart* (*U* §1303) ‘as honest as the priest’; *chomh glan le sagart* (*M* §2458) ‘as harmless as a priest’; *chomh hoiriúnach le sagart* (*M* §2490) ‘as harmless as a priest’; *chomh macánta leis an sagart* (*M* §2479) ‘as honest as the priest’; *chomh pioctha le sagart* (*M* §2492) ‘as neat as a priest’; *chomh bearrtha le sagart* (*M* §2388) ‘as clean-shaven as a priest’.

[69] See MAC COINNIGH 2008, 2013.

[70] *chomh bréagach le Máire Bheil* (*M* §2396) ‘as untruthful as Máire Bheil’; *chomh leitheadach le Máire de Bláma* (*C* §2276) ‘as vain as Máire de Bláma’; *chomh leathan le Máiria Bláca* (*C* §2276) ‘as wide as Máiria Bláca’; *chomh crosach le Máirín Chrosach* (*C* §2268) ‘as grimy (dark?) as Máirín Chrosach’; *chomh fada le muineál Mháire Fhada* (*C* §2271) ‘as long as Máire Fhada’s neck’.

[71] ROBINSON 1945: §5.

used outside regional borders and are, moreover, more unlikely to be retained in subsequent generations due to the irrelevance of the comparison. This, of course, concurs with TAYLOR's (1931) view that not only is the shelf-life of proverbial expressions in general quite short, but that those containing the name of an individual tend to lose both significance and application in the following generation.

Animals, fish, reptiles, amphibians, rodents (12%)
There are clear clusters of frequently-occurring vehicles in this category: the fox (13.4%) is the most dominant member followed by the herring (9%) and the eel (7.5%). The remaining members that have multiple occurrences (i.e. badger, bat, hedgehog, mouse, stoat, deer, salmon and trout) share frequency values of between 4.5% and 6%.

Table 8. Frequency of animal-fish-reptile-amphibian category tokens

Member	*n*	%
fox	9	13.4
herring	6	9.0
eel	5	7.5
badger, bat, hedgehog, mouse, stoat	4	6.0
deer, salmon, trout	3	4.5
other	18	26.9
TOTAL	**69**	**100**

The majority of the comparisons (62%) focuses on behavioural and sensory attributes of the vehicle. Within this grouping, there is a clear dichotomy between (i) objectively observable attributes of the vehicle such as *SPEED – chomh sciobtha le fia* (*FGB s.v. sciobtha*) 'as fleet as a deer'; *THINNESS – chomh seang le cú* (*M* §2503) 'as thin as a hound'; and (ii) culturally-determined, anthropomorphic, stereotypical attributes that have been assigned to the vehicle by humans, for example, *QUIETNESS – chomh ciúin le luich* (*M* §2408) 'as quiet as a mouse'; *SPITE – chomh naimhdeach le heasóg* (*FGB s.vv. easóg, naimhdeach*) 'as spiteful a weasel'. The latter class is more common and shows that the majority of these comparisons is based on underlying stereotypical cultural metaphors about animals, fish and reptiles, which have been promulgated in oral literature since earliest times (see PIIRAINEN 2012: 487). Many of these cultural metaphors can be traced back to antiquity, particularly to the Aesopic fables in which human qualities were frequently attributed to non-humans. It comes as no surprise that the fox (*vulpes vulpes*), as the most popular animal character of the Aesopic tradition,[72] and as the main protagonist in most of the animal tales in the *ATU* index,[73] populates the corpus with such density (13.4%). The fox is viewed as the epitome of slyness, cunning and predation, stereotypes that have appeared in popular and literary sources since classical antiquity (see nos 16–19).

16. *chomh críonna le sionnach* (*FGB s.v. críonna*)
'as cunning as a fox'
17. *chomh glic leis an sionnach* (*C* §306)
'as sly as the fox'
18. *chomh haibidh le madarua* (*M* §2378)

[72] See ARENDT 1982.
[73] See UTHER 2006: §136: '... the ATU index lists a great variation of other narratives about the fox, thus demonstrating that there are far more tales of the fox than of other animals, such as the dog or the wolf'.

'as clever as a fox'

19. *chomh rógaireach le madarua* (*M* §2497)
'as mischievous as a fox'

Interestingly, all the 'fox' comparisons focus on these anthropomorphic qualities, instead of observable physical or biological characteristics such as its colour, shape, or size. This concurs with UTHER's (2006: 151) comment about the general use of the fox in proverbial material, idioms and homilies that '… external and specific traits are less predominant interculturally than the characteristics known from olden times, such as prudence, treachery, cunningness and slyness.' We should note, however, that, in Ireland, the fox was the main threat to the domestic livestock and that these practical realities may have buttressed cultural representations of the fox as the single symbol of cunning.

The remaining examples focus on physical attributes (38%), such as *HEIGHT* – big/tall vs. small (no. 20), *SIZE* – slender vs. fat (no. 21), *SHAPE* – straight vs. crooked (no. 22), *WEIGHT* – heavy vs. light (no. 23), or some type of *TEXTURAL FEATURE* – wet, slippery, prickly (no. 24). As prototypical embodiments of these attributes, they are also, in the main, factually accurate.

20. *chomh beag le luch fhéir* (*M* §2385)
'as small as a field mouse'
21. *chomh ramhar le rón* (*M* §2494)
'as fat as a seal'
22. *chomh díreach le bradán i lár na habhann* (*M* §2427)
'as straight as a salmon in the middle of the river'
23. *chomh héadrom le liobóg leathair*[74] (*C* §1944)
'as light as a bat'
24. *chomh deilgneach le gráinneoig* (*M* §2425)
'as prickly as a hedgehog'

Tools and instruments (10.2%)

Interestingly, there is no clear clustering of vehicles in the category of tool and instruments: no item occurs more than twice (these are 'bagpipe', 'gun-barrel', 'bottle', 'needle', 'penny', 'pin', 'shilling', 'thread'). Instead, there is a broad distribution range that includes both what could be classed as commonly encountered items, e.g. 'bottle', 'clock', 'rope'; and those more uncommon instruments that are associated with a specific field of life, e.g. 'ramrod', 'whip', 'bagpipes'. The fact that most tools have a very specific function, e.g. 'a razor' = to cut, 'a ruler' = to measure, 'a clock' = to tell the time, may partly explain the broad range of vehicles. This function is highly salient in the vehicle, if not a defining physical attribute, and may motivate the *tertium* adjective, particularly in the case of infrequent vehicles. For example, the use of the 'barrel of a gun' or the 'foot of a pike' evokes the *tertium* 'straight', which corresponds with an essential obligatory attribute of a specific part of the object. The vehicles, on the whole, belong to the following areas of life: *house and housework* (no. 25); *agriculture* (no. 26); *sport and music* (no. 27); *trades* (no. 28); and *war* (no. 29):

25. *chomh cruaidh leis an bhac* (*U* §1287)
'as hard as the hob'
26. *chomh maol le buailtín* (*U* §1291)
'as blunt as a thresher'
27. *chomh lán le mála píbe* (*M* §2469)

[74] In Standard Irish, this is rendered *leadhbóg leathair.*

'as full as bagpipes'

28. *chomh domhain le méaracán táilliúra* (*M* §2429)
'as deep as a tailor's thimble'
29. *chomh díreach le bairille gunna* (*M* §2427)
'as straight as a gun's barrel'

The lack of vehicle clustering closely maps the pattern of *tertium* distribution: there are both common adjectives, e.g. *beag* 'small', *glan* 'clean', *geal* 'bright', and more specific adjectives often in the form of verbal adjectives, e.g. *sárlíonta* 'well-filled; *smeartha* 'smeared/greased'; *pollta* 'perforated'. There is no correlation between infrequent vehicles and specific adjectives, however: frequently-occurring adjectives are more likely to occur with infrequent vehicles. In Table 9, we can see a clear preference for particular adjectival qualities to be used with a tool/instrument vehicle. The high frequency of the term 'straight', which occurs in almost one-fifth of this category, and its opposite, i.e. 'crooked', is significant. These attributes occur in almost one quarter of this category (22.4%) and suggest that these visible, defining physical characteristics of tools and instruments are of paramount importance in their selection as vehicles.

Table 9. Frequency of adjectives in tool-instrument category

ADJ (*n* in rank)	Rank	*n*	*n***n*ADJ	%
díreach 'straight' (1)	1	10	10	17.2
cam 'crooked', *teann* 'tight' (2)	2	3	6	10.4
dubh 'black', *geal* 'bright' *géar* 'sharp', *daingean* 'sturdy', *oiriúnach* 'suited', *righin* 'tight', *leathan* 'wide' (7)	3	2	14	29.3
Other (28)	4	1	28	43.1
TOTAL			**58**	**100**

Vegetables (8.9%)

Vegetation has been identified by PIIRAINEN (2012: 308) as one of the most comprehensive source domains for idioms in languages. Unsurprisingly, this category is dominated by *féar* 'grass' (17.3%), typically with ground properties relating to its *GREENNESS* – *chomh glas le féar* (*C* §1943) 'as green as grass' and *PLENTY* – *chomh fairsing le féar* (*C* §3867) 'as plentiful as grass'. In the majority of other cases, vehicles are plants, flowers and fruits with high-salience, defining characteristics such as their colour (nos 30–1), texture (nos 32–3), or shape (nos 34–5):

30. *chomh dubh le sméar* (*M* §2431)
'as black as a berry'
31. *chomh dearg leis an rós* (*M* §2423)
'as red as the rose'
32. *chomh tirim le coicheann* (*C* §1949)
'as dry as straw'
33. *chomh nimhneach le dris* (*M* §2491)
'as prickly as a briar'
34. *chomh caol le gáinne* (*FGB s.v. gáinne*)
'as slender as a rush'
35. *chomh tiubh le dair* (*M* §2515)
'as thick as oak'

Observations of visually-recognisable characteristics of natural phenomena are the main motivation for vehicle-choice in this category, and the majority are simple literal comparisons for the purposes of explication.

Food and domestic appliances (5.1%)
Food, along with shelter and clothing, is one of the basic human needs, and it is of little surprise that it has influenced the choice of vehicles in comparisons. Despite our biological similarity, however, it appears that the wide spectrum of international cultural diversity in food practices has prevented core vehicles from achieving international recognition (see PIIRAINEN & BALÁZSI 2016: 301). The corpus shows that there is a discernable preference for localised choices in food vehicles. Two general conclusions may be made about Irish token types: (i) food types appear to be culturally-bound, rarely beyond the basic diet of dairy (milk) and vegetables (interestingly, meat does not feature); and (ii) vehicles are literal, prototypical examples of ground adjectives relating to colour, texture, size and price.

36. *chomh bog le him* (*M* §2395)
'as soft as butter'
37. *chomh bán le bainne* (*M* §2384)
'as white as milk'
38. *chomh fliuch leis an gcabáiste glas* (*M* §2444)
'as wet as green cabbage'
39. *chomh daor le uibheacha seisiúin* (*C* §704)
'as dear as session eggs'[75]

It should be noted that there is one internationally-attested example in this category, namely *chomh milis le mil* (M §2483) (*FGB s.v. milis*) 'as sweet as honey', which is found in Latin, e.g. *oh melle dulci dulcior tu es* (*OLD s.v. mel*), Ancient Greek (*GEL s.v. μέλι*) and the Bible, e.g. *Revelation* 10:9:[76]

> And I went unto the angel, and said unto him, Give me the little book. And he said unto me, Take *it*, and eat it up; and it shall make thy belly bitter, but it shall be in thy mouth 'sweet as honey' [my quotation marks].

This expression has become a literary trope in English since medieval times, occurring frequently in later literary sources, for example Shakespeare's work during the Renaissance.[77]

Wild birds (3.8%)

[75] The term "session" refers to the "Quarter sessions" which were local courts traditionally heard four times a year. During the time of these courts, judges, solicitors and their legal teams had to be fed, so the demand on basic foodstuffs, such as eggs, often caused an increase in price.

[76] Other examples in the *BIBLE* (*KJV*) include – ***Ezekiel* 3:3**: And he said unto me, Son of man, cause thy belly to eat, and fill thy bowels with this roll that I give thee. Then did I eat *it*; and it was in my mouth 'as honey for sweetness' [my quotation marks]. ***Psalm* 19:10**: More to be desired *are they* than gold, yea, than much fine gold: 'sweeter also than honey' [my quotation marks] and the honeycomb. ***Psalm* 119:103**: How sweet are thy words unto my taste! *yea*, '*sweeter* than honey' [my quotation marks] to my mouth!

[77] *SHAKESPEARE* – ***Henry IV*, Part 1, Act 1, Scene 2:** As the honey of Hybla, my old lad of the castle. And is not a buff jerkin a most sweet robe of durance? (BEVINGTON 1987: §135).

Wild birds are relatively uncommon in comparisons, although the category has multiple occurrences of the raven, wren and cuckoo. The majority of the qualities attached to the birds are based on simple observations of colour, size, sight and musicality, although anthropomorphic stereotypes relating to the vanity of the cuckoo and the carefree starling are also to be found. The vanity of the cuckoo can be traced back to medieval tradition when it was thought that he was singing his own name (WOOLGAR 2006: 68), whilst the carefree starling is a simple anthropomorphic projection related to its casual flight.

40. *chomh dubh leis an bhfiach* (*FGB s.v. fiach*)
'as black as a raven'
41. *chomh beag le dreoilín* (*M* §2385)
'as small as a wren'
42. chomh géar-radharcach le gainéad (*M* §2391)
'as sharp-sighted as a gannet'
43. *chomh binn leis an gcuach* (*M* §2391)
'as melodious as a cuckoo'
44. *chomh leitheadach leis na cuacha* (*FGB s.v. leitheadach*)[78]
'as conceited as the cuckoos'
45. *chomh haerach le druid* (*FGB s.v. aerach*)
'as carefree as a starling'

Irish mythology (3.4%)
Saga legends and folktales relating to Ireland feature in a small number of comparisons (3.4%). These are predominantly characters once fêted in medieval Irish hero tales, particularly the Ulster cycle (*An rúraíocht*) and the Fenian cycle (*An fhiannaíocht*), and who occur as typical embodiments of warrior prowess such as the bravery and strength of archetypal warriors *Fionn mac Cumhaill* and *Goll Mór mac Moirne*. Minor figures from the tradition such as the duplicitous *Giolla deacair* (also known as *Áb(h)artach*) and the bountiful milk-producing cow *An Glas Gaibhneach* also appear. Unsurprisingly, the pervasive and omnipotent *Cailleach Bhéarra* (The hag of Beara), who has been termed 'the most famous old lady in Irish literature' (WAGNER 1981: 6), features in examples related to reputed immorality and immortality, being the 'epitome of longevity in passing repeatedly through the cycle of youth and age' (Ó CRUALAOICH 1988: 153).

46. *chomh calma le Fionn mac Cumhaill* (*U* §1315)
'as brave as Finn Mc Cool'
47. chomh *láidir le Goll Mór mac Moirne* (*C* §2273)
'as strong as Goll Mór Mac Moirne'
48. *chomh leisciúil leis an nGiolla Deacair*[79] (*M* §2472)
'as lazy as the Difficult Servant'
49. *chomh sean le Cailleach Bhéarra* (*C* §1107)[80]
'as old as the Hag of Beara'

[78] An Irish equivalent of 'as proud as a peacock'.

[79] '**Abarta** (Ábartach, Ábhartach) Irish god. This minor figure in Irish mythology–one of the Formorians, an ancient and monstrous race–appears in texts devoted to the band of heroes called the Fianna. Ambitious to join the warrior elite, Abarta came to them pretending to be a lazy man in search of a job. Fionn Mac Cumhaill, leader of the Fianna, inexplicably agreed to take him into service, calling him Giolla Deacair, or 'lazy servant'. Abarta tricked the Fianna into mounting his apparently frail old horse and carried them away to the otherworld. There he held them hostage until Fionn, after many magical adventures and battles, located and freed them. After this crime, Fionn did not offer Abarta membership in his band', MONAGHAN 2009: §1.

[80] Var. *chomh sean leis an Chailleach Bhéarra* 'as old as the Hag of Beara' (*U* §1306)

50. *chomh fairsing le peacaí na Caillí Béarra* (*C* §1106)
'as plentiful as the sins of the Hag of Beara'
51. *chomh bleachtmhar leis an nGlas Ghaibhneach* (*M* §2392)
'as abounding in milk as the Glas Gaibhneach'

It seems clear that these nationally-known tales had some purchase within the proverbial mind, due to the pervasiveness of these stories in the oral tradition. Nevertheless, local tales and stories are equally numerous, even though it is unlikely that they would have had the same type of widespread dissemination as the examples above. For example, the expression *chomh glic le cearrbhach na súgán* (*C* §3299) 'as cute as the gambler of the straw-ropes' relates to a gambler who, in local lore (in County Mayo),[81] purportedly beat the Devil playing cards, and who could outwit Aristotle (he was the local personification of sublime shrewdness).

Church life, religious and other beliefs (3.2%)
Proverbial comparisons relating church life, religious and superstitious beliefs are found in less than one-thirtieth of the corpus (3.2%). This figure is much lower than both ARORA's statistics for Spanish[82] and TAYLOR's for American-English (which are both approximately 10%),[83] but this in itself is not surprising if we accept that there is a non-correlation between biblical idiomatic language and levels of the religiosity based on "national" borders. It is clear that references to the Bible are quite common although, as can be seen in SVARTENGREN (1918: 424–425), TAYLOR (1954: 8) and ARORA (1977: 18), the New Testament is less prominent than the Old Testament. The vehicle often contains the proper names of well-known biblical characters, whilst a salient attribute of their personality or physique appears as the ground. The ground-vehicle linkage is not arbitrary, but instead the result of the condensation of well-known, biblical stories, most prominently: the wisdom of Solomon – *chomh ciallmhar le Sola* (*M* §2406);[84] the patience of Job – *chomh foighneach le Iób* (*M* §2446), and the strength of Samson – *chomh láidir le Samson* (*C* §2275). These, if somewhat hackneyed – or, as TAYLOR (1956: 8) puts it, 'colourless and restricted' – are well-established comparisons, which can be easily traced back to their biblical source.[85] This category of

[81] Gleann Sál, Partraí, Co. Mhaigh Eo (Uí BHRAONÁIN 2010: §223).
[82] It is important to note that religious references were much higher in the comparisons used by Ricardo Palma in his *Tradiciones peruanas* (*circa* 20%), but that this reflects a deliberate, idiolectal use in literature as opposed to any broad collection from a linguistic community (see ARORA 1966: §6).
[83] 'Arora also points out that 10% of the expressions contain religious references to God, Christ, Cain, Adam and, in particular, the devil. Archer Taylor (see TAYLOR 1954: §8) has shown this is also true for English, and a cursory glance into collections of proverbial comparisons of other languages indicates a similar preoccupation with religious vocabulary', MIEDER 1979: §§127–8.
[84] Solomon is the most frequently mentioned biblical character in the Irish comparative material. Other forms found in the corpus are *chomh críonna le Solamh* (*C* §2267) 'as wise as Solomon' and *chomh éifeachtúil* [*sic*] *le Sola* (*M* §2436) 'as effectual as Solomon'.
[85] **Solomon, *1 Kings* 3**: the cultural foundation of this motif relates to the story in *1 Kings* 3:16–28 in which the King of Israel, Solomon, is asked to judge which of two women should be awarded custody of a disputed child. Solomon suggests cutting the child in two and giving half to each woman. When the real mother refuses, she is identified as the true mother and given custody. The idiom 'wisdom/judgment of Solomon' is widespread in the languages of Europe, although the proverbial comparison from which it derives is otherwise only found in Dutch and Bosnian – Dutch *zo wijs als Salomo*, and Bosnian *pametan kao Solomon* '(as) wise as Solomon' (see PIIRAINEN 2012: 194 for a full list of forms). **Job, *James* 5:11**: the patience of Job refers to people's ability to remain patient and to 'stand fast in their trials and afflictions' (GARRETT 1999: §258). The Old Testament character of Job is identified in *James* 5:10–11 as a prime example of someone with great patience, especially in the face of a series of trials and misfortunes, such as losing his wealth and children in a single day; being covered in painful sores; and his friends falsely accusing him of wrongdoing and blaming his lack of repentance as the source of his trouble (*Job* 2:9–12). James (*James*

simile alludes directly to biblical stories or summarises key events, and although the stories may themselves be forgotten, the "kernel" remains in what can be described as 'zero-grade truncated forms' (German 'Schwundstufe') of the tales (PIIRAINEN 2012: 253).

In contrast to these widely-distributed comparisons, there are also allusions to less well-known biblical stories which, in decontextualised form, display high levels of "opaqueness" – in that the relationship between the vehicle elements and the ground is not apparent. [86] For example, in the comparison *chomh mall le teachtaireacht an fhiaigh ón Áirc* (*C* §3810) 'as late/slow as the raven's errand from the Ark', there is no clear relationship between the ground trope based on *LATENESS* and the obscure vehicle 'raven's message from the Ark'. One could, of course, infer a meaning based on the typical comparative structure, but this would involve ignoring the possibility of an ironic reading (see 6.3). The true meaning is, therefore, non-decipherable without knowledge of the biblical tale. The story, of course, contains the "postdiluvial reconnaissance motif" A2234.1.1,[87] and relates to Noah ordering the raven to leave his Ark on a reconnaissance excursion to find out if the floods have abated. The raven, depending on the source, either does not return or delays as he scavenges for carrion. The raven is subsequently punished by either having its colour turned from white to black, or having to suffer thirst and having its bill broken. As a result of this failure, the raven is viewed in a negative light, both in cultural and folkloristic beliefs, and the proverbial comparison thus relates the idea of "extreme lateness".[88]

Interestingly, God and the Devil,[89] two of the iconic deities of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, are not very common in the comparisons although the Devil is three times more frequent. This is surprising for, if we accept the principle that the vehicle is typically the superlative embodiment of the ground quality, one would logically expect these two figures, which purportedly embody superlative "good" and "evil", respectively, to be featured extensively. The examples in the corpus generally concur with this pattern, however: the Devil is portrayed as being malevolent, wicked and cunning, e.g. *chomh dubh leis an diabhal* (*C* §2525) 'as evil as the Devil', *chomh gránna leis an ndiabhal* (*M* §2461) 'as wicked as the Devil', and *chomh glic leis an áibhirseoir* (*M* §2460) 'as cunning as the Devil';[90] whilst God

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5:10–11) (*KJV*) highlights Job's patience with the following: 'Take, my brethren, the prophets, who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for an example of suffering affliction, and of patience. Behold, we count them happy which endure. Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy'. **Samson, *Judges* 13–16**: Samson, one of the judges of the Ancient Israelites is given supernatural power by God so that he can commit superhuman feats of strength to defend his people against the Philistines. The story is told in *Judges* 13:5 (*KJV*), where his mother, wife of Manoah, is visited by an angel who makes her the following promise: 'For, lo, thou shalt conceive, and bear a son; and no rasor shall come on his head: for the child shall be a Nazarite unto God from the womb: and he shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines'.

[86] For an explanation of the term "opaqueness" in linguistics, see CACCIARI & GLUCKSBERG 1991: §217.

[87] This appears in two entries in *MIFL* §274 as 'A2234.1. A2234.1. *Raven does not return to Noah: must suffer thirst and break bill.* (Cf. A2231.2.1, A2411.2.1.5, A2435.4.3.)–Variant: he is cursed to be black or to eat carrion. *Köhler-Bolte I 3; Dh I 284; Irish myth: Cross., and A2234.1.1. A2234.1.1. *Raven does not return to ark in obedience to Noah: black color is resulting punishment.* Irish myth: Cross; Jewish: Neuman'. See ROOTH 1962 for a comprehensive examination of the distribution of this motif. She suggests that Catholic missionaries were responsible for bringing the motif to the New World. Recent work by KOROTAEV *et al.* 2006 argues, however, that the motif existed in the New World prior to the European colonisation of the Americas.

[88] Cf. *Is é teachtaireacht an fhéich ón Áirc agat é* (of dilatory messenger), it has taken you a long time to complete your errand (*FGB s.v. teachtaireacht*).

[89] For a list of English literary idioms (in the period 1920–1937) featuring the Devil, see WHITING 1938b: §§201–47.

[90] Other examples relating to the devil found in *FGB* are *chomh dána leis an diabhal* (*FGB s.v. dána*) 'as bold as the devil' and *chomh dubh, glic, bréagach leis an diabhal* (*FGB s.v. diabhal*) 'as black, cunning, false, as the devil'.

is munificent in his mercy – e.g. *chomh fairsing le Dia faoina ghrásta* (*C* §2475) 'as generous as God with his grace'. Strangely, it appears munificence is not universal, however, for in one example this generosity is qualified in an antonymic comparison *chomh gann le grásta Dé i dteampall Gallda* (*C* §5256) 'as scarce as God's grace in a foreign church', which may possibly be evidence of an underlying pro-Catholic bias.[91] Angels are also scarce in this material and are only featured in one example – *chomh mánla le haingeal* 'as gentle as an angel' (*FGB s.v. mánla*).

The evidence shows clearly that biblical references are not a typical source domain for comparisons, in spite of the fact that figures such as God, the Devil and angels are superlative embodiments of qualities from either polarity of the moral spectrum. The reason for this absence, I believe, does not lie in the puritanism of the cultural-religious sphere as proposed by SVARTENGREN (1918: 424–5) – because it is an accepted fact that the Irish-speaking population of the 19th and 20th centuries was overwhelmingly Christian – but instead in the socio-linguistic function of the comparisons. It has already been established that the source domain should be the epitome of the ground quality (good, badness, evil), but another functional aspect of proverbial comparisons requires the use of a source domain that clarifies and illuminates the meaning of the target. One could argue, therefore, that the use of abstract concepts, especially those which individuals have not experienced with their own senses and which have largely been communicated as mystic images, does not work effectively as a source domain.[92]

6. Humour in proverbial comparisons

As we have seen in Section 4.1, the vehicle is typically an exemplar of the ground quality, but in humorous comparisons, the vehicle is subversive: it deviates from the rationally accepted norms. Incongruous vehicles accentuate a particular similarity (or set of peculiarities) for the purpose of this humour. Instead of clarifying, however, the vehicles obscure, and humour results from the subsequent "expectation violation".[93] The Irish corpus shows clear patterns in the distribution of these unconventional vehicles and the ways in which humour is created in the comparisons. We can, broadly speaking, examine these along the categories outlined by NORRICK 1987a, namely: whimsical vehicles, overstatement, punning and ironic comparisons.

6.1 Whimsical vehicles

The first type is the "whimsical vehicle", which describes an improbable, sometimes even impossible, situation. The vehicles are highly unconventional, often even bordering on the absurd, and provide images that are difficult to visualise in reality. In these farcical, attention-catching comparisons, pigs climb ladders, cats wear shoes and carry pouches, and humans sleep with pigs:

52. *chomh ciotach le muc ag dul suas dréimire* (*C* §3876)
'as awkward as a pig going up a ladder'
53. *chomh ríméadach le cat a mbeadh bróga air* (*C* §1379)
'as proud as a cat wearing shoes';

[91] For an examination of religious slurs in Irish *blason populaire*, see MAC COINNIGH 2013.

[92] I have not commented on patterns in the remaining sections of the table (i.e. below 3.2%) as the frequencies were too low to provide significant examples of patterns.

[93] For the use of humour in similes, see TAYLOR 1954; NORRICK 1986a, 1987a; FISHLOV 1992; MOON 2008; and VEALE 2013.

54. *chomh postúil le cat a mbeadh póca air* (*C* §1378)
'as conceited as a cat with a pouch/pocket'
55. *chomh sona leis an té a chodail le muc* (*C* §3880)
'as happy as the person who slept with a pig'.

Single-word vehicles are often embellished by adding an absurd modifier, for example, 'cat' is intensified by placing a 'saddle' on it, i.e. *chomh místuama le cat a mbeadh srathar air* (*C* §2433) 'as clumsy as a cat wearing a saddle'. The incongruity derives from the schema conflict (NORRICK 1986a: 229–230) between the schema associated with our understanding of the typical use of a saddle and the schema provided by the atypical image in the vehicle. For example, a saddle is used for transporting weight (human or material) and is typically associated with the horse; this is the natural order. And so, to imagine a cat wearing a saddle and carrying goods would be incongruous to our understanding of nature. A cat is physically incapable of using a saddle, hence the 'clumsiness'. The proposition is deviant and the deviance invokes absurdity. From the perspective of alethic possibility, of course, this is not an impossible proposition – one could imagine some type of harness for a cat – but that, at best, it is highly improbable.[94]

Care should be taken with metaphorical soubriquets, however, for these can sometimes be misinterpreted as incongruent vehicles. A case in point is *búistéara an tsléibhe* 'mountain butcher', which appears as *chomh luainneach le búistéara an tsléibhe* (*C* §309) 'as quick as the butcher of the mountain'. When taken literally this vehicle is clearly incongruous – why is there a butcher on the mountain? And how is he/she a prototypical example of the trope of 'quickness'? The phrase *búistéara an tsléibhe* 'mountain butcher' is not recorded in available printed sources,[95] nor is it to be found in online searches of Irish-language material.[96] However, the metaphorical processing of the salient characteristics of the domain 'butcher', especially the functional attribute of 'killing', leads to the clear inference that this is 'the fox'. This extra metaphorical layering of the vehicle is thus an effective means of creating a novel comparison out of the more explicit canonical form 'as quick as a fox'.

6.2 Over-statement

Vehicles are often modified to include superfluous details that overstate the information necessary for the comparison. The hyperbole in these exaggerated comparisons often invokes a type of pithy humour. Broadly speaking, the level of humour will correlate with the level of hyperbole involved in the vehicle. In these examples, the intensified image in the vehicle is often striking, either because of vivid memorable imagery (nos 56–8) or, alternatively, because it invokes coarseness in macabre or scatological referends (nos 59–62).

56. *chomh dona leis an tóin thiar de dharadaol* (*C* §1908)
'as bad as the backside of a devil's coach-horse'
57. *chomh dorcha le tóin an phúca* (*M* §2430)
'as dark as a pooka's backside'

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[94] The typical application of the expression, according to Ó MÁILLE (Uí BHRAONÁIN 2010: §159), i.e. to indicate that an individual is doing a type of work with which he/she is unaccustomed, supports this view. This type of comparison is not peculiar to Irish, of course, as it is a variant of the most widely internationally distributed form of this type i.e. the harnessing of a saddle to a pig; cf. KRIKMANN 2001: §77.

[95] At least according to the data in *Nua-chorpas na hÉireann*, http://focloir.sketchengine.co.uk/run.cgi/index.

[96] The construction "butcher of X" is well-attested as a pejorative nickname in English sources, particularly in relation to individuals accused of alleged war crimes. For example the following are accessible from a simple search on www.google.com using the wildcard search 'butcher of *': The Butcher of Baghdad (Saddam Hussein); the Butcher of Beirut (Ariel Sharon); The Butcher of Benghazi (Hilary Rodham Clinton); The Butcher of Bosnia (Radovan Karadžić), and the Butcher of Lyon (Klaus Barbie).

58. *chomh cantalach le dris a mbeadh a dhá ceann sa talamh* (*C* §3018)
'as querulous as a briar with its two ends in the ground';
59. *chomh ramhar le poll mo thóna* (*M* §2495)
'as thick as the hole of my backside';
60. *chomh bréan le corp as an uaigh* (*M* §2397)
'as rotten as a corpse taken from the grave';
61. *chomh socair le mada a mbeadh bloc air* (*C* §3566)
'as quiet as a dog with a block on it';
62. *chomh dúinte le súil muice mairbhe* (*C* §3879)
'as closed as a dead pig's eye'.

6.3 Ironic comparisons

Humour is also manifested in ironic comparisons containing a vehicle that is easily imagined yet does not illustrate the ground adjective: it may not possess the adjective at all, or it may actually demonstrate the opposite. Therefore, when a vehicle fails to illustrate the ground adjective, the expected function fails also, and pithy humour is the result. There are numerous examples of these contradictory comparisons in English, e.g. 'as clear as mud', but surprisingly, there is only one identifiable example of irony in the Irish material, and it is on the lowest level of the ironic spectrum:

63. *chomh falsa le maide lofa* (*M* §2441)
'as lazy as a rotten stick

It could be suggested that this is because ironic comparisons are a modern phenomenon, i.e. they are modern transformations of traditional expressions, similar to the way that other proverbial forms, particularly Wellerisms and anti-proverbs, have been adapted and updated for a different function. This corpus, which does not include modern material beyond the mid-twentieth century,[97] would support that conclusion, if it is in fact valid.

6.4 Punning comparison

In punning comparisons, the ground predicate has two distinct applications – one is to the topic and the other to the vehicle. The conflict between literal and metaphorical readings of these schemas permits a resolution that often results in humour. For example, in 'John is thick as a plank', the ground 'thick' refers to (i) the vehicle 'plank', i.e. a wooden piece of wood that is broad/deep [literal]; and (ii) the topic 'John', i.e. 'unintelligent' [figurative].[98] Strictly speaking, the pun is only identifiable through the explicit contextual use of a topic so, insofar as the corpus is concerned, there are no identifiable punning comparisons. Speakers immediately recognise the felicitous or non-felicitous use of these comparisons, however, and this awareness prevents them using a punning comparison in literal situations and *vice versa*. The following examples are well-attested punning comparisons, which, although now conventionalised, demonstrate the process:

64. *chomh cam le cos deiridh an mhadra* (*C* §3565)
'as crooked [= dishonest] as the dog's hind leg'
65. *chomh nimhneach le dris* (*M* §2491)
'as painful [= spiteful] as a thorn'

[97] In natural speech, of course, a regular proverbial comparison can be used ironically to indicate the opposite, but this is contextually bound and requires a topic. This is beyond the scope of this present study, although some well-attested examples are mentioned in 6.4 for the purposes of demonstrating usage.

[98] See NORRICK 1987a: §§182–3.

66. *chomh glan le sagart* (*M* §2458)
'as clean [= innocent] as a priest'
67. *chomh glas le féar* (*C* §1943)
'as green [= gullible] as the grass'

7. Conclusions

The first general conclusion we can draw about Irish comparisons is that, in the main, they are based on the same type of adjectival tropes and noun phrases that appear in other languages such as English (both UK and American), Spanish and Russian.[99] There is a strong tendency towards literal propositions, and the material is dominated by adjectives that are difficult to describe digitally, i.e. according to discrete attributes, and so they must be understood in relation to prototypical objects that demonstrate their quality. The wide distribution of individual ground adjectives (there is a total of 206 adjectives in relation to 585 comparisons) suggests both a lack of clustering around single concepts and a broad proverbial repertoire dealing with an extensive range of ground qualities. The high-frequency adjectives, such as 'black', 'white', 'long' and 'sharp', follow international patterns identified by NORRICK (1987b) and TAYLOR (1954), in which "directly perceived qualities" are selected as grounds. The dearth of analyses of comparison types prohibits comprehensive cross-linguistic comparisons, but it is clear that there are some identifiable interlingual differences. For example, whilst Irish appears similar to English in the frequency of colours (both 9%), there is a significant difference in the overall percentage of directly observable qualities (25% in English vs. 47% in Irish). This suggests that the Irish language is more prone to objective literal comparisons as opposed to any subjective opinions about character judgements.

Vehicles are, predominantly, familiar objects that are the epitome of the adjectival trope and which, when used in context, clarify the topic. If we accept that direct perception of our environment is one of the most salient ways in which we acquire knowledge of the world (VEALE, HAO & LI 2008: 523), it is unsurprising that vehicle-choice in Irish displays a clear preference for the agrarian, the rural and the pastoral, reflecting a lifestyle that is highly reflective of the land and landscape, as well as contemporary (i.e. 19th- and early 20th-century) socio-economic and cultural mores. Our evidence shows, for example, that there is a particular attachment to the category of the natural world – based on the Empedoclean fourfold division of elementary roots: earth, water, air and fire – as a source domain for vehicles. The ubiquity of geographical, topographical and elementary phenomena clearly motivates vehicle-choice, and this is not unusual: it also fits with the general trend in the figurative lexicon of European languages to focus idiomatic expressions on the natural domains (PIIRAINEN 2012: 323). Furthermore, the high salience of domestic animals, once again, corresponds with a broader European tradition of using nouns like *cat*, *dog* and *pig* as vehicles, yet it is also an example of how Ireland is part of a wider European literary, folkloristic and mythological tradition that features similar anthropomorphic interpretations of animals' behaviour, e.g. the fox as the embodiment of slyness, cunning and predation. References to food types, domestic appliances, tools and instruments, which reflect a rural way of life, are typically literal vehicles that represent the ground adjective as a salient feature. On occasion, however, it is clear that semiotisations from literary tradition and well-known indigenous folk narratives have influenced the vehicle-choice, e.g. the Ulster cycle (*An rúraíocht*) and the Fenian cycle (*An fhiannaíocht*). Other less frequently-used vehicles

[99] TAYLOR 1954; ANDERSSON 1971; ARORA 1977; OGOL′CEV 1978; and NORRICK 1986b.

relate to a broader and more significant pan-European literary tradition that owes its roots to classical Greek and Roman sources, including Aesop's fables and the Bible, which have been disseminated widely due to intertextual processes. It is noticeable that the category "human beings", whilst highlighting the directly observable qualities of vehicles (e.g. age, gender, name, part of the body), also facilitates a higher degree of subjectivity, including assumptions and stereotypes about gender, trades, religious orders, nations and local characters, which reflect what ROBINSON (1945: 5) has termed 'local color'.

Whilst cognitive choices clearly motivate the choice of both the ground and the vehicle, prosodic considerations also feature, particularly in adjective choice where monosyllabic adjectives are the most common (52%). There is also a clear correlation between syllabic complexity and frequency: high-frequency adjectives tend to be typically monosyllabic, whilst low-frequency adjectives are more often polysyllabic. Furthermore, it could be suggested that this preference for simplicity in syllabic choice is the reason why the formula *chomh* + ADJ + *le* + NP has been lexicalised in Irish, i.e. that short, monosyllabic words assist in the acquisition and recall of comparisons. As a linking device, alliteration is also important and features in almost one in ten examples; this indicates that the syntactic structure of the comparison is clearly amenable to the repetition of initial sounds. Significantly, however, rhyme is entirely absent in comparisons. This is possibly due to the relatively fixed structure of the Irish comparison, in which there are only single comparisons, which limits the insertion of lexical items to ground and vehicle slots.

The vehicle has quite a different function in (pithy) humorous comparisons, where it may obscure, negate, or contradict the adjectival trope. The expectation violation due to the schema conflict (expected vs. actual) provides a context for this pithy humour. It is interesting that, although there are examples of overstatement and absurdity in the material, the two other common forms of pithy humour, i.e. irony and puns, are almost totally absent. It may be the case that such transformations of traditional expressions are a relatively modern phenomenon and, thus, are not found in this corpus of material from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Alternatively, it could be hypothesised that proverbial comparisons are not in current speech – or that the proverbial repertoire of the linguistic community is so limited – that such transformations are not possible. This, of course, would raise further questions about the nature of paremiological minima in Irish in general, but these are questions beyond the scope of the present study. Moreover, for any definitive conclusions about the use of proverbial comparisons in language and their role within the proverbial lexicon of European languages, more comprehensive cross-linguistic analyses are required. It is hoped that this current examination will contribute an initial step in this general direction and that further analyses of older Irish-language material, for example in O'RAHILLY'S (1922: 147–168) bibliography of proverbial material in literature, will supplement the conclusions drawn here.

Appendices

Table 1 (extended). Frequency of *ground* type in the Irish corpus

		Frequency		
Ground (*n* of ADJ in rank)	Rank	*n*	*n***n*ADJ	%
dubh (1)	1	16	16	2.7
fada, geal (2)	2	15	30	5.1
díreach (1)	3	13	13	2.2
géar, ramhar (2)	4	12	24	4.1
láidir (1)	5	11	11	1.9
bréagach, éadrom (2)	6	10	20	3.4
ard, fuar (2)	7	9	18	3.1
cam, glic, tiubh (3)	8	8	24	4.1
ciúin, fairsing, righin, sean(da), sleamhain, (5)	9	7	35	6.0
bán, crua(idh), dall, dána, fliuch, glan, glas, lag, tirim (9)	10	6	54	9.2
beag, bodhar, buí, caol, críonna, daingean, dearg, leathan, mín, searbh (10)	11	5	50	8.5
beo, binn, bréan, cantalach, domhain, dúr, gnóthach, éasca(idh), liath, lom, luaineach, mall, marbh, mion, mór, tanaí, teann (17)	12	4	68	11.6
bog, caoch, corrthónach, daor, díomhaoin, dona, flúirseach, folláin, gasta, goirt, oiriúnach, luath, macánta, nimhneach, seang, siúrálta, trom (17)	13	3	51	8.7
aerach, aibidh, aosta, balbh, beannaithe, bearrtha, bocht, calma, casta, ciotach, cneasta, colgach, cráite, crosach, crosta, cruinn, dorcha, falsa, fial, fíor, foighdeach, gangaideach, gann, gorm, lán, leitheadach, leisciúil, líonmhar, mall, meidhreach, pioctha, saibhir, slán, smeartha, socair, sona, stuama, te (38)	14	2	76	13.0
baoth, beadaí, beathaithe, bisiúil, bleachtmhar, bradach, bruidiúil, buan, ceangailte, ceanndána, ceart, ceolmhar, ciallmhar, cinnte, cliste, cnaptha, coilgneach, coir, confach, contúirteach, cothrom, cruógach, cuileach, cúlánta, cúthal, daibhir, dealraitheach, deas, deilgneach, dian, díbhirceach, dícheallach, díonmhar, discréideach, dlúth, dothóigthe, dúinte, éifeachtúil, fadálach, faiteach, fealltach, fiáin, folamh, frithir, gaelach, garbh, geanúil, géar-radharcach, gearr, giogach, gliocach, gránna, greamaithe, guairdeallach, attha, éaganta, imeartha, ionraic, íseal, úr, lách, leamh, leochaileach, líonta, luathintinneach, mánla, meanmnach, milis, millte, mínáireach, místuama, modhúil, mómhar, naimhdeach, neamhurchóideach, pollta, postúil, ríméadach, rite, rógaireach, rua, sámh, saothrach, sárlíonta, sciobtha, siúlach, slim sleamhain, soiléir, soineanta, súgach, tacúil, téagrach, tine, tréan, tuirseach, tur (96)	15	1	96	16.4
TOTAL			**585**	**100**

Table 3 (extended). Frequency of *vehicle* types in the Irish corpus

		Frequency		
Vehicle type (*n* of N in rank)	Rank	*n*	*n***n*N	%
cat (1)	1	15	15	2.6
cearc, fear (2)	2	10	20	3.4
muc, madarua (2)	3	9	18	3.1

cloch (1)	4	8	8	1.4
bean, féar, sagart (3)	5	7	21	3.6
beach, scadán, gabhar, luchóg (4)	6	6	24	4.1
cnoc, diabhal, éan, eascann, easóg, farraige, gráinneog, madra, méar (9)	7	5	45	7.7
an té, asal, balla, bó, capall, carraig, cú, fiach, gaineamh, gaoth, grian, lá, leac, mála, tine (15)	8	4	60	10.3
coinín, bac, bradán, breac, broc, bróg, cailín, ceo, crann, , dreoilín, dris, fia, gé, giorria, im, plúr, slis, sneachta, Sola, tóin, uan, ubh, uisce (23)	9	3	69	11.8
bainne, bairneach, bás, buidéal, cailc, clann, clár, clúmh, cos, cuach, cuileann, damh, daol, deoir, eala, fíoruisce, frog, fuil, fuip, gáinne, gealach, gealbhan, Goll, gunna, iolar, lítis, loch, ministir, múille, pic, pingin, pocaid, Poll Tí Liabáin, reithe, riail, scilling, seilimide, snaois, snáthaid, spideog, súil, tarbh (43)	10	2	86	14.7
abhlainn, aingeal, áirbhiseoir, airgead, airne, amadán, aoileach, aol, aprún, Arastol, art, bacach, bairille, barrach, bhaighear, bia, binn, bior, biorán, bís, bláth, bliain, bodhrán, bogha, boimbéal, bord, bos, bosca [na faoistine], bráthair, brocamas, broideadh, buachalán, buailtín, búistéara, bunóic, cabáiste, caid, Cailleach Bhéarra, caisleán, calthóg, camán, camras, canach, cat crainn, Ceannaí Fionn, ceannbhán, cearrbhach, cleite, clog, cnap, cnúdán, coicheann, colainn, corcán, corp, creamh, criathar, criostal, cruimh, cuireadh, cuiteog, cúr, dair, damhain, daradaol, dath, Déamar, dearna, dia, díle, domhnach, domlas, dreancais, drithle, drochaimsir, druid, duilliúir, duine, éag, eidhinn, fáinne, faoch, farrchat, feag, Féilim, feochadán, Fiarac, fideog, fíodóir, Fionn Mac Cumhaill, fírinne, focal, francach, frídín, fuiseog, ga (gréine), gad, gainéad, gandal, garraí [Bháitéir], geamhar, geansaí, gearrán, Giolla Deacair, Glas Gabhneach, gloine, grásta, grean, gruth, gual, Harry Statle, iarann, iarta, intinn, Iób, lámh, lámhainn, liathróid, líbín, lil, linn, liobóg, líon, liopadaileap, lóchán, lon, long, luaidhe, luath, lúbán, lúidín [an phíobaire], mac tire, maide, Máire [Bheil], Máire [de Bláma], Máiria [Bláca], Máirín [Chrosach], mart, meánlae, méaracán, mil, móin, muineál, naomh, neascóid, nimh, nóinín, oíche [Fhéile Fionnáin], ór, peaca, péatar, píc, pluais, plúirín, poll, poorhouse, prás, práta, púdar, ráithe, raithneach, rámhainn, rásúr, reilig, réiltín, roc, rón, rós, sac, sáile, salann, Samson, Sasanach, scailliúin, scarlóid, scéal, sciathán, seabhac, seabhán goirt, seachtain, Seán Deirg, Seán Mór, searrach, Seoirse, sicín, sioc, síoda, slat, sluaiste, smólach, snáith, soiscéal, solas, sop, spéir, sponc, spríos, sruthán, stail, stoca, sú, súch, tae, táilliúr, táithfhéileann, talamh, teach, téad, tobac, tobar, tor, tower [Cheann Gólaim], tráithnín, trompa, tuairgnín, tuar ceatha, tuil, uaigh, urchar, watch (220)	11	1	220	37.6
TOTAL			**585**	**100**

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