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METAPHORS, CORPORA AND ILLNESSES. AN INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR ELENA SEMINO

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Head of the Department of Linguistics and English Language at Lancaster University, Elena Semino is an Italian-British born linguist whose main research interests are in stylistics, metaphor theory and analysis, health communication and corpus linguistics. She is working on projects on schizophrenia and autism in narrative, and on the role that metaphor plays in communication about pain, cancer and the end of life.

Her most recent publications include:

*Semino, Elena, and Zsófia Demjén. *The Routledge Handbook of Metaphor and Language*. London: Routledge, 2017.*

*Demjén, Zsófia, Elena Semino and Veronika Koller. "Metaphors for 'good' and 'bad' deaths: a health professional view." *Metaphor and the Social World* 6/1 (2016): 1-19.*

*Semino, Elena, Zsófia Demjén, Jane Demmen, Veronika Koller, Sheila Payne, Andrew Hardie and Paul Rayson. "The online use of Violence and Journey metaphors by patients with cancer, as compared with health professionals: a mixed methods study." *BMJ Supportive and Palliative Care* (2015, online first): 1-7.*

*Demjén, Zsófia, and Elena Semino. "Henry's voices: the representation of auditory verbal hallucinations in an autobiographical narrative." *Medical Humanities* 41/1(2015): 57-62.*

*Semino, Elena, Demjén, Zsófia and Veronika Koller. "'Good' and 'bad' deaths: narratives and professional identities in interviews with hospice managers." *Discourse Studies* 16/5 (2014): 667-685.*

*Semino, Elena. "Pragmatic failure, mind style and characterisation in fiction about autism." *Language and Literature* 23/2 (2014): 141-158.*

SARA CORRIZZATO: Your most recent work is *The Routledge Handbook of Metaphor and Language*, described by the publisher as “a comprehensive overview of state-of-the-art interdisciplinary research on metaphor and language”¹. How did you (and co-editor Zsófia Demjén) organize material for such a vast project?

ELENA SEMINO: Basically, it has six main sections called ‘Parts’; we decided to start with theory, so Part One is on theoretical approaches to metaphor and language. Obviously, you cannot cover all the different theoretical approaches to metaphor but we decided to cover some of the main ones, i.e. conceptual metaphor theory, blending theory, relevance theory and dynamical systems theory.

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¹<https://www.routledge.com/The-Routledge-Handbook-of-Metaphor-and-Language/Semino-Demjen/p/book/9781138775367>. Last visited October 10, 2016.

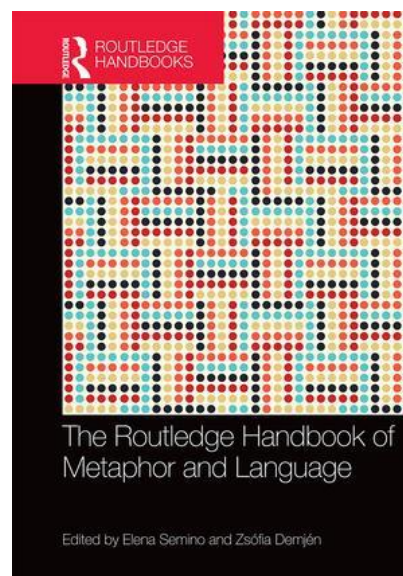


Part Two is on methods: we thought it was important both to reflect a lot of work that has been done on metaphor from a methodological perspective in the last few years, but also to establish the importance of methods in the field to introduce the section on methods. So, Part Two is 'Methodological approaches to metaphor and language' and it covers different methodological issues and approaches.

Then we have two sections, which deal with form and function: formal variation and functional variation. Those are a bit tricky - you cannot really separate form and function properly because they are intertwined, and we say that in the introduction. In the formal variation part, we are looking at linguistic and textual manifestations of metaphor, for example parts of speech, textual patterns, and we also look at genre, creativity, diachronic variation and more. Whereas in the functional part we are looking at different types of function the metaphor uses: how it is used in education, in the press, in politics, in advertising and in other fields. So, those sections are not totally separate, but there is an attempt to separate form and function.

Part Five is based on something that we felt very strongly about, that we should not just try to reflect research on metaphor but also how the findings of research can be used to deal with real-world issues. So, this section is called 'Applications/Interventions: using metaphor for problem solving.' And so, there we have applications to health care, management, teaching of second and/or foreign languages, reconciliation, public policies, and so on.

Part Six is on metaphor and cognitive development: we look at metaphor processing, and then acquisition in both neurotypical and non-neurotypical individuals. Therefore, there is a chapter on metaphor in connection with neurodevelopmental disorders such as autism and schizophrenia, and then metaphor comprehension. The final chapter, which is not in any of the parts and stands on its own, turns the topic of the *Handbook* around because the *Handbook* is about metaphor in language, but language and communication themselves are often talked about metaphorically. So, the final chapter is on metaphors that are used for language and communication, especially in English. In the final version of the *Handbook*, this section is called 'Epilogue.'



SC: How did you develop a specific interest in investigating metaphor from a linguistic point of view?

ES: This was very early on in my career because my PhD was actually on the language of poetry and it was then published as my first book in 1997, *Language and world creation in poems and other texts*². Because I was interested in poetry, particularly in how we imagine the world around poems, metaphors were unavoidable and so I had a chapter on metaphor in that book. But that was metaphor and poetry.

So, I obviously read on metaphor, particularly the conceptual metaphor approach, and, apart from finding it interesting, it also showed me that metaphor is an important phenomenon in communication and in thinking, more generally. I guess that probably up to that point I had not quite appreciated how important metaphor was outside literature, which was my first interest in terms of research. By the end of the PhD, I was very interested in metaphor generally and I started thinking about studying metaphor beyond poetry, which was my original focus.

Basically, things then developed from there because the first two studies³ I did were linked to metaphor and the way in which it is used in language. So, I developed an interest in metaphor very early on in my career, and then that interest developed as I looked at more different types of texts, genres, problems, issues, types of patterns. I then developed different methods in analysing it.

² Semino, Elena. *Language and World Creation in Poems and Other Texts*. London: Longman, 1997.

³ Semino, Elena and Kate Swindlehurst. "Metaphor and mind style in Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*." *Style* 30/1 (1996): 143-166.

Semino, Elena and Michela Masci. "Politics is football: metaphor in the discourse of Silvio Berlusconi in Italy." *Discourse and Society* 7/2 (1996): 243-269.



SC: How can Corpus Linguistics approaches be relevant to the study of metaphor?

ES: Generally speaking - this is something I often say when I give talks on the topic - one of the reasons why metaphor is regarded important is that it is claimed to be frequent in language. Lakoff and Johnson define metaphor as pervasive and ubiquitous. When people actually try to quantify that, the frequency has been found to vary between 3-4 and 20 percent of the words, very much depending on the text type. So it is important to study this frequency (What do we mean by frequent? How does frequency vary across different types of texts?). But also, then, if something is frequent and we want to study it systematically and want solid generalization, then we may need to analyse a lot of data, and that is where computer-aided methods may be useful. A combination of claims about frequency and the importance of making solid generalization means that we need to analyse large quantities of data and therefore we need appropriate methods to handle those large quantities of data. So, that is why corpus linguistics comes in.

Even more generally, the notion of conceptual metaphor, which has been very influential, is fundamentally based on evidence from language and linguistic use. Again, it is linked to claims about the conventionality of certain types of metaphorical usage. Thus, in that case if one has made those types of generalizations, the best way to provide solid evidence is to use corpus methods, because you can analyse large quantities of data and basically you deal with results the output that the software has produced. So, you cannot just pick up examples that suit you. Those are the reasons why corpus linguistics allows us to do stuff that we would not be able to do otherwise.

SC: Do you think metaphors can affect intelligibility? Do they play the same role in NS-NS interactions and in NNS-NNS communicative exchanges?

ES: Intelligibility can be defined in different ways, but if we talk about understanding one another in very general terms, what I sometimes say is that metaphors can both help and hinder understanding: obviously, they can help understanding, and the cognitive approach shows it, for example by making abstract topics concrete. But, of course, as any other type of language that is in some ways indirect, they can also hinder understanding if there are linguistic and cultural differences between people involved in communication. That can even happen between people who speak the same language because they may use different idiomatic expressions or they may have different degrees of familiarity with different source domains. Therefore, those problems can be even more acute when people who are communicating do not share the same mother tongue or do not have the same culture because there is cultural variation in metaphor use and there is cross-linguistic variation in metaphors. Moreover, you can have both misunderstandings that people are aware of and misunderstandings that some people are not aware of. So, there is a mismatch between what the speaker intended and what the hearer understood that they may not be aware of.

Metaphors tend to be used in many different contexts and also in every language. We would expect that they occur both when native speakers talk to each other and when there is communication between native speakers and non-native speakers. There is some evidence that there might be some correlation between metaphor use and how intimate relationships between people are. Actually, one of the chapters in the *Handbook* refers to research suggesting that when people use metaphor with each other they are perceived to be more intimate than when they do not. The use of metaphor also depends upon the kind of communication, but I would expect it would be used in all different kinds of contexts.

SC: The definitions of ‘linguistic metaphor’ and ‘conceptual metaphor’ are still under discussion. Scholars are developing different theoretical approaches to recognize and classify them. How would you define these two concepts?

ES: If we define them in relation to each other within conceptual metaphor theory, I think it is possible to distinguish between them because, according to conceptual metaphor theory, the distinction is not very controversial. A linguistic metaphor is any expression in language that can be analysed as metaphorical and, within conceptual metaphor theory, it would be any expression in language that realizes a cross-domain matter, essentially. Whereas a conceptual metaphor is a pattern of metaphorical thought in conceptual structure, so there are systematic correspondences between two conceptual domains. Within conceptual



metaphor theory, you can get different nuances but basically the distinction is reasonably clear and the definitions are also reasonably clear.

I think where there is discussion is more in terms of how valid is the notion of conceptual metaphor, so many years after the publication of *Metaphors We Live By*⁴. Some people question whether conceptual metaphors actually exist. With linguistic metaphor again there are issues to do with what counts as a metaphor in language, i.e. what counts as a metaphorical expression. Therefore, different people will have different approaches. For example think about the things that we might call dead metaphors or etymological metaphors: some people would regard them as metaphorical but other people may not. There are also some issues in the conventionalized metaphorical uses of delexicalized verbs that have very semantically bleached meanings, like in 'taking a walk'. To conclude, if we look at the notion of linguistic metaphor and conceptual metaphor separately they can be very controversial; within conceptual metaphor theory, however, the distinction between them is not particularly controversial.

SC: Among all the projects involving metaphor you have been working on, is there one you consider to have higher social value outside of the academic world of research?

ES: For the last three or four years I have been working on a project on the metaphors used to talk about cancer and end-of-life in contemporary U.K. This was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council of the U.K. (ESRC). We constructed a corpus that has interviews and on-line forum contributions by three groups of people involved in healthcare (patients with advanced cancer, family carers, and healthcare professionals, including doctors and other types of professionals such as nurses). We built a corpus of, overall, one and a half million words, including, for each group, a set of interviews and on-line forum contributions. We then used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to study systematically the metaphors that are used by these different groups of people.

What is the reason for this project? We know that metaphor is used to talk about topics that are subjective, sensitive, and difficult to talk about in any other way, for examples illness, and serious topics like cancer and end-of-life. We also know that metaphors can frame topics in a particular way. They highlight some aspects and background others, and can be used to project different kinds of identities and relationships. When something is very sensitive and subjective then the choice of metaphor may have serious consequences, both positive and negative. That was an important reason why this project was undertaken. As for cancer specifically, there has been a lot of controversy in various fields including practice in healthcare. There has been controversy particularly in the English-speaking world on the use of military metaphors for cancer, i.e. the idea of the battle against cancer or losing the battle against cancer. These were all the reasons why we thought it was important to do this study and also to consider patients, family carers and healthcare professionals from different perspectives. I think these are the same reasons why the project was funded. It has been probably one of the most rewarding professional experiences of my life and the project is continuing.

Obviously we have some findings that are relevant to metaphor research itself: there is an essay which just came out in the journal *Applied Linguistics*⁵, and which uses these data to propose a kind of explicit method for looking at metaphor and framing. So, some contributions are more theoretical, some are more methodological and explain how to analyse metaphor in a large corpus. However, the most important findings are about the topic of cancer and end-of-life itself. For example, we have shown that it is impossible to make a distinction between metaphors that are *good* or *bad*, especially for patients.

The question is not so much 'what kind of metaphor is used?' but how they are used, who uses them, how, and in what context. So, what we considered in metaphor use, for example, is: 'Are the metaphors empowering or disempowering for patients?', 'Do they have negative or positive emotional consequences?', 'What evaluation do they carry?'. There are some metaphors that can be considered as negative, such as

⁴ Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago/London: Chicago University Press, 1980.

⁵ Semino, Elena, Zsófia Demjén and Jane Elizabeth Demmen. "An integrated approach to metaphor and framing in cognition, discourse and practice, with an application to metaphors for cancer." *Applied Linguistics* 37/5 (2016): 1-22.



when the patients describe themselves as a *walking-time bomb*. Other than that, the most important thing is to look at how the metaphors function in context for the particular person, rather than generalizing across all journey metaphors or military metaphors or sports metaphors. We have looked, for example, at metaphors that patients use for their relationships with healthcare professionals and, vice versa, the metaphors that healthcare professionals use in relation to patients. The metaphors used by patients sometimes express the perception of an imbalance of power with healthcare professionals, for example their inability to stand their own ground in interactions with healthcare professionals. On the other hand, metaphors are also used by healthcare professionals to talk about their relationship with patients. Sometimes they emphasise the emotional vulnerability of doctors who may find it very upsetting to deal with patients and patients' death. We also looked at the metaphors that are used to talk about dying, especially dying of cancer, and the metaphors family carers use after the relatives' death, for example grieving, and also how some of the metaphors to do with grieving might lead to negative self-perceptions. Sometimes the metaphor of grieving as a journey suggests that grieving is a linear process where you start off being very sad and then little by little you will become less sad. So, people are disappointed in themselves if they feel that they are going backwards feeling sad again. In other words, the framing provided by some of these metaphors for grieving might generate feelings of guilt and a sense of inadequacy.

Finally, we developed what we called 'a metaphor menu', a collection of metaphors from our data and other sources that can be used as a resource for patients. It includes many different ways of talking about the experience of cancer, from metaphors of nature, or journey, military and music metaphors to many others. I am working with an oncologist to share these results with patients as a resource because ultimately, when metaphor is used sensitively, it can be a huge resource for making sense of the experience of illness.