Metaphors, identities and relationships in online interactions among people with cancer: a corpus-based study

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Structure of talk

• Background:
  – Metaphor, illness and cancer
  – Illness and identities
  – Peer-to-peer computer-mediated communication about illness

• A corpus-based study of the metaphors used by people with cancer:
  – Data
  – Methods

• Findings:
  – Metaphors, identities and online communities
  – Metaphors and online interactions
  – In-group metaphor use on an online forum thread

• Conclusions
Background
Metaphor

• Metaphor involves talking, and potentially thinking, about one thing in terms of another.
• The two ‘things’ are different but some form similarity can be perceived between them: e.g.:

‘I'm new to the forum and wanted to know if there are any other younger bowel cancer fighters amongst us.’
‘But I have had a good cancer journey so far’

(from an online forum for people with cancer)
Why study metaphor?

• Metaphors are used to talk and think about subjective, sensitive, complex, and poorly delineated experiences in terms of simpler and more concrete experiences.
• Different metaphors ‘frame’ the topic in different ways, highlighting some aspects and backgrounding others.
• This is particularly relevant when studying the metaphors used to express different views, attitudes, evaluations, emotions, identities and relationships.
Metaphor and illness

- Illness is one of the subjective, sensitive, complex and poorly delineated experiences that tend to be conventionally conceptualised, experienced and communicated through metaphor.

‘[P]atients routinely employ a wide range of metaphorical expressions as they talk about specific diseases and their subjective experiences of illness.’ (Gibbs and Frank 2002: 140)
Metaphor and cancer

• Substantial interdisciplinary literature on metaphors and cancer, at least since Susan Sontag’s (1979) *Illness as Metaphor*.
• Debate over appropriateness of different metaphors, especially for patients.
• Criticisms of ‘fight/battle/war’ metaphors for cancer – replaced in UK policy documents on cancer by the ‘cancer journey’.
Identities and illness

- Identities are multiple and flexible, and are constructed and negotiated in discourse.
- Serious illnesses such as cancer threaten the person’s identity and can cause profound changes in self-perceptions and others’ perceptions.
- Metaphor is one of the ways in which new identities are developed and expressed.
Computer-mediated communication and illness

• Peer-to-peer computer-mediated communication about illness can create online communities where people find information, advice, support, solidarity, emotional release etc. with no temporal and geographical barriers.

• However, there can be problems with disinformation, conflict and verbal aggression, as a result of anonymity and the ‘disinhibition’ that can be associated with it.

• Little attention has so far been paid to metaphor in computer-mediated communication about illness.
A corpus-based study of metaphors used by people with cancer
Data

- 500,134 words of contributions to a UK-based online forum for people with cancer (2007-2012)
- Collected as part of ESRC-funded ‘Metaphor in End-of-Life Care’ project at Lancaster University 2012-14, with:
  - Zsófia Demjén (The Open University), Jane Demmen (Huddersfield University), Andrew Hardie, Veronika Koller, Sheila Payne and Paul Rayson (Lancaster University)
Methods

• Manual identification and classification of metaphors in a sample of the data (15,000 words)
• Corpus-aided analysis of metaphors in complete data-set, via the online tool Wmatrix (http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/wmatrix3.html):
  – Concordancing semantic domains likely to contain metaphorical expressions: e.g. G3 - Warfare, defence and the army; weapons.
  – Concordancing words or lemmas likely to be used metaphorically: e.g. ‘journey’
  – Concordancing ‘metaphor signals’: e.g. ‘like’ as a preposition
  – Concordancing words or lemmas corresponding to topics that may be discussed metaphorically: e.g. ‘surgeon’.
Metaphor, identities and communities on the online forum
‘Split-self’ metaphors and individual identity

• ‘It took time and healing to bring myself to the realisation that I was still going to be around for some time to come. I found doing the mundane every day chores boosted my self esteem and brought me back to some semblance of my former normal self.’

• ‘But please rest assured - I am still my positive self. I refuse to worry too much as I want to enjoy myself and not be a weight on those around me.’

• ‘The main thing is they don't treat me any different and that really helps as I don't like being treated as an invalid or someone on thier last legs. Just be your normal self with patience and understanding when they are having a bad day.’
Similes and changes in individual identity

• Like an older person:
  – ‘I am ok on the flat but I can't cope walking up hills. Feel like I am 90 years old sometimes lol.’
  – ‘My pain is getting worse and this morning my back seems to have given way on me. I feel and look like an old lady.’
Like a younger person:

- [on noisy colostomy bag] ‘and rather than be mortified like most, being me, I revert to being like your average 5 year old and find it hilarious when it starts farting really loudly with no control whatsoever.’

- ‘I am so sorry to hear about all the mets and recurrences. I really don't think you are at all to blame - but I know that feeling of the consultant looming over you like a naughty schoolgirl!’
Like an animal:

- ‘I'm doing fine and no one can tell I have been ill except for my slow growing hair - but some even think it's fashionable - I think I look **like a poodle** and you can see my photo on my home page’

- ‘Doctors - esp. ones that seem to have the power over your life and death - do seem to be pretty scary people. They use a lot of long words and you probably sit there **like a bunny in the headlights** and you just don't know what to ask them.’

- ‘one radiographer who knew the exact way to help me off the table (most left me there **like a beached whale!**)’
Like a supernatural entity:

– ‘I did feel like a zombie, and found it a huge mental effort to drag myself out of bed every day to get to the hospital for my RT.’

– ‘With me, I had Cisplatin, it made me nauseous, sometimes vomiting, I looked like a ghost in my mirror with all colour drained out of me, and I had zombie-proportioned fatigue.’
Violence metaphors and identities: ‘fighters’

- **Self-description:**
  - ‘My consultants recognized that I was a born fighter and saw my determination to prove them wrong’

- **Description of others:**
  - ‘You are such a fighter and so inspirational’
  - ‘Your husband sounds like a fighter which will hold him in good stead,’

- **Group description:**
  - ‘I'm new to the forum and wanted to know if there are any other younger bowel cancer fighters amongst us.’
Journey metaphors and identities: ‘travellers’

- ‘Happy Easter fellow **travellers**.’
- ‘Morning Fellow **Travellers**’

- ‘The **rocks** in our **paths** are easier to **handle** when we're all in it together. My biggest learning **point** from the whole cancer experience is that the best people to help you are the ones who've been **there** before or are **heading there** with you.’
Journey metaphors and identities: ‘passengers’

• ‘As much as I have found this thread painful (and scary) because I am not a carer but a brain tumour patient myself. I have often said that I only pop by every now and again because it saddens my heart to read of the passengers nearing the end of their journey and those recently having finished their journey.’
Metaphors and online interactions
A request for help

I have just been diagnosed with Oesophageal Cancer - they found a large tumour during the endoscopy yesterday. I am having a CT scan tomorrow. Everywhere online seems so depressing as they say that if you go after you have had problems swallowing it's too late to operate! And it sounds such an awful form of cancer - and normally I am a very positive person. I do hope there is an option for me. I suppose I will soon discover if it is possible or not.

Charley
Hi Charley

Sorry to learn of your diagnosis, there will be so many questions going through your mind, and maybe too much to assimilate at times, if you can think of this chapter in your life as a reluctant journey and each procedure a place along that journey that must be completed before you move onto the next it may help you better deal with it.
So here I am 4 yrs on and I'm going for another PET scan, only this time its not for the good news that I'm all clear - it could well be to tell me I'm starting my journey all over again! It really feels like I've gone backwards, could I find that brave, never give up attitude once more to go through that again. The first time fear wasn't even an emotion, the only thing I feared was how my parents and brothers would cope.

[...]
All I do know is that my Cancer journey is not yet over and what I'm starting to realise is that it probably never will be....once a member of this club, your a lifelong member!

Any thoughts that you may have would be welcome, and if this has helped others to see that they are not alone or any other reason then great.
To all those still in the thick of their journeys, chin up, its all worth it in the end!
Love and Respect
John
John hi my name is Diane and your post interested me greatly. I have NHL and am undergoing treatment but I have been told its not curable but treatable and hopefully I will get into remission but I know that this is with me for life [...] Anyway I digress, you know if you have to Ashley that you can do this journey again but lets hope you don't have to. You should feel so proud for getting where you are now. As you say once on the journey you will always have one foot on the bus now and then with fear etc but hold your head up high and think of the amazingly strong person you are today. Your story has most definitely given me hope [...] Diane xxxxx Fellow Passenger :)

Fellow Passenger :)

Lancaster University
Hi Dave,

[...] I start my first round of chemo tomorow at 8:30 in [...] and just want to get things started. I am keeping focused on the tape at the end of this race so whatever happens on the way is only a way to get there. Let me know how things are with you.

Dan
Hi Dan

It's good you have this first hurdle out of the way, [...] You may feel like you are in a void at the moment and thinking about the future may be hard, [...] You have a very long road ahead so pace yourself and try to be patient, treat it like a marathon but in the end you will get there.

Regards,

Dave
In-group metaphor use on a particular thread
The ‘Welcome to Warped’ thread

- The online forum includes a large thread that is headed: ‘For those with a warped sense of humour WARNING- no punches pulled here’ (approximately 500,000 words)
- This is explicitly presented as a space for people ‘who cope by being irreverent and silly and able to laugh at all the bad stuff’.
- There is evidence of tensions and conflict within the thread, but also of complicity and camaraderie.
- Several patterns of metaphor use contribute to the creation and maintenance of identities, relationships and in-group cohesion.
Military camp titles

- One of the contributors starts to address or refer to other contributors using military camp titles:

  - ‘I was kind of hoping Lance-Corporal Jim was still around so he could offer to be my dad... but I think the power has gone to his head’
  - ‘Morning, Paul... and welcome to our lovely little loony home. always room for another one and I think you will find the facilities quite amenable.. there is usually some sort of alcohol around (unless commandant Denise has been around)’
  - ‘Popped out from your Dictators monthly have we Captain Sam?’
  - ‘share nicely our Camp Commandants.... and I bought it at a shop, cos you just don't listen do you Colonel’
• Other contributors also adopt and develop the ‘military camp’ metaphor:
  – ‘Found the booze - thanks but a bit disappointed, should of guessed though - in your style - Bloody minatures, Denise and I have shared them out - 12 each so better seem greatful I suppose we both had a glass full. You ever tried crem de menth and tonic wine? bit like the contents of your designer bag I guess. The other commanders are undercover and lurking in dark spots’
Humorous exchanges and the military titles

• ‘Well done Flight lieutenant Jim for finding your way all the way over here from blog land.. I am impressed.. I would promote you but a) i think you have reached top rank already and b) I can't think of other ranks... and not sure what the top one is…’

• ‘Well LM Thanks for the further promotion ! Do I get shiny things to wear on my dress uniform ? Yes did say uniform and not just dress !!’
Some example concordances

y to you soon ( can I stay on the site now
usually some sort of alohol around ( unless
, I think i am safe for a while longer ... 
"=60"> Oh Brigadeer John , even being camp
BMWST ones out the back maybe ( good hint ...
... <br/> I also want a word with our camp
mand not sure what the top one is ... I think
a ha <br/> And which numbers would those be 2011 9:42 PM" words="178"> hey , well done
24 Aug 2011 10:45 PM" words="134"> ha ha
1 ... ha ha even better . <br/> Sleep tight
 Brigadeer is my favourite ... what 's yours commander
 Brignder eh ? eh ? you saying we are mental or someth
"=60"> Brigadeer , you found it ! Did the sat nav help ? <br/
and a big hug xxx <br/> <br/> Click here to
even notice in a month and before you start
fo there , but I do n't care cos apart from
You reminded me , have n't heard from our
date="2 Sep 2011 10:49 PM" words="267"> OK
You have to remember my mental health here ,
k you might have failed the maths test today
re , expect no mercy ) <br/> and just to say
has a dog named after a fish or a submarine
Captain ... I have an overactive imagination and the
100% is the answer you were looking for )
re , expect no mercy ) <br/> and just to say
has a dog named after a fish or a submarine
Captain , P and I have made up again . he agrees with
that ... <br/> I was kind of hoping Lance-
boby all the best today . Just remember what
aged to get to the psycho in the company of
"=60"> Corporal sent was still around so he could offer to b
Corporal ... said , "Do n't panic ! ..." 2 and then went shopping in little Swede
The ‘cancer card’ on the Warped thread

gardening’ so its me or it doesn’t get done.. cancer card doesn’t work with him I’m afraid…. (though have to have some trump system for your cancer cards … shouldn’t terminal trump remission??
hers (he is such a dick ) thinking that the cancer card might get me off in court….. and she’s fun making it up… also links in with the cancer card trump system… though guess we could offend could silence with you in tow and how many cancer cards you could pull too… “it was my friends sandwiches etc…. nearly thought of playing the cancer card , but resisted….and they found someone we’ve got cancer you know… ) Does the cancer card work with brothers? I suspect not… though there would be too many of us playing the cancer card ….. and then would the fact that I had us lot trying to outdo each other on the cancer card trump system… that’s one game I would Or just can’t be bothered… You need the Cancer Card cancer card services for all bothered… You need the Cancer Card! cancer card services for all your cancer card needs
Cancer Card cancer card services for all your cancer card needs…. In our IGC range (I’ve got cancer tested it, so would love you to try the cancer card . Years ago my daughter did the ‘hand over Sue, do you need more than toothbrush and cancer cards? And as for where you could end up it would … and then burst into tears… play your cancer cards and before you know it you will be here we… Oooh actually little kids get great cancer cards … tragic children need holiday with their the list. Maybe we should do a book of the cancer cards and we could all contribute to it… we sorry, but I do have to report a Failed cancer card incident: me and brother tonight… Was there
The ‘cancer’ card and different uses of Card Games metaphors

• A game between an individual with cancer and other people:
  – ‘Whilst walking out of the stadium I got my brain cells working and thought about playing a cancer card, and so as I walked down to the train station I started to make my way toward the disabled entrance.’

• A game between the thread contributors and other people:
  – ‘Wonder if we could find a nice hotel somewhere for the night and see if we played the cancer cards en masse we might get some discounts or freebies..’

• A game that the thread contributors play against each other:
  – ‘Actually, I'm not looking forward to seeing us lot trying to outdo each other on the cancer card trump system... that's one game I would happily lose’
Developing the cancer card metaphor

‘I was going to do this with illustrations, but no photoshop etc here and too much gin, so sorry- you will just have to imagine them xxxx

Or just can't be bothered...
You need the Cancer Card!

XXXX Cancer Card services for all your cancer card needs....
In our IGC range (I've got cancer)
or
ICFSWC range (I'm caring for someone with cancer)
We have a wide range of cards to suit most occasions....
Please note: All Cancer Cards are prefixed by either of the above IGC or ICFSWC please state clearly which type you require on the order form.

So for example the BMST card would read... I've got cancer, buy me shiny things or

I am caring for someone with cancer, buy me shiny things.

Our featured cards this week are the ones for those days when let's face it, when you just need a bit of a perk from this cancer lark....’
A ‘real’ cancer card for purchase online

Product Description

Oh no! Are you sick and tired of people asking you, "How are you feeling today?", or perhaps one of those "But you look great!" awkward moments? But wait! There's more! "You've lost so much weight!", or "I love the new hairdo! What's your secret?" What to do?!!

It's time to cash in all those pity chips and milk your diagnosis for all it's worth. Why? Because why not? Play your cancer card. You'll be glad you did. After all, you've earned it. Survivors rule!
Conclusions

• In peer-to-peer online communication among people with cancer, metaphors can be used to:
  – Express different individual and group identities, including changes in identities and (self) perceptions as a result of the illness;
  – Provide advice, support and empathy;
  – Create and manage relationships and communities, including via collaborative creativity and humour.

• The analysis also provides evidence of metaphor use as dynamic and emergent.
• The analysis provides more evidence for the role of online forums in providing:
  – A space where people with cancer can find emotional release, support, advice, empathy, solidarity and even fun;
  – A source of insights for researchers that cannot easily be matched by any other source of data.

• An eclectic use of corpus methods for the purposes of metaphor identification proved to be extremely useful in analysing the corpus and arriving at these and other findings.
Thank you

http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/melc/