The metaphors we use to describe abstract ideas and emotions influence the way we reason about them (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Recent empirical work shows that subtle instantiations of metaphorical frames influence how we conceptualize social matters. For example, metaphors used to describe crime affect how people form opinions about it (Thibodeau & Boroditsky, 2011).

Descriptions of emotional disorders vary according to culture and historical context. Framing mental illness as brain disease – as opposed to a reaction to or consequence of psychosocial factors – has been proposed as a strategy to fight stigma in recent years. However, this framing may also cause undesired attributions to patients (Corrigan & Watson, 2004).

Here we explore whether metaphorical framing influences how we conceptualize depression. First, we conducted a corpus analysis using the CREA corpus of written Spanish to investigate how people refer to depression, using texts from Argentina, Chile and Colombia. We searched for the target domain lexical item depresión (depression). Phrases in which the target word was embedded in metaphorical expressions were extracted – 151 cases in 735 total occurrences distributed over 160 documents published in press, magazines, fiction, and non-fiction books. The identification of metaphorical expressions was done according to methodological guidelines described in Stefanowitsch and Gries (2006). Three main conceptual mappings were identified: DEPRESSION IS HOLLOW PLACE (42.3% – metaphorical expression example: El estaba sumido en profunda depresión); DEPRESSION IS DISEASE (37.8% – example: La enfermedad de depresión [...]); DEPRESSION IS ADVERSARY (17% – example: Me atacó una depresión). Other mappings accounted for less than 2% of the total.

Recent work shows that when emotional disorders are framed as brain disease, people make attributions not only about the onset of the disorder (biology) but also its offset (Corrigan & Watson, 2004) – Will the patient get better to live a normal life? Using a similar experimental paradigm to Thibodeau and Boroditsky (2011), we investigated whether metaphorical expressions influence people’s estimates of likelihood of recovery from depression. Sixty participants were given a case description where four typical symptoms were listed. Depression was metaphorically described either as a disease, an attacker/adversary, or hollow place. Symptoms were identically described in all three conditions. The results revealed that participants exposed to the disease metaphorical frame rated long-term recovery as a less likely event than the other two groups (F(1,58)=9.1; p = .004), while participants exposed to hollow place metaphorical frame perceived greater likelihood of short-term recovery (F(1,58)=5.07; p=.028). Results are discussed in relation to the role of metaphor in abstract concepts and knowledge structure.

References