Metaphors used by terminal patients to express their relationship with health professionals

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In this paper we consider the metaphors used by terminally ill patients to express how they perceive their relationship with health professionals. The paper forms part of the ESRC-funded project 'Metaphor in End-of-Life Care' at Lancaster University, in which we investigate metaphor use in a 1.5 million-word corpus of interviews and online forum contributions by terminally ill patients, family carers and health professionals.

A 90,000-word sample dataset was analysed manually to identify metaphorical expressions (Pragglejaz Group 2007). Lexical items deemed metaphorical were allocated to broader semantic domains, which were then matched with established categories in the semantic annotation tagger included in the *Wmatrix* web interface for corpus analysis (http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/wmatrix/). This made it possible to explore the most relevant semantic domains in the complete corpus, and to study metaphor patterns systematically across the data.

The metaphors used by some patients suggest a grateful and trusting view of their relationship with health professionals, who are presented as, for example, angels, saints and magicians, and as engaged in a fight on behalf of the patients. In contrast, other metaphors express a negative perception of the patients' relationship with health professionals, who are also described as enemies, attackers, torturers, or reluctant providers of weaponry. These metaphors emphasize the patients' sense of an imbalance of power and knowledge in their relationship with health professionals, as well as doubts about whether the health professionals always have the patients' best interests at heart. We reflect on the implications of our findings for communication and the provision of care at the end of life.

References

Pragglejaz Group. 2007. MIP: A method for identifying metaphorically used words in discourse. Metaphor and Symbol, 22(1), 1-39.