

## METAPHOR'S PARTAKE IN MEDICAL DISCOURSE

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*Abstract: In the present article, we examine the concept of metaphor from a diachronic point of view, beginning with Aristotle's four types of metaphors and ending with the Conceptual Metaphor Theory. As part of an extended research on medical metaphors, the paper explores Ricœur's and Derrida's ideas on metaphor. We espouse the idea that metaphor is all-permeating, and side with Lakoff and Johnson in seeing it is an integral characteristic of human thought. In addition, we accept the two roles of metaphor in science as defined by Ortega y Gasset. Before exploring the nature of medical metaphor, we offer a working definition of discourse and medical discourse in particular. We suggest a new way of looking at medical metaphors, inspired by Ricœur's understanding of metaphor as a discourse phenomenon. We conclude that viewing metaphor as not being noun-bond in the Aristotelean tradition, but rather – as pertaining to the level of discourse does not negate the stipulations of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory; rather, it augments and further particularizes them in relation to the study of metaphor in medical discourse.*

*Key words: medical discourse, medical metaphor, discourse*

### Metaphor's Cradle and Grave

It is hard to begin any diachronic examination of the understanding of metaphor without making a reference to Aristotle. After all, Aristotle “seems to have put forward the first systematic placing of it, a placing at any rate which survived as the first, and had the most profound historical consequences” (Derrida 1974: 30). Thus we feel justified in following the *custom* of “in the first place... Aristotle's definition is to be recalled, that at least of the *Poetics*” (Derrida 1974: 30).

Aristotle describes four types of metaphor, “metaphor is the application of a strange term either transferred from the genus and applied to the species or from the species and applied to the genus, or from one species to another or else by analogy” (*Poetics* 1457b).

In other words, the first type deals with a substitution of the general with the particular: in Aristotle's example of genus to species transferal, the general term *stand* in the case of a ship is used instead of the particular one because “riding at anchor is a species of standing” (*Poetics* 1457b). A substitution of the particular with the general is present in the usage of a particular term, *ten thousand*, instead of the general term, *many* (*Poetics* 1457b). Thus the first couple of metaphoric types represent a hierarchical movement, with the direction being reversed: there is a movement between bottom, particular, and

top, general, with the only difference being whether the movement initiates at the lower level, the particular, the *genus*, or at the upper level, the general, the *species*. Of course, preserving the upper position for the general and the lower for the particular is simply due to the mental image of a scheme with many particulars at the bottom of the scheme being united under the umbrella of a singular general.

The third type of metaphor is linear: it is between two particulars of the same general as in Aristotle's example "*"drawing off" is used for "severing" and "severing" for "drawing off," both being species of "removing"*" (*Poetics* 1457b).

The fourth type is no longer an issue of transference: it is an analogy. Metaphor by analogy refers to "when B is to A as D is to C, then instead of B the poet will say D and B instead of D". Aristotle illustrates this analogy: "a cup is to Dionysus what a shield is to Ares; so he will call the cup "Dionysus's shield" and the shield "Ares' cup"" (*Poetics* 1457b).

In fact, there is yet another type of metaphor: "another way of employing metaphor is to call a thing by the strange name and then to deny it some attribute of that name. For instance, suppose you call the shield not "Ares' cup" but a "wineless cup"" (*Poetics* 1457b).

It has struck us that some of Aristotle's metaphoric types can just as well refer to cases of metonymy. This observation holds especially true for the hierarchical types: a substitution of the general with the particular can easily be seen in substituting a part of a person's body for the whole person as in "hands" when referring to labourers (which is also a synecdoche). In addition, a substitution of the particular with the general can be found in an expression such as "landing in London" to refer to actually landing at Stansted, an Essex airport that is within the greater London area, yet approx. 60 km away from Central London.

We will no longer pursue the question of the interplay and overlap between metaphor and metonymy here. Suffice to say that we do not view metaphor and metonymy as two opposing poles, the former – being "alien to the similarity disorder", the latter – "to the contiguity disorder" (Jakobson 1956: 90); rather, we see them as being in constant interaction (Goranova 2022).

What concerns us here is that the first extant description of metaphor, the Aristotelean one, marks both a beginning and an end to metaphoric studies. While the reason that allows us to refer to Aristotle's definition of metaphor as the *cradle* of *metametaphor* is clear, we need to specify why this is a metaphoric *grave*. It is a place of burial of any non-Aristotelean understandings of metaphor: Aristotle confines the understanding of metaphor to nouns only, and

his enormous influence and century-long-uncontested authority chains metaphor to the level of lexis.

### **Metaphor's Quickening and Rebirth**

It is the elaboration, along with its rapid spread and warm welcome among linguists, of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory that marks metaphor's rebirth: this time as an all-permeating, reason-grounded impossible-to-live-without phenomenon.

The scope of the present paper does not allow us to dwell on the actual rebirth of metaphor. We will just note the great shift from the Aristotelian-like vision of metaphor as a lexis phenomenon to the new understanding suggested by Lakoff and Johnson of metaphor as a thought phenomenon, "human thought processes are largely metaphorical" (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 6). Thus we are now faced with metaphor itself on the level of reasoning, i.e. conceptual metaphor, and its realizations in language, i.e. metaphorical expressions (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 6).

Of course, Conceptual Metaphor Theory did not spring into being all of the sudden: there have been many *fetal kicks* suggestive of the approaching *rebirth*, i.e. the upcoming shift in thinking about metaphor. Lakoff and Johnson themselves admit that they are indebted to many preceding scholars. In the present paper, we will focus on only one of the philosophers that Lakoff and Johnsons admit to having been "significantly influenced by" (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: xii) – Paul Ricœur. Furthermore, since we are convinced that Ricœur's understanding of metaphor ought not to be examined without, at least a brief, reference to Derrida's ideas (both authors have engaged in a detailed discourse on metaphor), we will begin, namely, with Derrida's words.

"Metaphor exists only to the extent that someone is supposed to be manifesting by an utterance such-and-such a thought which remains in itself unobvious, hidden, or latent" (Derrida 1974: 32). Derrida bases his understanding of metaphor on Aristotle: the French philosopher accepts metaphor as being a noun-bound phenomenon, although he specifically highlights the Aristotelean contrast between thoughts, *dianoia*, and words, *lexis* (Derrida 1974: 32), particularly nouns, *onoma*<sup>87</sup> (Derrida 1974: 33). In this way, Derrida sets the stage for the Conceptual Metaphor theory's dichotomy of conceptual metaphor, in thought, and metaphorical representations, in language.

What we find Ricœur's greatest contribution to the advancement of the understanding of metaphor to be, is that he takes metaphor from the level of the

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<sup>87</sup> As in the Ancient Greek tradition of names and nouns, *onoma*, which predates Aristotle and has been evidenced in Plato's works (Karfik 2021:179).

lexis to the level of discourse. By always involving two ideas, “metaphor is essentially a discursive phenomenon” (Ricœur 1975: 23). This French philosopher explicitly critiques Aristotle for the noun-binding of metaphor by refuting “the excessive and damaging emphasis put initially on the word, or, more specifically, on the noun or name, and on naming, in the theory of meaning” and calling for a new understanding which “proceeds from the recognition of the sentence as the primary unit of meaning” (Ricœur 1975: 49). The latter “treatment of metaphor” places it “at the sentence level of discourse” (Ricœur 1975: 49). We would argue that Derrida’s *usure* is actually possible only in discourse: only in discourse can metaphor be subject to *wear*, i.e. “erasure by rubbing, or exhaustion, or crumbling”, and *usury*, i.e. “the additional product of a certain capital, the process of exchange which... would make that original wealth bear fruit, would increase the return from it in the form of income, of higher interest, of a kind of linguistic surplus value” (Derrida 1974: 7).

### Metaphor’s Walk in Medical Discourse: The Path

The study of discourse has lately attracted a lot of scientific interest. However, the very nature of discourse is not clearly demarcated. There exist varying definitions: even in a dictionary, we find a wide scope of meanings. Leaving aside the archaic and obsolete notions of discourse as *rationality and social familiarity*, we are left with *verbal interchange of ideas, formal and orderly and usually extended expression of thought on a subject, connected speech or writing, a linguistic unit (such as a conversation or a story) larger than a sentence; a mode of organizing knowledge, ideas, or experience that is rooted in language and its concrete contexts (such as history or institutions)* (Merriam Webster 2023).

For our current purposes, we will work with the following understanding of discourse: **it is thought embedded in language and exchanged successfully**. *Thought* is inclusive of ideas and knowledge; *language* refers to either or both written and spoken language; *exchanged* evokes the necessary participation of more than one individual; and the *success* of such exchange depends upon the unison of the interpretation on the receiving end with the intended interpretation on the part of the issuing side.

Since our current interest is focused on medical discourse, we will narrow this working definition to state that **medical discourse is health-related thought embedded in language and exchanged successfully**. It is crucial to underline the fact that medical discourse is not restricted to exchange of highly specialized information: it involves not only medical specialists, but patients and the general public as well.

There are two main characteristics of medical discourse: specialization and popularization. On one hand, it is a venue for information exchange among specialists; on the other hand, it is a question of information exchange between specialists and non-specialists. Furthermore, even though medical issues are the area of expertise of medical specialists, the central role of these issues in human life make them of interest to all people. It is safe to say that “medical communication has become a cornerstone of our society”, which both stems from and results in “popularisation, aimed at making specialised, medical knowledge accessible to the layman” (Ordóñez-López and Edo-Marza 2016: 1).

### **Metaphor’s Walk in Medical Discourse: The Gait**

The place of metaphor in science has long been problematic. Ever since Aristotle, who not only confined metaphor to the level of the lexis, but also to the realm of poetry, there have seemed to be no room for metaphor in science. In fact, if we continue to embrace the Aristotelean understanding of metaphor as a noun–phenomenon, then the exact nature of scientific terms would preclude metaphor: “words may have more than one meaning, but their use in science permits just one” (Ricœur 1975: 42). A given word is stripped of all possible interpretations but one “in technical and scientific language, where everything is explicit” (Ricœur 1975: 105).

Of course, science has never been articulated without the use of metaphor: it is only the *metadiscourse* on scientific discourse that used to exclude metaphor. An obvious reason why this stance of *metadiscourse* is a *faux pas* is “the contribution” of metaphor “to a logic of invention” (Ricœur 1975: 101). Ortega y Gasset expresses a similar view when explaining what he sees as the two major uses of metaphor in science. The first one is evident when a new scientific discovery is made: a word already in existence is employed in naming the just-sprung-to-life concept (by virtue of resemblance) (Ortega y Gasset 1946<sup>88</sup>: 388). The second one is manifested when a person needs to process a difficult idea: this usage is considered to be the “most profound and essential use of metaphor in knowledge” (Ortega y Gasset 1946<sup>89</sup>: 390). We tend to “rely on easy and readily accessible objects to be able to comprehend ones that are difficult and elusive” (Ortega y Gasset 1946: 391).

The affirmation of thinkers such as Ricœur and Ortega y Gasset of the importance of metaphor in science made it possible for linguists to start focusing on medical metaphor and to embrace “the close association of medicine with metaphor” (Vaisrub 1977: 3). The Conceptual Metaphor Theory has further aided this great internal change of *metadiscourse* on medical discourse towards

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<sup>88</sup> The article “Las dos grandes metáforas” was first published in 1924.

<sup>89</sup> Translations from Spanish are ours.

the cultivation of a metaphor-welcoming disposition. It is enough to point to the two perhaps most popular orientational conceptual metaphors, HEALTH IS UP and ILLNESS IS DOWN (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 15), whose metaphorical instances have been examined by practically all of the multitude of modern researchers of medical metaphor. Not few among these researchers have exerted themselves to propose ways to classify medical metaphors. Such classifications are quite varied: from the now classical one of Vaisrub which is dependent on thematic fields such as war, myth, nature, etc. (Vaisrub 1977) to ones based on the source domain or target domain (Pacheva-Karabova 2005). However, we feel that there is a great need for a new way of looking at medical metaphors: one that, while preserving the spirit of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, is closely inspired by Ricœur's understanding of metaphor as a discourse phenomenon, with a slight Aristotelean flavor that the French taste buds might find to be on the sour side.

The theoretical *recipe* calls for a firm fundamental belief in metaphor as a thought phenomenon that finds its expressions in language. Where Ricœur's ideas step in is in the clarification of *language*. Are Lakoff and Turner's metaphoric instances to be found at the lexis level or at the discourse level? We would say that even though all metaphoric instances exist in discourse, it might be quite useful to differentiate between *lexis-thriving* ones and *discourse proper* ones. Let's take a look at the expression *losing the fight with cancer*. *Cancer* is a lexis-thriving metaphoric instance since the initial transfer of the characteristics of a crab, *karkinos* in Greek, to the disease is no longer an active one, i.e. it has now become a medical term, a word with no *lively* metaphoric nature, a *sleeping* metaphor or a *dead* one as one of the third type of dead metaphors described by Lakoff (Lakoff 1987: 1). *Losing the fight* is a *discourse proper* metaphor since the association of this metaphorical instance to the conceptual metaphor of TREATMENT IS WAR is clear and very much alive. It directly corresponds to our working definition of medical discourse as *a health-related thought embedded in language and exchanged successfully*: this metaphoric instance (at the level of language) is an obvious embodiment of the conceptual War metaphor (at the level of thought). Furthermore, the metaphoric instance is *discourse proper* because it is *exchanged successfully*, i.e. interpreted correctly, only in the proper context, which happens to be medical discourse. Outside of this discourse, *losing a fight* can and does have significations completely unrelated to any disease or treatment.

Of course, we do not attempt to affirm that *lexis-thriving* metaphors<sup>90</sup> are noun-bound in the strict Aristotelean sense, nor do we endeavor to deny that

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<sup>90</sup> In the spirit of Lakoff and Johnson, we refer not only to conceptual metaphors as *metaphors*, but to their metaphoric instances as well (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 6). It is enough to remember

even *lexis-thriving* metaphors exist at the level of discourse as well: after all, they have been subjected to *usure*, which we already identified as taking place in discourse. Rather, it is simply a question of *lexis-thriving* metaphors appearing closer to the lexis than to discourse. They are typically fixed, noun-only, and part of medical terminology (as *cancer*) while *discourse proper* metaphors are often semifixed, phrasal, and can vary (*they have lost the fight, he is losing the fight*, etc.).

### Conclusions

Based on our examination of Aristotle's definition of metaphor, as well as of Derrida and Ricœur's take on it, we conclude that a new application of their ideas to the study of medical metaphor can be beneficial. Such application does not negate the stipulations of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory; rather, it augments and further particularizes them in relation to the study of metaphor in medical discourse.

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that conceptual metaphors exist in thought only, and any metaphors in language are actually metaphoric instances of the thought metaphors.

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