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Metaphorical Representation of Coronavirus in Medical Myths

Elena S. Stepanova 

Samara State Medical University,

89, Чапаевская str., Samara, Russian Federation, 443099

✉ pretty.step@bk.ru

Abstract. This paper focuses on metaphorical representation of coronavirus in medical myths on the example of the British media. To attain this goal, the descriptive metaphor theory is used for the analysis of metaphorical models for the conceptualization of coronavirus. The information about the virus transmitted by the media correlates with background knowledge of the recipient, acquires new conceptual characteristics. Our hypothesis is that metaphorical actualization of coronavirus in medical myths is represented by the descriptive metaphor, the content of which changes depending on the specifics of the spread of the virus over the country as well as the political situation in the country. The research is based on the assumption that metaphorical implications in medical myths influence the representation of the disease, which reflects not only general beliefs about this disease, but also molds the public opinion on political situation in the linguocultural society. The objective of this research is to analyze the titles and leads of the British press about coronavirus and interpret the metaphorical models for the conceptualization of coronavirus, used in medical myths. The objective of the research determined the choice of research methods: content analysis of titles and leads that contain metaphorical models for the conceptualization of coronavirus in medical myths; sampling analysis aimed at identifying and describing the functions of metaphorical models in the representation of the disease in medical myths. The notions of metalanguage such as the signification descriptor and the denotation descriptor are used to describe the functioning of metaphors. The research findings reveal that for the conceptualization of coronavirus in medical myths the following metaphorical models are used: ‘Coronavirus-military rival’, ‘Coronavirus-natural disaster’ and ‘Coronavirus-silver lining’.

Keywords: coronavirus, metaphorical representation, conceptualization, medical myth, metaphorical model, disease

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Метафорическая репрезентация коронавируса в медицинских мифах

Е.С. Степанова 

Самарский государственный медицинский университет,
443099, Российская Федерация, Самара, ул. Чапаевская, д. 89

✉pretty.step@bk.ru

Аннотация. Статья посвящена метафорической репрезентации коронавируса в медицинских мифах на примере британских СМИ. Для достижения этой цели используется дескриптивная теория метафоры для анализа метафорических моделей концептуализации коронавируса. Информация о вирусе, передаваемая СМИ, коррелирует с фоновыми знаниями реципиента, приобретает новые концептуальные характеристики, которые отражаются в медицинских мифах. Гипотеза исследования заключается в том, что метафорическая репрезентация коронавируса в медицинских мифах представлена дескриптивной метафорой, содержание которой меняется в зависимости от специфики распространения вируса, а также политической ситуации в стране. Исходной предпосылкой для исследования является предположение о том, что метафорические значения в медицинских мифах влияют на представление о болезни, которое отражает не только общие представления об этом заболевании, но и формирует общественное мнение о политической ситуации в лингвокультурном обществе. Цель этого исследования — проанализировать заголовки и лиды британской прессы о коронавирусе и интерпретировать метафорические модели концептуализации коронавируса, используемые в медицинских мифах. Цель исследования обусловила выбор методов исследования: контент-анализ заголовков и лидов, содержащих метафорические модели для концептуализации коронавируса в медицинских мифах; выборочный анализ, направленный на выявление и описание функций метафорических моделей для репрезентации болезни в медицинских мифах. Нами были использованы понятия метаязыка, такие, как «сигнификативный дескриптор» и «денотативный дескриптор», которые позволяют описывать функционирование метафор. Результаты исследования показывают, что для концептуализации коронавируса в медицинских мифах используются следующие метафорические модели: «Коронавирус — военный соперник», «Коронавирус — стихийное бедствие» и «Коронавирус — луч надежды».

Ключевые слова: коронавирус, метафорическое представление, концептуализация, медицинский миф, метафорическая модель, болезнь

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Introduction

The pandemic outbreak of coronavirus in the beginning of 2020 has become a significant event in the world politics and economics. The virus, which appeared in the Chinese city Wuhan, has not only spread over all the countries of the world and

become the reason of a great number of human deaths, but has also affected the world economy, bringing down the stock markets and world politics, causing mutual accusations and generating conspiracy theories. At the same time the main channel of circulation of information about coronavirus and its consequences is the media. Mass media discourse creates this or that image of the disease in the mind of the recipient adopting an attitude to it. The information about the virus transmitted by the media correlates with background knowledge of the recipient, acquires new conceptual characteristics. As a result they can be categorized in medical myths.

The correlation of any phenomenon with this or that category in mind affects the creation of myths. Besides, it is the media that generate coronavirus myths which reflect the state's policy in the struggle with the virus. Facing the disease, Great Britain demonstrated its special way in the struggle with the virus. The representation of coronavirus in medical myths matches the British national character and contributes to the nation's mobilization in the required moment. The process of metaphorization plays a significant role in the representation of the virus in medical myths. When journalists transmit the characteristics of the virus to other fields of human knowledge, they touch profound cognitive structures of the recipients, affecting extensively the creation of the disease representation in medical myths. They make us believe in things for which logic or evidence is lacking. When medical myths convince us to act in ways that are contrary to our own interests, or (for doctors) to the interests of patients, we must critically challenge their assumptions, and finally, have the courage to abandon them [1. P. 208].

The objective of the research is the analysis of metaphorical representation of coronavirus in medical myths and determination of interrelation of this representation with extralinguistic factors. The analysis is based on the following hypothesis: "Metaphorical representation of coronavirus is associated with the epidemiological situation in the country. Metaphorical actualization of coronavirus in medical myths is represented by the descriptive metaphor, the content of which changes depending on the specifics of the spread of the virus over the country as well as the political situation in the country".

To prove this hypothesis we analyzed 150 titles and leads of the British newspapers and medical scientific popularization journals from the period of 20th April 2020 to 20th January 2021, when the spread of coronavirus was the most rapid.

The objective of this research is to analyze the titles and leads of the British press about coronavirus and interpret the metaphorical models for the conceptualization of coronavirus, used in medical myths.

The objective of the research determined the choice of research methods: content analysis of titles and leads that contain metaphorical models for the conceptualization of coronavirus in medical myths; sampling analysis aimed at identifying and describing the functions of metaphorical models in the representation of the disease in medical myths.

Methodology

Our research is based on the works on the conceptual metaphor theory [2; 3], the semantic metaphor theory [4; 5], discourse metaphor theory [6], critical discourse analysis [7] and critical metaphor analysis [3; 16].

The notion “conceptual metaphor” determines the mapping of knowledge about one conceptual domain in another one [2]. According to Lakoff and Johnson’s conceptual metaphor theory (CMT), this type of metaphor should be understood as the nominative type of linguistic metaphor, leading to the formation of abstract meaning. Such a metaphor, being a conceptual phenomenon, cannot be limited to the sphere of language [2; 10; 11]. At the same time, in the process of projecting a metaphor, a number of important functions are actualized, among which the most significant are the addition of meaning and emotional colouring, the transfer of elements of a changed cultural paradigm, the transfer of conceptual changes. These functions provide an integrated conceptual structure instead of disparate fragments.

Ricoeur’s view on metaphor reflects the process of functioning of the metaphor in the language and combines both semantic and psychological aspects. Metaphor, according to Ricoeur, is a “semantic conflict” caused by the emergence of a new predicative meaning based on the everyday lexical meanings of words. The author also emphasizes that when constructing the theory of metaphor, it is important to take into account the psychology of imagination because the metaphorical meaning is generated by imagination. In addition, Ricoeur pays great attention to the syntactic aspect of metaphor and believes that the sentence contains the metaphorical meaning, and the process of metaphorization is not a transfer of the word meaning, but the interaction between a logical subject and a predicate in a sentence. Hence, the metaphorical meaning is the result of the semantic shift at the level of meaning and a deviating predication, not a deviating nomination. Moreover, from the point of view of the researcher, metaphorical statements are devoid of informative content [12. P. 162—195].

Davidson and Searle developed Lakoff and Johnson’s conceptual metaphor theory by stating that the metaphor is interpreted in terms of the mechanism of its action. According to this approach, the mechanism of metaphor is not actualized at the level of semantics, but in the sphere of its use. When interpreting the concept of metaphor, one should not discard the direct meaning of the word, since it participates equally with the figurative meaning in the process of metaphorization. According to Davidson, imagery is already embedded in the direct meaning of the words of the language. When perceiving a metaphor, we immediately understand its metaphorical meaning, and do not attribute it as something additional to a given metaphorical statement [4. P. 238—254].

The basis of Lakoff and Johnson’s conceptual metaphor theory were advanced by other linguists, such as Baranov and Kövecses. They developed descriptive metaphor theory to study metaphorical specifics of discourse as a whole but not its individual examples. According to Baranov, metaphorical projection is the function of mapping the elements of the source domain to the elements of the target domain [13. P. 73—79].

Kövecses states that the source domain often projects on the target domain extra meanings in addition to the basic meaning. These additional meanings are called metaphoric implications of a conceptual metaphor [3. P. 17]. To describe the function of mapping the author uses the language of semantic descriptors [13. P. 73—79].

A metaphor is also defined as a discourse phenomenon. The notion “discourse metaphor” is defined as a stable metaphorical projection which functions as a key frame inside a definite discourse during a period of time [14]. Thus, to define a metaphor as a discourse one, it should have the following criteria: length, stability, frame character, and belong to a definite discourse.

The research in the field of discursive approach to metaphor was undertaken by German linguists Walter and Helmig. They postulate that metaphor is not only a cognitive phenomenon, but also a social one. Implicit categorized structures are reflected in metaphor, which influence the construction of reality in the society [6].

Critical discourse analysis is aimed at the identification and interpretation of discursive metaphorical models in their interrelation with extralinguistic factors. According to this approach, the focus of the researcher is shifted from the process of development of metaphorical models towards their influence on the collective consciousness. The theory of critical metaphor analysis focuses on the identification of the implicit information by the analysis of discursive metaphorical models. This is the main mental operation that unites two conceptual spheres and creates the opportunity to use the structuring potentials of the source domain when conceptualizing a new domain [9; 15].

Since the aim of our research is to analyze metaphorical models for the conceptualization of coronavirus in medical myths, it is necessary to give the definition to the notion “disease myth”. This term is defined as commonly-held beliefs based on well-known concepts about a particular disease typical of a linguocultural society and which are based on the fear of the unknown and unavoidable [16].

Disease myths acquire semantic meaning, become symbols, have linguocultural meaning, and they are passed down from one generation to the next. It is typical human nature to give additional connotations to frightening linguocultural phenomena (coronavirus is among them). Obviously, it is necessary to study the influence of myths on the system of representations of the disease. One cannot study disease myths without language or culture [16].

Our research is based on the understanding of the dual nature of metaphor. It functions as a cognitive and discourse phenomenon. Metaphorical implications in medical myths influence the representation of the disease, which reflects not only general beliefs about this disease, but also molds the public opinion on political situation in the linguocultural society.

Descriptive metaphor theory was used to pursue the objective of analyzing metaphorical models for the conceptualization of coronavirus, used in medical myths. With this approach, this paper not only looks at the frequencies of metaphorical models that represent medical myths in the British media but also provides their functional interpretations.

The difference between the descriptive metaphor theory and the conceptual one is that it reflects the linguistic aspect of metaphor functions. In this theory a metaphor is described as a set of signification and denotation descriptors which represent the source domain and the target domain of the metaphorical projection. The use of metalanguage of signification and denotation descriptors makes it possible to describe the contexts of metaphor usage.

The use of words accepted in the descriptive metaphor theory reflects the linguistic aspect of metaphor functioning. The metaphorical model in this case turns out to be a homogeneous domain of the source — homogeneous from the point of view of human experience and semantics. In this sense, the metaphorical model in the descriptive metaphor theory is a linguistic metaphorical model.

We have developed a methodology for analyzing metaphorical models of coronavirus in medical myths: 1) the performance of the content analysis of the titles and leads in the British media to conceptualize coronavirus in medical myths; 2) the use of the metalanguage of signification and denotation descriptors allowing to describe the functioning of metaphors.

The language of descriptors makes it possible to evaluate the quantity of metaphorical models from the point of their functioning in the discourse. For example, it is possible to determine the “cognitive loads” of signification descriptors. The more realities are described by the signification descriptors, the greater potential of the metaphorical model is in this type of the discourse.

Results and discussion

The results of the content analysis of 150 titles and leads of the British press show that the following metaphorical models for the conceptualization of coronavirus in medical myths are used: ‘*military rival*’, ‘*natural disaster*’ and ‘*silver lining*’.

The results of the analysis show that thematically related fields of signification descriptors form ‘metaphorical models’ (M-models). For example, signification descriptors that have the semantics of military operations form the model ‘*Coronavirus — military rival*’, descriptors thematically related to natural disaster form the model ‘*Coronavirus — natural disaster*’ and descriptors thematically related to hopeful prospects form the model ‘*Coronavirus-silver lining*’.

According to the descriptive metaphor theory, the metaphor ‘*Coronavirus — military rival*’ is represented as a two-element set of the following type: <coronavirus>, <military combatant, military activity>. As for the model ‘*Coronavirus-natural disaster*’, it is described as a two-element set of the following type: <coronavirus>, <natural catastrophe, natural disaster>. Regarding the model ‘*Coronavirus-silver lining*’, it is shown as a two-element set of the following type: <coronavirus>, <hopeful prospect, silver lining>. The first descriptor is a signification, the other two are denotations.

The metaphorical model ‘*Coronavirus-military rival*’ is used as during the pandemic people strive to fight it, and war is the extreme form of confrontation.

Military terms which serve as the means of verbalization of metaphors are as follows: *'secret weapon against Covid-19'*, *'New Covid-19 variant is beating all others'*, *'volunteers are the hidden army'*. The metaphorical model *'Coronavirus-military rival'* can be illustrated by the following example:

*"The new variant of coronavirus spreading across London and the South East is "beating all the others" in transmission"*¹.

In this example the journalist uses the metaphor *'the new variant of coronavirus is beating all the others'* to explore the myth that the new variant, which is said to be the cause for a rapid rise in infections, is becoming the dominant strain.

In the next example the journalist uses the metaphor *'Covid-19 fractured medical aid delivery'* to establish the myth that the pandemic has had a significant impact on medical aid; going beyond the obvious financial implications of an economic crisis and extending to personnel, supplies, and disease control:

*"Covid-19 fractured medical aid delivery"*².

A large number of metaphors in the British media belong to the model *'Coronavirus-natural disaster'*. In this case, the virus is perceived as a kind of dangerous element. Sometimes this metaphorical model is based on specific comparisons with a hurricane or a storm, for example: *'new wave is overwhelming hospitals'*, *'new wave is hitting Europe'*, *'Covid is a disaster'*. The metaphorical model *'Coronavirus-natural disaster'* can be shown in the following example:

*"Coronavirus is the biggest disaster for developing nations in our lifetime"*³.

In this example the journalist uses the metaphor *'coronavirus is a disaster'* to establish the myth that devastating economic and health crises in poorer countries will affect the whole world.

In the next example the journalist uses the metaphor *'wave of Covid-19'* to demystify the myth that the virus breaks out and is suppressed in peaks and troughs, until enough of the population is vaccinated or potentially develops immunity:

*"The first wave of Covid-19 is not over — but how might a second look?"*⁴.

A separate group of metaphors is formed according to the model *'Coronavirus-silver lining'*. Experts have high hopes for vaccination and believe that thanks to it, it will be possible to get rid of the terrible consequences of the Coronavirus. This model is represented by the following metaphors: *'our Covid-19 silver lining'*, *'a silver lining in the dark Covid-19 cloud'*. The metaphorical model *'Coronavirus-silver lining'* can be represented in the following example:

¹ Evening Standard. URL: <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/covid-variant-beating-others-transmission-b393809.html> (accessed: 02.02.2021).

² British medical journal. URL: <https://blogs.bmj.com/covid-19/2020/09/25/how-covid-19-fractured-medical-aid-delivery/> (accessed: 02.02.2021).

³ The Guardian. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/21/coronavirus-disaster-developing-nations-global-marshall-plan> (accessed: 02.02.2021).

⁴ The Guardian. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2020/jun/05/the-first-wave-of-covid-19-is-not-over-but-how-may-a-second-look> (accessed: 02.02.2021).

“*The Covid-19 pandemic is like a big black cloud that has descended on earth, bringing with it death and destruction. However, without minimising the seriousness of the situation we are in, I see some silver linings in the dark cloud... the elevation of the importance of international organisations, such as the World Health Organisation (WHO)*”⁵.

In this example the journalist uses the metaphor ‘*silver linings in the dark cloud*’ to create the myth that the current pandemic is a good reminder of the indispensable role played by the WHO in maintaining international public health.

In the next example the journalist uses the metaphor ‘*surprising silver lining of lockdown*’ to establish the myth that the social distancing and lockdown have given us an opportunity to reconnect. Reconnect with ourselves:

“*The surprising silver lining of lockdown ...*”⁶.

The results of the sampling analysis of metaphorical models that represent the disease in medical myths indicate that the most widely used metaphorical model is ‘*Coronavirus-military rival*’ (70 units, 47% of sampling), the less used one is ‘*Coronavirus-silver lining*’ (27 units or 18% of sampling) (see Fig. 1).

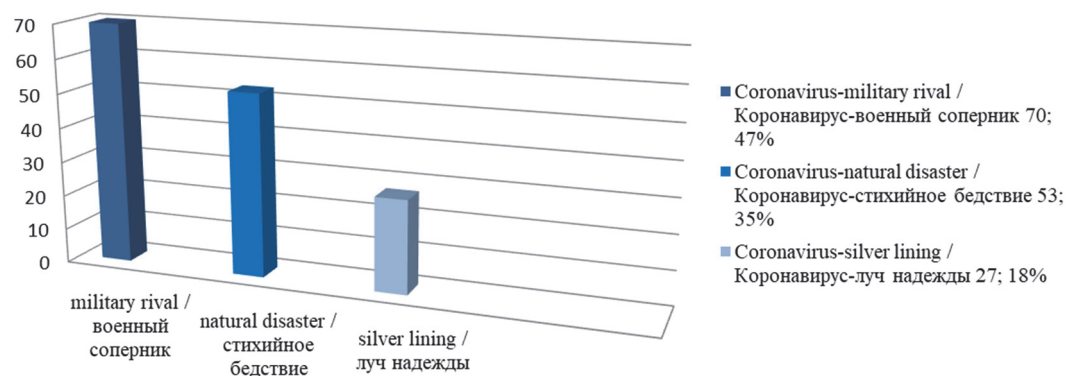


Fig. 1. The frequency of coronavirus metaphorical models in medical myths
Рис. 1. Частота использования метафорических моделей при описании коронавируса в медицинских мифах

The wide use of metaphorical model ‘*Coronavirus-military rival*’ is explained by the fact that the virus becomes an enemy, and the fight against it becomes a war. At the same time, the virus is a rival that causes fear and anxiety. However, the dominance of military terms contributes to the idea of the virus as an enemy: it is possible and necessary not only to fight it, but also to defeat it.

As for the model ‘*Coronavirus-natural disaster*’, it is less frequent as not all people recognize its natural origin. Some people think that COVID-19 passed on to

⁵ The Straits Times. URL: <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/7-silver-linings-in-covid-19-dark-cloud> (accessed: 12.02.2021).

⁶ The Guardian. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/may/22/silver-lining-lockdown-wotsits-spaghetti-toast-proustian-madeleine> (accessed: 12.02.2021).

humans from bats in the Chinese city of Wuhan. Others say that it was not the result of the evolution of coronavirus, but the result of the systemic work of scientists.

Regarding the model ‘*Coronavirus-silver lining*’, it is the least widespread since the incidence of Covid-19 is very high and does not allow people to hope for the best. “Silver lining” is an additional component since the situation with coronavirus is very serious.

Conclusion

People have different views on the origin of coronavirus. Some people believe that it is the war, as it has become the reason of a great number of human deaths. Others believe that it is a natural disaster since coronavirus occurs in multiple-wave outbreaks. The situation with Covid-19 is horrifying. And the incidence rate is falling very slowly. Thus, hope is very rare in headlines.

Our research dwelt upon the problem of representation of coronavirus in medical myths established by the British media. Metaphorical models contribute to the conceptualization of coronavirus in medical myths. Metaphorical models as means of expressing the notion “coronavirus” show associations of this phenomenon with well-known concepts, adopt a mental attitude, a certain approach to it either as a military rival, natural disaster or silver lining.

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Information about the author:

Elena S. Stepanova, PhD of Philology, Department of Foreign and Latin Languages, Samara State Medical University; *Research Interests*: Cognitive linguistics, Cultural linguistics, Semantics; *e-mail*: pretty.step@bk.ru eLIBRARY SPIN-code: 6992-0076. Scopus Author ID: 57222422219

Сведения об авторе:

Степанова Елена Сергеевна, кандидат филологических наук, доцент кафедры иностранных и латинского языков Самарского государственного медицинского университета; *научные интересы*: когнитивная лингвистика, лингвокультурология, семантика; *e-mail*: pretty.step@bk.ru eLIBRARY SPIN-код: 6992-0076. Scopus Author ID: 57222422219