

Cancer as a Metaphor

Malahat Shabani Minaabad^{1,*}

¹ Department of English Language Teaching and Linguistics, Payame Noor University, Tehran, Iran

*Corresponding author: Malahat Shabani Minaabad, Department of English Language Teaching and Linguistics, Payame Noor University, P.O. BOX: 19395-3697, Tehran, Iran. Tel: +989143533955; Fax: +982433750686; E-mail: m.shabani@pnu.ac.ir; shabani110@yahoo.com

DOI: 10.30699/mci.4.4.420

Submitted: 17 May 2020

Revised: 3 Jun 2020

Accepted: 24 Jun 2020

e-Published: 1 October 2020

© 2020. Multidisciplinary Cancer Investigation

DEAR EDITOR,

The term metaphor is derived from metaphora, a Greek word comprising meta (over) and pherin (carry), which literally means carrying over. Metaphors are important tools in thinking and communicating, and they have great importance in cognitive linguistics. Metaphors are abundantly used in different fields, including medical texts. In this respect, metaphors and abstract concepts are also found in cancer-related studies. Metaphors frame the same subject in different ways and facilitate different conclusions and evaluations. Thus metaphors can be used as an expression due to the existence of specific frames and clauses and assessments they suggest. Hence, using metaphors is a controversial topic because of a combination of such factors and the use of certain phrases and related concepts [1]. Considering a linguistic performance, in addition to communicating through message transmission, what gives depth and meaning to this communication is the effect that linguistic tools create on the audience. In this regard, one of the most important tools to transmit language from its real function to a virtual and literary one is a metaphor [2, 3]. Metaphors are abundantly used in different fields, including medical texts. In this respect, metaphors

and abstract concepts are also found in cancer-related studies. In the last four decades, cancer was one of the leading causes of death worldwide, despite significant advances in its treatment. Sontag refers to two main reasons for using a metaphor: understanding the causes of cancer and treating it [4]. Ever since the book "Illness as Metaphor" was published by Sontag, there has been a good deal of empirical and theoretical research on the role of metaphors in diseases, especially cancer, all around the world [4]. However, the effect of using metaphors in cancer-related texts on patients' fear has not received enough attention in Iran. According to some researchers, metaphors are influenced by cognition and discourse. In addition, cancer increases panic attacks in people more than any other disease. A study in Australia found that cancer was the most frightening word among people [5]. Metaphors are largely used since early ages. Therefore, one of the ways to reduce people's fear and anxiety about the word cancer is paying special attention to cancer metaphors in the language and culture of each nation. According to cognitive researchers, empirical studies show the ways metaphors can influence arguments and evaluate people on various issues. In this respect, the most effective metaphors in terms of framing effects include (a) source domains that are widely accessible and clearly delineated, (b) mappings that are apt (i.e., precise application to the target domain), and (c) target domains that are complex, abstract, and not already linked to confident understandings and strong views in the relevant individuals or groups [6]. Since the impact of using metaphors on cancer-related texts is not fully investigated, the current study aimed at reviewing the metaphors related to cancer in the articles published in the journal of Multidisciplinary Cancer Investigation (MCI). Accordingly, the study attempted to address the

following question: "What metaphors did the authors use when reporting cancer-related cases in the MCI journal?"

The book "Illness as a Metaphor" became a model for studies on metaphors and diseases [4]. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) developed a kind of paradigm in cognitive linguistics by expressing the conceptual metaphor theory (CMT). They stated that CMT includes cognitive maps or a set of domains of dominant goals, most of which are subjective, abstract, and complex, and less well-thought-out. Furthermore, medical language is highly complex and somehow ambiguous; the reason for this issue is that clinical medicine is not just an exact science, but a form of science mixed with art that is in a swamp of human emotions influenced by multiple abstract variables [7]. Emotional experiences can hardly be expressed in precise scientific language; therefore, it is metaphors that relate these new emotional experiences to old experiences and help to understand the complex pattern of emotions. Hence, researchers and experts widely use conceptual metaphors to make communication easier. In this sentence, the term invasive, which is a military and conceptual metaphor, was used. This metaphor refers to a patient with cancer as an attacked and conflicted individual. Hence, paying attention to metaphors used in articles and discourses are of particular importance.

Today, using linguistic methods or questionnaires to collect data is not acceptable for linguists working on metaphor. They believe that using metaphoric words in studies is a suitable method to show the mechanisms of the human brain. In the present study, we used a manual method to search for selected conceptual metaphors. The keywords used to extract articles from the MCI included cancer, survival, invasive methods, chemotherapy, and radiation therapy.

The current research used the metaphor identification procedure (MCP) developed by Group (2007). This model is a systematic approach to recognize word phrases used metaphorically in the text and includes the following steps [8]:

1. Scanning the text and getting an overview of the entire text of the reviewed articles.
2. Detecting the target units or words within the whole text (e.g. cancer, breast, etc.).
3. The instant meanings of all words and metaphors found in the second stage are examined, and their meanings in other texts are evaluated (e.g. in the research, it was found that words such as invasive treatments and survival have different meanings, like conflict, aggression, and war).
4. If these steps are taken carefully, all the remaining words are metaphors.

In the current study, six papers published in the MCI

Table 1: The Published Papers Reviewed in the Present Study

	The Published Papers	Reference Number	Number of Metaphors
1	Zangouri V, Akrami M, Tahmasebi S, Talei A, Ghaeini Hesaroeih A, Hosseini S. Medullary Breast Carcinoma and Invasive Ductal Carcinoma: A Review Study. <i>Multidiscip Cancer Investig.</i> 2017;1(Suppl 1). DOI: 10.21859/mci-supp-100.	[9]	5
2	Jafari M, Gity M, Olfatbakhsh A. Comparing Ultrasound Features of Invasive Ductal Carcinoma Regarding Patient Ages: ≤ 40 Years Old and Above it. <i>Multidiscip Cancer Investig.</i> 2017;1(Suppl 1). DOI: 10.21859/mci-supp-118.	[10]	9
3	Akbari M, Rasaf M, Nafissi N, Shojaee L. The Effect of Patho-biological Factors on the Survival of Recurrent Breast Cancer Patients. <i>Multidiscip Cancer Investig.</i> 2017;1(Suppl 1). DOI: 10.21859/mci-supp-101.	[11]	10
4	Atashgar K, Sheikhaliyani A, Tajvidi M, Molana SH, Jalaeyan L. Survival analysis of breast cancer patients with different chronic diseases through parametric and semi-parametric approaches. <i>Multidiscip Cancer Investig.</i> 2018;2(1):26-32. DOI: 10.30699/acadpub.mci.2.1.26.	[12]	6
5	Dehghani Z, Tavakoli M, Mokarian F. Assessment of the Memory of Patients with Breast Cancer Before and After Chemotherapy. <i>Multidiscip Cancer Investig.</i> 2017;1(Suppl 1). DOI: mci-supp-107.	[13]	5
6	Jalili F, Masoudi Alavi N, Abedzadeh Kalahroudi M. Frequency of Symptoms in Patients With Cancer Receiving Chemotherapy, According to Gender and the Primary Site of the Cancer in Kashan, Iran, 2017. <i>Multidiscip Cancer Investig.</i> 2019;3(1):17-24.	[14]	4

journal conducted on cancer treatment, especially breast cancer, were randomly selected and scanned for metaphoric words. Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the papers and the number of metaphors found.

After reviewing these published papers in the MCI journal, four cancer-related metaphors were identified as follows:

1. Cancer is a war (battle): In sentences containing cancer-related metaphors, patients' bodies were considered as scenes of war and their experiences as the experience of a person on the battlefield.
2. Cancer is a trip: In sentences containing cancer-related metaphors, cancer was considered a trip. Some of the metaphorical phrases in this group have a theme that cancer patients have a lot of difficulties along the way
3. Cancer is a restriction: In sentences containing cancer-related metaphors, cancer is considered as a limitation and obstacle.
4. Cancer treatments are transactions: In sentences containing cancer-related metaphors, cancer treatment is considered as a transaction. For example, the sentence "common treatments for cancer have fewer effects" shows that treating a patient with cancer is like a transaction.

In the current study, an attempt was made to highlight how euphemistic metaphors and words used by researchers can evoke patients' subconscious minds. According to many studies, using words has an emotional and cognitive load that is useful and effective in the mental health and perceptions of people of diseases. Studies show that cancer-related metaphors used in scientific texts are useful for expressing different aspects of the disease and patients' experiences. In other words, these metaphors facilitate characterizing the stages of the disease that a patient experience [15]. Therefore, it seems essential for researchers to pay attention to this issue. It is suggested that further similar studies be conducted on patients with cancer to evaluate the psychological effects of using metaphoric terms and euphemisms related to cancer.

REFERENCES

1. Potts A, Semino E. Cancer as a Metaphor. *Metaphor Symb.* 2019;34(2):81-95. DOI: [10.1080/10926488.2019.1611723](https://doi.org/10.1080/10926488.2019.1611723).
2. Altmann C. "To use a metaphor at a time like this would be obscene": a study of cancer, poetry and metaphor. *COLLOQUY Text Theory Critique* [Internet]. 2017 May 22 [cited 2020 Aug 12]; (15):[7-35 pp.]. Available from: [3. Ghobadi Kia A, Rahmati M. A review in metaphor and its types in the most important rhetorical books. The 10th International Conference on the Promotion of Persian Language and Literature; August 26-28; Ardabil: Mohaghegh Ardabili University; 2015.
 4. Sontag S. *Illness As Metaphor*. 1st ed. New York, USA: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 1978. 87 p.
 5. Quaresma M, Coleman MP, Rachet B. 40-year trends in an index of survival for all cancers combined and survival adjusted for age and sex for each cancer in England and Wales, 1971–2011: a population-based study. *Lancet*. 2015;385\(9974\):1206-18. DOI: \[10.1016/S0140-6736\\(14\\)61396-9\]\(https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(14\)61396-9\) PMID: \[25479696\]\(https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25479696/\).
 6. Grady J. Using metaphor to influence public perceptions and policy: how metaphors can save the world. In: Semino E, Demjén Z, editors. *The Routledge Handbook of Metaphor and Language*. London: Routledge; 2017. p. 540.
 7. Lakoff G, Johnson M. Conceptual Metaphor in Everyday Language. *J Philos*. 1980;77\(8\):453-86. DOI: \[10.2307/2025464\]\(https://doi.org/10.2307/2025464\).
 8. Group P. MIP: A Method for Identifying Metaphorically Used Words in Discourse. *Metaphor Symb.* 2007;22\(1\):1-39. DOI: \[10.1080/10926480709336752\]\(https://doi.org/10.1080/10926480709336752\).
 9. Zangouri V, Akrami M, Tahmasebi S, Talei A, Ghaeini Hesarooei A, Hosseini S. Medullary Breast Carcinoma and Invasive Ductal Carcinoma: A Review Study. *Multidiscip Cancer Investig.* 2017;1\(Suppl 1\). DOI: \[10.21859/mci-sup-100\]\(https://doi.org/10.21859/mci-sup-100\).
 10. Jafari M, Gity M, Olfatbakhsh A. Comparing Ultrasound Features of Invasive Ductal Carcinoma Regarding Patient Ages: ≤ 40 Years Old and Above it. *Multidiscip Cancer Investig.* 2017;1\(Suppl 1\). DOI: \[10.21859/mci-sup-118\]\(https://doi.org/10.21859/mci-sup-118\).
 11. Akbari M, Rasaf M, Nafissi N, Shojaee L. The Effect of Patho-biological Factors on the Survival of Recurrent Breast Cancer Patients. *Multidiscip Cancer Investig.* 2017;1\(Suppl 1\). DOI: \[10.21859/mci-sup-101\]\(https://doi.org/10.21859/mci-sup-101\).
 12. Atashgar K, Sheikhalian A, Tajvidi M, Molana SH, Jalaeiyan L. Survival analysis of breast cancer patients with different chronic diseases through parametric and semi-parametric approaches. *Multidiscip Cancer Investig.* 2018;2\(1\):26-32. DOI: \[10.30699/acadpub.mci.2.1.26\]\(https://doi.org/10.30699/acadpub.mci.2.1.26\).
 13. Dehghani Z, Tavakoli M, Mokarian F. Assessment of the Memory of Patients with Breast Cancer Before and After Chemotherapy. *Multidiscip Cancer Investig.* 2017;1\(Suppl 1\). DOI: \[10.21859/mci-sup-107\]\(https://doi.org/10.21859/mci-sup-107\).
 14. Jalili F, Masoudi Alavi N, Abedzadeh Kalahroudi M. Frequency of Symptoms in Patients With Cancer Receiving Chemotherapy, According to Gender and the Primary Site of the Cancer in Kashan, Iran, 2017. *Multidiscip Cancer Investig.* 2019;3\(1\):17-24. DOI: \[10.30699/acadpub.mci.3.1.17\]\(https://doi.org/10.30699/acadpub.mci.3.1.17\).
 15. Reisfield GM, Wilson GR. Use of metaphor in the discourse on cancer. *J Clin Oncol*. 2004;22\(19\):4024-7. DOI: \[10.1200/JCO.2004.03.136\]\(https://doi.org/10.1200/JCO.2004.03.136\) PMID: \[15459229\]\(https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/15459229/\).](https://bridg-

</div>
<div data-bbox=)