How we think about depression: Metaphors matter

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Linguistic framing, emotions and social matters.

‣ The metaphors we use to describe emotions influence the way we reason about them (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

‣ Recent empirical work shows that subtle instantiations of metaphorical framings influence how we conceptualize social matters.

  ‣ (e.g.) Metaphors shape political attitudes (Landau, Sullivan & Greenberg, 2010)

  ‣ (e.g.) Metaphors used to describe *crime* affect how people form opinions about it (Thibodeau & Boroditsky, 2011).

Linguistic framing and mental illness

▸ Descriptions of emotional disorders vary according to culture and historical context (Watters, 2010).

▸ Medicalization of psychological disorders (Pilecki, Clegg, McKay; 2011):

  ▸ 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 (see Corrigan & Watson, 2004, for a review).

Outline

Case study: Depression

▸ Corpus analysis to investigate how we talk about depression in Latino American countries.

▸ Experiment designed to test whether the way we frame depression influences the way we conceptualize the course of the symptoms.

▸

Corpus analysis

- *CREA* corpus of written Spanish (Banco de datos CREA online, 2012 – *Corpus de referencia del español actual.* http://www.rae.es) :
  - We used texts from Mexico, Argentina, Chile and Colombia, covering a wide range of topics and authors, running from 1974 to 2004.

Corpus analysis

▸ **Method** (Stefanowitsch & Gries, 2006):

  ▸ We extracted all sentences where the target domain lexical item *depresión* (depression) appeared.

  ▸ Each sentence was then analyzed to determine whether the target word was embedded in a framing of interest.

Results

▸ The total number of hits for the word *depresión* was 967 (distributed over four countries, and 307 different documents by different authors).

▸ 166 patterns of interest were identified:
  ▸ 71 expressions were tagged as spatial/down metaphors (42%),
  ▸ 29 expressions were tagged opponent metaphors (17%),
  ▸ 62 expressions were tagged as disease framings (37%).
 ▸ 4 expressions (2%) were identified as other metaphorical patterns.

Examples

- DEPRESSION is [an] OPPONENT (17%):

  … *me agarró una depresión* (depression got a hold of me);

  … *combatir la depresión* (to fight depression)

  … *en garras de la depresión* (under the paws of depression)

- DEPRESSION is [a] (Hollow) PLACE (42, 3%);

  …*cayó en una profunda depresión* (He fell into a deep depression)

  …*salir de la depresión* (get out of depression)

  … *desbarrancarse en la depresión* (fall over the cliff of depression)

- DEPRESSION framed as a PHYSICAL DISEASE (37,8%).

  … *la depresión es una enfermedad* (depression is a disease)

  … *curarse de la depresión* (to cure from depression)

  … *la depresión de Javier se me empezó a contagiar*

  (Javier´s depression became contagious)

Corpus data
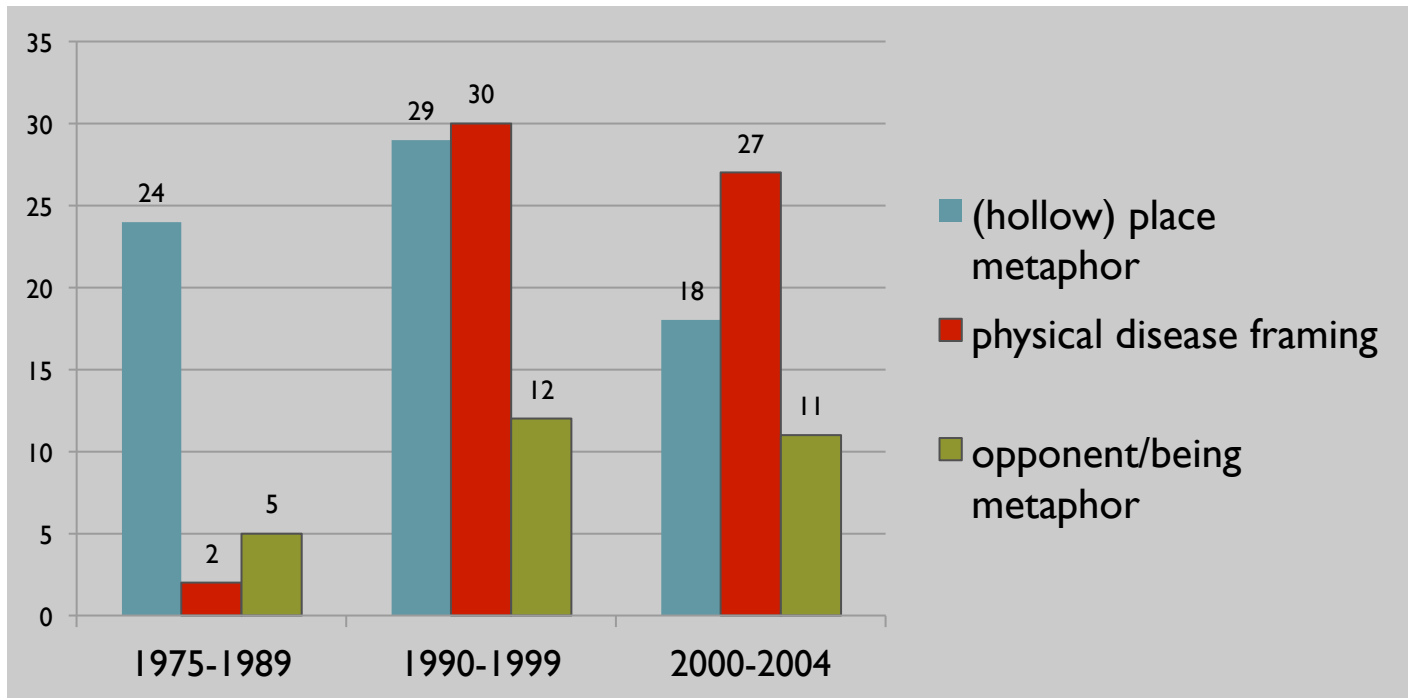
Pearson's chi-squared test (3X3 contingency table)
X^2 = 19.9; df= 4; p < 0.001**.

Experimental questions

▸ When depression is framed as a brain disease, people make attributions about the *onset* of the disorder (biology) (Corrigan & Watson, 2004)

  ▸ Do people make attributions also about its *offset* (Corrigan & Watson, 2004) – Will the patient get better to live a normal life?

  ▸ Does linguistic framing influence the way we conceive the course of depression?

Experiment 1

▸ *Task:* Participants read a description of a fake case of depression and answered Likert-type questions (1-7 scale).

    ▸ *Three conditions:*

        ▸ 1) Depression framed a physical disease.

        ▸ 2) "Depression is an opponent" metaphorical framing.

        ▸ 3) "Depression is hollow place" metaphorical framing.

▸ *Participants:* Sixty students from Universidad de Andes (Bogotá, Colombia)

Materials (translated to English)

Juana is a 20-year-old girl. Five weeks ago she {**contracted**/**was attacked by**/**fell into**} a {**serious**/**fierce**/**deep**} depression. As a result of such a {**disease**/**attack**/**fall**} Juana presented the following signs over the last five weeks:

- Continuous crying over four or more hours a day.
- Loss of weight without entering a special diet.
- Insomnia five out of seven days.
- Loss of interest in almost all activities and people almost every day.

Example questions

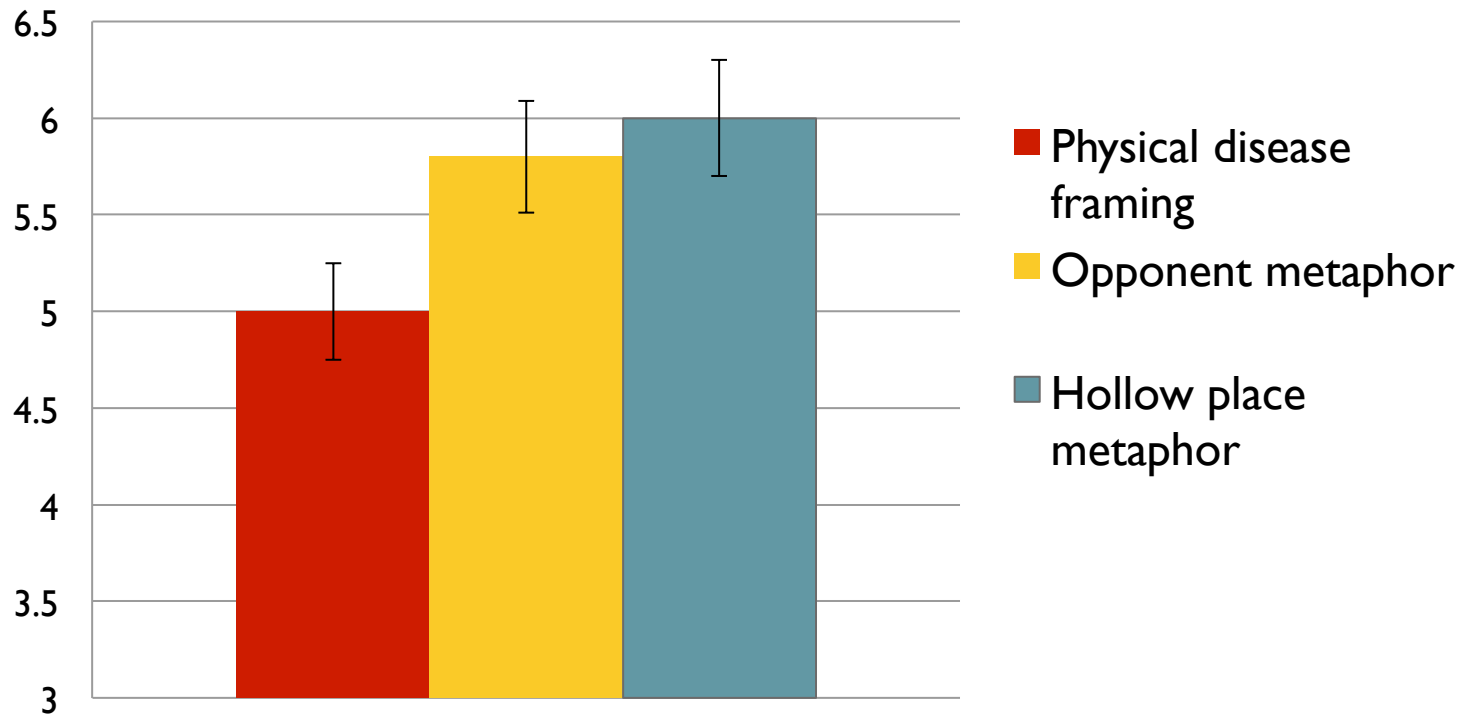In a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 = "not likely at all" and 7 = "very likely",

How likely do you think it is that Juana will recover to live a normal life?

How likely do you think it is that Juana will improve her situation within the next three weeks?
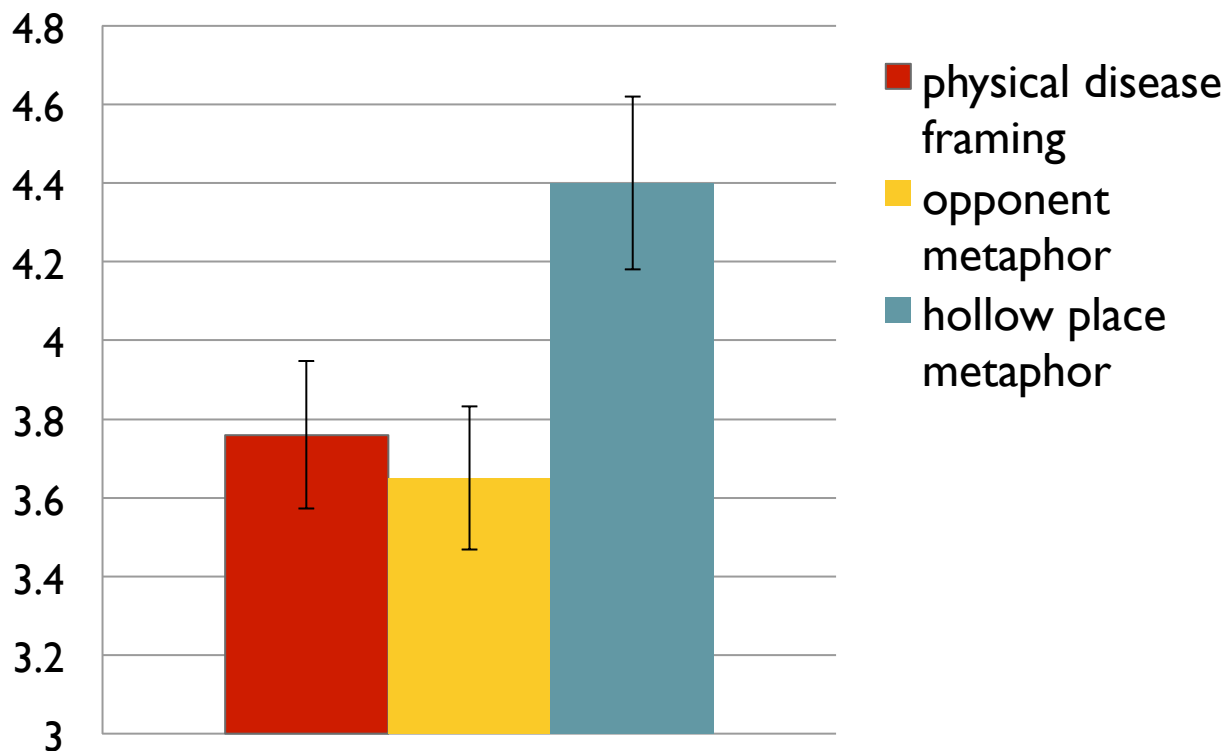
Likelihood of recovery ratings
1= "not likely at all"; 7="very likely"

Legend:
- Physical disease framing (red)
- Opponent metaphor (yellow)
- Hollow place metaphor (blue-grey)

$F(2,57)=4.75$; $p=.012$.

Likelihood of short-term recovery ratings. 1= "not likely at all"; 7="very likely"

Hollow-place vs. opponent/physical disease
t(58)= 2.25; p= .028

Conclusions

▸ The results suggest that linguistic framing influences the way we conceptualize the course of depression.

  ▸ This is consistent with previous literature suggesting that framing mental illness as a brain disease might cause undesired attributions to the nature of the condition. (Corrigan & Watson, 2004).

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