Cancer is a tumultuous journey: A cross-linguistic analysis of metaphor
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Metaphor is known to be a powerful conceptual and linguistic strategy for shaping attitudes in various areas of human experience. One area – the construal of illness, specifically of cancer – has drawn a lot of recent attention (Demmen et al. 2015). Violence and journey metaphors for cancer (e.g., combat cancer, my cancer journey) have been identified as common in patients’ discourse, as well as in broader discussions (Gibbs & Franks 2002). Some argue that violence or war metaphors should be avoided because they lead to a sense of inevitable defeat or shame for not fighting hard enough (Hauser & Schwarz 2015).

Because multi-lingual studies of illness metaphors are rare (and absent in cancer discourse research), I seek to address several open questions about potent cancer metaphors such as CANCER IS WAR. First, to what extent are these and other metaphors found in languages other than English? Second, is it something about the language-independent conceptual metaphor that generates negative feelings, or is there perhaps something about the language’s lexicogrammatical structures expressing that metaphor?

To address these questions, I present two of my recent studies. Study 1 focuses on a specialized corpus of English and Spanish patient blogs that I have compiled, and uses a mix of corpus linguistic and computational metaphor detection methods. The metaphor tagging was performed using an online tool I designed for metaphor annotation, and includes a means to annotate, categorize, and search over metaphoric expressions in several languages. The results of Study 1 reveal that not only cross-linguistic, but also gender differences exist in how metaphors are employed in first-person narratives. Study 2 is an experiment featuring survey questions about vignettes in which the argument structure of sentences conveying violence metaphors in English and Spanish is manipulated (namely, variable argument linking as in the cancer attacked John vs. John attacked cancer). Results indicate that the grammar, rather than the metaphor itself, is yielding effects suggestive of differing degrees of pessimism regarding health outcomes.

In both languages, I find several surprising trends. In spite of admonitions from the healthcare community, patients themselves persist in using violence metaphors in large proportions. Further, while war metaphors are used quite frequently, journey and other types of metaphors dominate extended personal narratives. And finally, the journey-war dichotomy is a hard one to make, as many lexical triggers in texts are evoking both types of metaphors. (For instance, invasive cancer cells and the cancer advanced suddenly both use motion words that are associated with violence and harm.)

Taken together, the results of these two studies paint a more fine-grained picture of how metaphors in general, and cancer metaphors in particular, work at the intersection of conceptual structure and grammar. They also emphasize the need to take into account the differing lexical and constructional inventories across languages when considering the role of conceptual metaphors in human reasoning. Finally, they may prove useful towards better strategies in the critical area of illness communication.

References
