

Lexicographical Aspects of Health Metaphors in Financial Text

Abstract

The frequent use of metaphor is an all-pervasive characteristic of the native languages of all civilisations and cultures. This implies that metaphors can be readily identified as such throughout the myriad of genres fashioned and developed by the very large number of distinct discourse communities to be found within human society. However, there are two very distinct types of metaphor: firstly, metaphors chosen by skilful writers who consciously wish to embellish their text by the use of deliberate ornamentation; and secondly, metaphors which hardly, if at all, impinge on the writer's consciousness because they are so deeply rooted in the human psyche that they are actually needed to give primary linguistic form to people's thoughts, even within frames of professional reference. This paper treats the latter type of metaphor, illustrating the way in which themes in financial discourse are very often articulated via an appeal to the concept of health and its vocabulary. Some questions are posed with respect to the lexicographic treatment of conventional primary metaphor and grammatical metaphor.

Most often and most traditionally, metaphor is held to be an ornament or adornment of cultured discourse of the sort perhaps best represented by *belles lettres*, notably poetry. This deliberate, even contrived ornamentation is intended and is generally felt to be principally aesthetic: it arises via an imaginative associativity of thought which temporarily imparts or is strained to impart a new contextual and **non-literal** meaning to a "pre-existing" vocabulary item in a fixed context. The Collins Cobuild Dictionary defines metaphor thus: *a metaphor is an imaginative way of describing something by referring to something else which has the qualities you are trying to express*. A cluster of questions hence arises but remains predominantly within the field of literary studies: what is conscious metaphor, what metaphors are there, what is a dead metaphor – and why do metaphors exist and what are they for anyway?¹

However, there is a functionally more important – and mysterious – manifestation of metaphor: metaphorical usage we are barely conscious of because we are totally inured to it. Outside the strictly literary frame of reference the study of metaphors of this second type owes an enormous debt in modern times to the pioneering achievement of Lakoff and Johnson² who posit the existence of well over a hundred generic,

“deep” metaphors. Ubiquitous; they represent a type of metaphor “which occurs in most of the sentences we utter” (Lakoff, 1993) **and** [emphasis added] “which is neither imaginative and creative nor innovatory, but which is so natural as to be unconscious” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Metaphors of this type are “invisibly prevalent” to a very high degree in all types of text, including academic and serious-journalistic discourse in the natural, social and economic sciences and in the humanities.

So the use of metaphor most often passes unnoticed by the vast majority of readers/hearers for the simple reasons, firstly, that they are conditioned to such modes of expression and, secondly, that even if “articulators” wished to express themselves differently, they would have to exert themselves very hard to achieve a linguistic formulation that did justice to their requirements without perpetrating awkwardness and confusion. It is very difficult, even to the point of impossibility, to create certain types of “meaning” by employing strictly non-figurative but properly referential vocabulary. The metaphor – normally not cognitively recognised as such – which is required in such circumstances is normally already at hand, already there, prompting itself almost automatically as it waits to be called upon in the process of turning ideas into words. The very purpose of Lakoff and Johnson’s phrase, embodied in the title of their influential book *Metaphors we live by*, is to emphasise that metaphor is so deeply rooted in the human psyche that modes of expression that eschew metaphor are difficult to conceive, never mind construct. This type of basic or – literally – generic metaphor is designated by Lakoff and Johnson as a metaphorical cognitive ideal model (MICM), which is a cognitive “proto-structure” – at the virtual top of the tree of abstraction – subliminally used by human beings for the definition of concepts and for the formation of concept networks. Among these cognitive generator mechanisms are two which have been called the “personalisation” and the “health” MICMs; they are clearly related to those most primary concerns of human beings: the individual person as a complex and integrated social and psychological entity; and his/her health. Given the normal but not necessarily morbid pre-occupation of human beings with their personal health, the actual personalisation MICM is often psychologically subsumed by the health MICM.

Pielenz summarises the Lakoff and Johnson thesis thus (Pielenz, 1993):

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Given:

- that human beings are conceptually structured entities;
- that our perceptions and actions are (pre-)determined by our conceptual system;
- that this conceptual system is fundamentally metaphoric;

Hence:

- our perceptions and actions are fundamentally metaphoric in their nature.

To restate: the “invocation” of metaphor in many different areas of discourse most often passes unnoticed **as such** by the vast majority of language users, “producers” and “receivers” alike, for the simple reason that they are completely “habituated” to such a mode of expression. In our case this is a professional habituation, the important corollary being that anyone who has not “internalised” the said lexical/linguistic habits somehow does not “belong”. Neither let us forget that the mediating journalists have themselves had to clone their professional linguistic behaviour – always (to be) primed by its associated frame of reference! – from the discourse community that is the target and focus of their daily attention.

Any inspection of financial text and discourse will reveal that health metaphors occur and recur constantly. They are, however, routinely instantiated with respect to realia and situations where *health* is, at best, only an analogy or the imputation of an inherent property. For most “direct” communicators and readers, however, the expression *health* – and other germane lexis which, so to speak, revolves around that nucleus – paves the way to virtually totally satisfactory descriptive approximations to reality, accepted as such, either consciously or subconsciously, by the primary actors in the business of promulgating or absorbing news about the fortunes of financial markets etc.

Investigation of a 6,000,000-word machine-readable corpus of financial texts from the *Financial Times* (FT) – generously provided to us for research purposes by Times Newspapers – shows well over a hundred high-frequency words, ostensibly health-related or even outright medical in referential terms, which are commonly used in financial discourse: *abort, addiction, ailing, alive, anaemic, anaesthetic, anatomy, appetite, atrophy, backbone, bill of health, bleed/blood, breath, bruise, casualty, choke, chronic, clone, collapse, complexion, contagion, convalesce, cripple, cure, debilitating, decline, depressed/depression, diet, disease, endemic, epidemic, exhaust, exposure, famine, fat, fatal, fatigue, fever, fit, geriatric, haemorrhage, hamstring, handicap, hangover, headache,*

health, healthy, hunger/hungry, hurt, immune, incubation, indigestion, infection, inject, injured, life, life-blood, limp, medicine, mid-life, miscarry, muscle, myopic, nerve, nourish, nurse, overweight, pain, palatable, palliative, panic, paralysis, patient, pulse, rally, recipe, recovery, recuperate, rehabilitation, relapse, resuscitate, revitalise, revive, robust, rupture, sanity, scar, shock, sick, sleepy, slim, stagger, starve, sterilisation, stomach, strength, stricken, suffer, support system, surgery, symptom, syndrome, teething, temperature, thin, tired, transplant, trauma, tumble, umbilical, vibrant, viral, weak/weaken, wound. Examples of textual instantiations of these words are given in the Appendix.

For dictionary-makers, particularly those involved in creating “productive” or encoding dictionaries, describing word usage of the above sort is exceedingly problematic with respect to both definitional and collocational lexicography: i.e., what exactly is the stock market’s *genus proximum* of *haemorrhage*? “Classical” metaphors are, of course, innovatory and lexicographers cannot, obviously, be expected to record such nonce or evanescent actualisations of meaning. On the other hand, although it is perhaps not surprising, it is nonetheless regrettable that highly frequent and systematic metaphorical usages à la Lakoff and Johnson are most often left undertreated or even untreated in dictionaries, even though they are quite proper grist for the lexicographer’s mill. This state of affairs, arguably, makes the need for fuller linguistic and lexicographic analysis more alluring. The argument, incidentally, is not advanced here that the health-related vocabulary items selected and quoted below [and others like them] are somehow indistinguishable from each other with respect to the “criteriality” of their use. There is a cline ranging from total *cliché* (*substantial change in the **complexion** of sales, say?*) to novelty (*The company has been, for some time, **overweight** in Latin America, . i.e. it has “parked” [or “exposed”!] too many of its assets there.*).

However, many questions of principally lexicographical import remain, including:

- modelling the instantiation and textual dynamics of “deep” metaphors [DMs];
- “didacticising” the findings from such models;
- filling lacunae in decoding dictionaries’ treatment and definienda of DMs;
- providing more and explicated citations involving DMs;
- clarifying selectional restrictions/permissions applicable to DMs;

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- tracking the migration of old collocates from non-DM to DM contexts;
- recording the birth of new collocations involving DM contexts;
- detailing the subtleties of DMs' valency patterns and their possible transformations, especially with respect to changes relative to *actants* and *circumstants*;
- investigating the degree of contextual rigidity when DM's are involved;
- quantifying the functional load and dispersion of DM's in text .

Perhaps more lexicographic attention should be paid to the needs, both encoding and decoding, of the huge number of people, world-wide, who learn and use languages for specific purposes?

Notes

1. I am indebted to Patrick Corness, Roger Horne, John O'Connor, Patricia Thomas, and Aldona Zwierzynska-Coldicott for many instructive discussions over the last few months on the subject of metaphor in non-literary text.
2. And of Reddy too, on account of his 1979 essay on the so-called "conduit metaphor".

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Selected Concordance Citations

ANAEMIC

Total assets were an anaemic 3.4%

ANAESTHETIC

[...] described the Bundesbank's actions as no more than an anaesthetic for the financial markets

APPETITE

I[...] jittery about the Canadian government's appetite for debt

BLEED

[...] borrowings of £800M as Pilkington continues to bleed cash

BREATH

The market paused for breath yesterday

CONTAGION

However, the collapse of Drexel Burnham Lambert, the US securities firm, [...] focused regulators' minds on the risk of contagion – that problems within one part of a company, perhaps unregulated, can quickly spill over into other areas

CONVALESCE

[...] although the Group is no longer on its death-bed, it is still in convalescence

DIET

The dollar needs a steady diet of good economic

FAMINE

Even the credit-worthy will practise what Kaufmans call 'capital frugality' – for the rest, it looks more like capital famine

GERIATRIC

The result was that Chrysler entered the recession with a geriatric range of cars

HAEMORRHAGE

[...] funds were haemorrhaging out of the Lira

HEALTH

[...] concern over the wider health of the banking sector

HUNGRY

[...] the banks are now hungry for assets

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IMMUNE

Although the division was never expected to be immune from recession, news [...] knocked the shares down 16p to 224p [...]

INCUBATION

Chicago's long-awaited global trading weapon, Globex, opened in June after a five-year incubation

INJECT

[...] the Government plans to inject more than £1 billion

LIFE-BLOOD

[...] small businesses are the life-blood of the nation

MEDICINE

[...] the harsh medicine through which the ERM medicine achieves its end

MISCARRY

[...] the INO's plan to increase productivity miscarried

NURSE

[...] that Germany should have nursed the lira through

OVERWEIGHT

The company has been, for some time, overweight in Latin America

PATIENT

[...] the patient is alive but not yet available to run a marathon

PULSE

[...] to a pulse-raising £8.350

RECOVERY

Dollar makes tentative recovery

RECUPERATE

[...] has allowed companies to recuperate from the recession

RELAPSE

[...] rather than relapse into another semi-recession

RESUSCITATE

[...] a desperate attempt to resuscitate the ailing tourist industry

REVITALISE

[...] to boost investment and revitalise the economy

SICK

We had a very sick balance-sheet

STARVE

[...] they are already starved of capital

STERILISE

This move helped to sterilise the massive intervention by the Bundesbank on the foreign exchanges

SUPPORT SYSTEM

He wanted to see duties of environmental care written into as many of the EC market support systems as possible

SURGERY

Now, under a new chairman, Mr John Curran, and extensive surgery to bring overheads in line with sales expectations [...]

SYNDROME

The familiar Nigerian syndrome of the central bank trying to contain inflation while the government spends [...]

Some analysts suggested that the resounding silence could have been due to a watch and wait syndrome

TEMPERATURE

However, spurious stories raised the temperature in Unigate, ahead 6 at 360p

TRANSPLANT

Japanese car makers setting up transplant manufacturing operations in Europe

TRAUMA

He insisted yesterday that GM's financial traumas in North America had not undermined any capital [...]

UMBILICAL

Stock Exchange severs its umbilical cord

[...] strong banking regulator without umbilical links

WOUND

The Bank re-opened the wound at a critical stage