

Metaphorical analogies in an online discussion forum for relationship abuse survivors: “*That analogy really works for me*”

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When people undergo traumatic events, they frequently turn to metaphor in an attempt to make what might initially seem indescribable into something comprehensible to others, and/or to help themselves reach a clearer understanding of what has happened to them. This investigation explores such metaphorical language produced in an online discussion forum by survivors of relationship abuse to communicate about various aspects of their experience.

The specific linguistic focus here consists of metaphorical analogies that such survivors use about various aspects of their abuse experience, including their perception of past actions, involved parties, present and future recovery, and emotions. The present analysis first explores the ways survivors ‘frame’ their experience through selection of a particular source domain, and then goes on to look at the various source domain ‘scenarios’ that are subsequently drawn upon to elaborate various salient details of the abuse. Further, the analysis discusses the ways in which survivors negotiate and develop metaphorical scenarios and frames among themselves in their forum discussions (see e.g. Musolff, 2016; Semino & Demjén, 2016 for discussion of frames and scenarios).

Metaphor is often used to discuss abstract, complex ideas in terms of more concrete entities, whereby certain real or perceived qualities from a concrete ‘source’ domain are mapped to an abstract ‘target’ domain. Cognitive linguists maintain that the metaphors we use in language offer evidence about how we conceive of the world around us. Systematic analysis of metaphors used in authentic discourse may thus provide particular insight into the values, attitudes, and experiences of relationship abuse survivors, especially as metaphor naturally lends itself as a resource when people are attempting to share, explain or make sense of highly emotional and/or traumatic events (see e.g. Demjén, 2016; Kövecses, 2000; Semino et al., 2015).

Primary material and methods

The empirical data for this investigation consists of the metaphorical language produced in a publically available online discussion forum for anonymous posters, accessible without password protection. The forum allows survivors of relationship abuse to start and/or respond to threads about their ongoing or past experience in an abusive relationship. The relationships discussed most frequently involve a love partner: a spouse, a live-in partner, or a boyfriend/girlfriend. Other abusive relationships discussed concern family members (usually parents, siblings, or children), colleagues, and/or platonic friends. The abuse under discussion is always mental and emotional, but is sometimes also manifested in other forms, e.g. physical, financial, etc. The forum threads comprise a corpus of 44.6 million words produced over a six-year period: 302,793 posts produced by 4561 individual posters in 4042 threads.

The corpus was first uploaded into Wmatrix, a web interface using the CLAWS part-of-speech tagger and USAS semantic tagger (see <http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/wmatrix3.html>). Concordance lines and co-text for all metaphorical comparisons overtly flagged by use of the lexeme ANALOGY were retrieved for analysis: roughly 500 extended metaphors in all. These comparisons were assigned brief 'labels' summarizing their contents, which were then semantically annotated to identify the underlying metaphorical frames focusing on "some aspects of a perceived reality [to] make them more salient in a communicating text" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). The particular scenario in any given frame was then fleshed out to fill in the correspondences between the various elements expressed in the analogy and the various elements in the abuse experience, along with any overall message. Finally, investigation into the co-text of the identified analogies allowed for evaluation into how survivors react to, accept, expand, and/or reject the metaphorical comparisons advanced by members of the discourse community.

By way of example, consider the metaphorical comparison in (1), labeled as a 'tornado' analogy.

- (1) I think of them [abusers] kind of like tornados. They touch down and destroy everything in their path then disappear, we good people just happen to be the pretty red barn in the field they land in.

USAS annotation assigns the words 'tornado' with the code *W4*, indicating that this term falls in to the discourse field of the *world and environment (W)*, and more specifically, the *weather (4)*. 'Weather' is then taken here as the frame. In this particular scenario, the abuser is equated with a tornado, while the survivors are simply in the wrong place at the wrong time, the random and disempowered victims of indomitable and ruthless forces of nature. Unlike many analogies that are discussed among posters, this particular contribution brought about no direct response.

Sample analysis

Three points immediately stand out upon analysis of the metaphorical comparisons in this corpus. First, there is immense variety in the types of selected frames, rather than any 'one-size fits all' solution. Second, few posters select the identical scenario to describe (parts of) their experience, even within the same frame. Third, despite such wide variety, most proposed comparisons strike a chord with other members of the discourse community; members frequently show their support for each other by complimenting posters for an analogy that particularly resonates. Only rarely is there dissent, although alternative analogies may be advanced; this is part of the negotiation between survivors as they try to reach an understanding of their experience.

Here we contrast a few selected scenarios belonging to the same frame, all explicitly marked at some point in the discussion as an analogy: twenty-eight analogies fall into the discourse field of the *world and environment*, seven of which belong to the subdivision *weather*. Within this frame, three survivors selected a scenario of natural disaster. Two elaborate on a tornado analogy, while the third discusses a hurricane analogy; see (1) above, (2), and (3) respectively.

(2) In a blink of an eye we can lose all that we have - the psycho came through our lives much like a tornado showing no mercy on who they touched down on - but it is the love and volunteering of others much like this site and in our communities that pull victims together and get them back on their feet - How would we live without that love -we would be nothing but a tornado and a psychopath that only rips things apart.

(3) My latest analogy for the abuser is, a hurricane came through and ripped the roof off my house - nothing I can do to change what happened, but I am in full control of my recovery.

The tornado analogy in (2) shares the same mappings as those already identified in (1). The remark in (2), however, is preceded by the poster's recounting of her then-current experience with an actual tornado that had just hit her local community. She describes the grief and shock among the people who had lost their homes and places of business, and - importantly - also the generosity and caring among those who were able to offer help and support. This image of solidarity in the face of inexplicable adversity adds an uplifting note to the analogy, missing in (1). The figurative hurricane in (3) plays the same disempowering role as the tornado in the two previous examples, yet here the poster describes her subsequent reclaiming of her own sense of empowerment in even stronger terms than in (2); the helpless victim of a natural disaster becomes a determined survivor.

This same contrast between disempowered victim and empowered survivor in the wake of a natural catastrophe is explicitly discussed by another poster, in an analogy about earthquakes - also falling into the 'world and environment' superordinate category, but annotated with the USAS tag for the subcategory of 'geographical terms' (W3 tag) rather than 'weather' (W4 tag). In (4), a poster brings up her therapist's analogy where the overall abuse experience is compared to an earthquake.

(4) She gave me an analogy to state her position of total responsibility for choosing life's experiences. Her words, "If someone finds themselves in an earthquake, that person chose the experience on some level."

By the logic of this therapist, no abuse survivor is a completely innocent victim of random events, as is the contention in the earlier tornado and hurricane analogies. Instead, we are all at least partially responsible for everything that befalls us. In a sense, this therapist's view is one of empowerment, for it should always be possible to actively change circumstances that are under our control. In this case, however, the poster adamantly rejects the implications of the therapist's metaphor; see (5).

(5) I can not accept this belief system. If in an earthquake, I do not hold myself accountable for being the victim of an earthquake, but only my actions following my experience. How I cope with it. I am not responsible for childhood abuse, only my journey to heal from it. And I did not choose to be a victim of a disordered abuser. But I am responsible for healing from it, growing from this so I will not be targeted again.

This statement thus mirrors the view expressed in the hurricane analogy in (3), with the distinction between hapless victim and responsible survivor. In these scenarios, while the posters accept no blame for the abuse itself, they do accept responsibility for their reactions to the abuse.

References

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