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).
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](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 (3×3 contingency table)

\[ \chi^2 = 19.9; \text{ df} = 4; p < 0.001**. \]
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)
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”

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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