DISEASE METAPHORS IN JOURNALISTIC DISCOURSE

Alina ȚENESCU
Senior Lecturer, PhD, University of Craiova
alinatenescu@gmail.com

Abstract

Drawing on journalistic texts that make use of illness as metaphor for troublesome social, cultural, political, ethnic, religious phenomena which call for drastic measures, this paper aims to analyze and classify metaphors and images that frame the perception and experience of serious social issues, poverty, political, ethnic crisis and so on in terms of disease.

Not only do we examine the main aspects of figurative language associated with illness and disease used by journalists in media discourse, but we also rely upon an approach based on conceptual metaphor theory when we analyze and classify conceptual metaphors related to illness. We will illustrate the identified categories by examples taken from a corpus of excerpts of journalistic discourse.

Our main objective is defined by the organization of conceptualizations of social, political, cultural issues into several categories of cognitive metaphors related to disease, applying the model of analysis developed in the research by Lakoff and Johnson (1980).

Keywords: cognitive metaphors, cognitive-semantic approach, disease, illness metaphors, journalistic discourse.

1. Introduction

As a prominent feature of journalistic discourse, metaphor performs a major function: it helps journalists render complex issues understandable to the readers and to the public. We thus become aware that we cannot locate metaphor anymore only in the poetic domain, since modern approaches to discourse analysis conceive metaphor as prevalent element in our everyday life, as locus of thought that can be dealt with and detailed cognitively, all the more so as metaphor is "a […] conventional way of conceptualizing the world" (Lakoff, 1992: 203).

The cognitive conceptualization of metaphor by Lakoff and Johnson is based on the assumption that metaphors are not mere poetic devices or matters of poetry, but cognitive structures that can be identified at a level "foregoing their manifestation in language" (Faur, 2004: 340-341).

Cognitive linguists and discourse analysts and specialists acknowledge that metaphors perform an important role in thought and in the structuring of our perception and comprehension of reality and of social, cultural issues.

Disease metaphors have drawn considerable attention in the past few years. Linguists and semanticists have revealed how extensively metaphors and images of diverse diseases in a specific culture shape and mould the representation,

BDD-V3100 © 2017 Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 20:55:55 UTC)

experience and perception of social convulsions and economic, political, cultural or ethnic issues. An essential catalyst for research in this direction originated in Sontag's (1978; 1989) work on *Illness as Metaphor*. As a real cancer sufferer, Sontag contended against the pervasive use of disease metaphors in writing about tumours and other terminal illnesses as well as on their impact on the representation and perception of disease in Western European society. Even though her study is nothing but a heartfelt appeal to elude the use of figurative language when tackling diseases in a journal's column or article – "[…] illness is not a metaphor, and the most truthful way of regarding illness […] is one of the most resistant to metaphorical thinking" (Sontag, 1999: 3) – it encouraged further scientific investigation into two types of disease metaphors, depending on whether the metaphor serves as target domain or as source domain. Thus, the initial studies on the power of disease metaphors have remained a benchmark on the way towards a more intricate and complex comprehension of illness, not only by historians or anthropologists, but also by linguists and journalists.

The understanding of everyday language as place of manifestation of the metaphor allowed and favoured the study of illness metaphor concentrated nowadays on specialty languages: medical language, economic language, language of diplomacy on crisis or journalistic language.

The corpus used for the study of sickness metaphorical language used in journalistic discourse is tackled from the perspective of conceptual metaphor theory. We will identify typologies and examine categories of conceptual metaphors related to social, political, cultural affections. We aim to comprehend how these social, cultural, political issues are described metaphorically and we intend to illustrate the identified categories by examples taken from a corpus of excerpts of modern journalistic discourse. It is almost inconceivable nowadays to speak or write about illness (affecting the physical body or the social body) and explain suffering without recurring to metaphors (Țenescu, 2012: 135).

Not only have medical scientists and psychologists recognized metaphors as an essential source of meaning for the sick, for the patients and their relatives in their efforts to cope with and grasp the sense of a terminal or dangerous disease, but other professions, such as journalists, have made use of medical metaphors to illustrate and explain afflictions on the social, political body or to render striking images of social, economic and cultural afflictions. These peculiar metaphors tend to render more tangible, – by an implied comparison with something that is closer to one's ordinary experience (one's physical experience of pain or disease) – that which is not easily understood or difficult to seize and grasp by the senses (pain, sicknesses of the social body).

Stolberg (2004: 5) argues that disease metaphors are not to be analyzed isolatedly, but on the contrary, they must be understood as "parts of culturally or historically specific wider webs of meanings" […] if we were to "use a term borrowed from cultural anthropology".

BDD-V3100 © 2017 Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 20:55:55 UTC)

2. Disease metaphors in journalistic discourse

Dealing with the issue of perception and description of suffering inflicted on the social or economic body as it is reflected in journalistic discourse favours an orientation of research by several approaches of the semantics of disease/suffering and pain: the identification of essential aspects of disease imagery in our research corpus, an examination of perceptions and representations of disease and suffering in media discourse and a recognition of the main categories of conceptual metaphors associated with sickness and disease.

If authors and researchers such as Sontag (1989, 1999), Tompkins and Lawley (2012), Fiumara (1995), Wilberg (2012) and Broom (2007) have indicated that illness metaphors are pervasive in medical discourse and not only, they also insisted on explaining why illness metaphor represents a natural way to describe disease and health issues and they emphasized the importance of recognizing patients' or suffering individuals' (or social body's) metaphors, and showed how using and working within and with these metaphors can trigger an individual's or social body's healing process.

In analyzing and discriminating disease metaphors, we first discern two types of sickness metaphors, depending on whether illness serves as "source domain" or as "target domain" (Rijn-van Tongeren, 1997: 12). If disease acts as "vehicle" or "source domain", the illness and its features constitute a metaphor for non-medical phenomena, which is the common case in our corpus of study. For example, crisis can be reflected as a "disease" of post-modern society. With the second type, metaphors borrowed from non-medical contexts are employed in order to render the characteristic features of a peculiar sickness.

In the current study, our data sources are represented by excerpts of journalistic discourses in English conceived during 1999-2013 whose target-public is represented by the readers of the *New York Times*.

A current metaphor found in the columns of the *New York Times* is POVERTY IS A DISEASE and COMMON PHYSICAL AFFLICTION. This metaphor is, in fact, a source subcase of the metaphor Poverty is physical harm and its cognitive mapping serves to decode the frame of poverty such as follows: for poverty to express itself as dearth, as lack of an amount of material possessions, there must be an impoverished entity (in the example below, the child) and an impoverished state (the toxic stress, leading to stress-related disease and possibly, to cognitive impairment):

(1) "Toxic stress is the *heavy hand* of early poverty, scripting a child's life not in the Horatio Alger scenario of determination and drive, but in the patterns of disappointment and deprivation that shape a life of limitations." (*NYT*, 2013)

The metaphor's source frame is a disease while the target frame is poverty and the related metaphor is in this example SOCIAL ISSUES ARE ILLNESSES

BDD-V3100 © 2017 Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 20:55:55 UTC)

which includes as subcase the metaphor Poverty is physical harm. What is particularly striking in the example above is that health metaphor is paralleled by the organicist metaphor POVERTY IS A HUMAN BEING. The medical metaphor is not the only one used to talk about social issues, as Fairclough (1989: 122) asserted. Not only disease metaphors, but also organicist metaphors are employed to portray the negative impact of poverty on a child's health and life. As a living being, with its own will and force, poverty lays a heavy hand on the poor child's body, causing him toxic stress, which is, in its turn, a symptom of "disappointment and deprivation" shaping "a life of limitations".

Not only are health metaphors drawn upon to speak about social problems such as poverty, but they are also utilized to portray situations of social convulsions or unrest, as attacks on a healthy society's body or on the health of the society as a whole:

(2) "The rioting and looting that *convulsed* poorer sections of London over the weekend spread Monday to at least eight new districts in the metropolitan area and broke out for the first time in Britain's second-largest city, Birmingham, in what was developing into the worst outbreak of social unrest in Britain in 25 years." (*NYT*, 2011)

In example (2), the frame of the metaphor RIOT IS SICKNESS is displayed as a medical condition characterized by the urban body's rapid and repeated muscle contraction and relaxation, resulting in an uncontrolled shaking of the English social-urban body. Since the social convulsion is a symptom of seizure (epilectic or non-epilectic, the urban body's convulsion resembles to a stroke. When the urban organisms (London and Birmingham) are suffering from a convulsion in their poorer areas, they experience several symptoms: social confusion and unrest, loss of control, abrupt shaking of the entire public body, uncontrollable metropolitan spasms and so on. As this peculiar convulsion is caused by an electrical activity accident in the British community's brain, its symptoms initially last for one or two days and then extend for another week in other parts of the urban body ("eight new districts in the metropolitan area") to finally reflect the "worst outbreak" of a social disease that hasn't harmed Britain for more than a quarter of a century. The basic meaning of this disease metaphor is that it construes an expression of riot and looting as eroding, undermining and weakening the health of English society.

The third example in our corpus of study reflects the way we talk about illness in terms of war and cleansing and shows how an army thinks that, in its fight to eliminate a disease from the societal body, it bombards and shells "civilian populations" and leads a chemical warfare for "ethnic cleansing".

(3) "Investigators at the international war crimes tribunal in The Hague have concluded that the Croatian Army carried out summary executions, indiscriminate shelling of civilian

BDD-V3100 © 2017 Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 20:55:55 UTC)

> populations and ethnic cleansing during a 1995 assault that was a turning point in the Balkan wars, according to tribunal documents." (*NYT*, 1999)

The social body cleansing represents for the army a natural way to eliminate a real or imagined disease. Removing disease with deep societal body cleansing is unparalleled, as unprecedented military operations carried out by the Croatian Army doubled by assaults and "summary executions" are considered hygienic, and portrayed as means to clean out the community's body ethnically.

Conclusion

The current corpus analysis accentuates the lexical richness of health and disease imagery in English journalistic discourse and raises the awareness as to the metaphoric configuration of social issues which highlights the high frequency and centrality of the illness metaphor and of the organicist metaphor. Peculiar mental images of social problems such as that of poverty of physical affliction, of riot as convulsion caused by a social-urban body's seizure and the use of the military metaphor together with the disease metaphor in order to illustrate ethnic cleansing in a country reveal the intricate conceptualization of social issues in medical terms. Journalistic discourse in English provides a rich corpus and a wide array of examples reflecting the richness of the metaphorical thought built around the conceptualization of social and ethnical problems nowadays.

Corpus

Klass, P. 2013. "Poverty as a Childhood Disease", also available at http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/05/13/poverty-as-a-childhood-disease/?_r=0
Somaiya, R., Burns, J. 2011. "Rioting Widens in London on 3rd Night of Unrest", http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/09/world/europe/09britain.html
Bonner, R. 1999. "War Crimes Panel Finds Croat Troops 'Cleansed' the Serbs, http://www.nytimes.com/1999/03/21/world/war-crimes-panel-finds-croat-troops-cleansed-the-serbs.html

References

Broom, Brian. 2007. *MEANING-full Disease*. *How personal experience and meanings cause and maintain physical illness*. London: Karnac Books.
Caballero, R. and Diaz-Vera, J. 2013. *Sensuous Cognition. Explorations into Human Sentience – Imagination, (E)motion and Perception*. Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
Cacciari, C. 1998. "Why do we speak metaphorically? Reflections on the functions of metaphor in discourse and reasoning". In A. N. Katz, C. Cacciari, R. W. Gibbs Jr., M. Turner. *Figurative Language and Thought*, 119-157. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Fairclough, N. 1989. *Language and Power*. London: Longman.

BDD-V3100 © 2017 Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 20:55:55 UTC)

Faur, Elena. 2014. "Semantica cognitivă și teoria metaforei conceptuale. O abordare din perspectivă integrală". In *Diacronia*.ro, Editura Academiei, 340-355.
Fiumara, Gemma Corradi. 1995. *The Metaphoric Process – Connections between Language and Life*. Routledge.
Howes, David, 2003. *Sensual Relations. Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
Lakoff, G. 1987. *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Lakoff, G. 2006. " The contemporary theory of metaphor". In D. Geeraerts (ed.), *Cognitive Linguistics*: *Basic Readings*. 186-238. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
Lakoff, G. 1993 "The contemporary theory of metaphor". In Andrew Ortony (ed.) *Metaphor and thought: Second edition* (pp. 202-251), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Lakoff, G. and Turner. M. 1989. *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M. 1980. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
Reddy, M. J. 1979. "The conduit metaphor: A case of frame conflict in our language about language". In A. Ortony (Ed.), *Metaphor and Thought* (284–310). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Rief, W., Broadbent, E. 2007. "Explaining medically unexplained symptoms-models and mechanisms". In *Clinical Psychology Review* 27 (821-841).
Rijn-van Tongeren, G. 1997. *Metaphors in Medical Texts*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
Sontag, S. 1999. *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*. New York: Picador.
Sontag, S., 1989. *Illness as Metaphor*. New York: Vintage Press.
Sontag, S., 1978. *AIDS and Its Metaphors*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
Stolberg, M. 2004. "Metaphors and Images of Cancer in Early Modern Europe". In *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, vol. 88 (1-42).
Tompkins, P., Lawley, J. 2012. "The Mind, Metaphor and Health". In *Positive Health*, Isuue no 78, http://www.cleanlanguage.co.uk/articles/articles/23/1/Mind-Metaphor-and-Health/Page1.html
Țenescu, Alina. 2012. "Space, Body and Change in the Architecture of Postmodern poetry". In *Challenging Change, Literary and Linguistic responses*, edited by Vesna Lopičić and Biljana Mišić Ilić. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing (131-150).
Ullman, Steven. 1957. *The Principle of Semantics*. Oxford: Blackwell.
Wilberg, P. 2012. "Metaphor and the Metaphorical Body – the Missing Link between Illness, Language and Life" in *Existential Medicine*, also available at https://existentialmedicine.wordpress.com/metaphor-and-the-metaphorical-body-the-missing-link-between-illness-language-and-life/.

BDD-V3100 © 2017 Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 20:55:55 UTC)