

Metaphorical conceptualization of associations in medical texts: An analysis in English and French

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Abstract

Metaphorical conceptualization as described by Lakoff (1993) has been recognized as a widespread phenomenon in specialized fields such as biology and medicine, contributing to theory building and the development of scientific thought. This kind of conceptualization has been observed to apply to specific entities or processes in these domains (Vandaele 2003; Vandaele et al. 2006). Preliminary analyses of corpora of medical texts suggest that conceptual relationships such as association (i.e., an observed co-occurrence between two factors that is often a precursor to observations of causal relationships) may also be the focus of metaphorical conceptualization. Moreover, this phenomenon may be observed at a textual level in collocates — specifically, intensifiers and attenuators — of lexical markers of this relationship (e.g., *close association*).

In order to explore this hypothesis, using a corpus-based methodology adapted from Vandaele and Lubin (2005), this study focused on adjectival and adverbial collocates of a set of 25 markers of association previously identified in medical texts (Marshman forthcoming).

This presentation will focus on observations of the data to evaluate what these collocates indicate about potential metaphorical conceptualizations. In addition, similarities and differences observed between collocates of various markers, classes of collocates (intensifiers and attenuators), and marker-collocate pairs in the two languages will be explored. Finally, the potential import and applications of this information and of this type of analysis for terminology, terminography and translation — as well as teaching in all of these fields — will be discussed.

Methodology

The corpora used for the analysis consist mainly of specialized articles in the medical domain (specifically, research and review articles from specialized journals discussing the etiology, development, effects, diagnosis, prevention and treatment of breast cancer and heart disease), complemented by a small proportion of popularized texts (specialized journalism). Collocates evaluated immediately preceded or followed a marker of this relationship, and were identified manually in KWIC concordances generated in WordSmith Tools (Scott 1999). They were then evaluated to determine if they evoked for the reader a metaphorical conceptualization, as indicated by the perception of a “cognitive dissonance” resulting from the presence of two simultaneous mental representations: one corresponding to what is known about the relation indicated by the marker (e.g., *association*), the other being suggested by the collocate (e.g., *close*). This approach is inspired by the concepts of *factivity* and *fictivity* developed by Talmy (2000). As *close* is prototypically used to describe entities with a physical location (relative to another such entity), the collocation above suggests that associations indicated by this marker may be conceptualized in terms of a relationship of physical proximity.

Applications

The manipulation of intensifiers and attenuators commonly used with markers of association is an important skill for translators, writers and others who produce texts in specialized domains. The choice of such collocates is often made according to established conventions rather than the simple combination of neutral meaning components, and users must be aware of these conventions in order to choose a modifier that conveys the desired effect in an idiomatic way. The study of these collocates thus can help to produce resources that can assist users in recognizing these conventions and in following them, not only in making “correct” or idiomatic choices, but also — and perhaps even more importantly — to avoid making those that do not reflect usage in the domain.

Contrasting conceptualizations present in intensifiers and attenuators and in English and French allowed certain specificities to be identified; these may be important guides to help users to recognize both parallels (e.g., the use of the height-related intensifiers *high* and *élevé* with *risk* and *risque*) and differences (e.g., the absence of proximity-based attenuators of association, such as *distant*, in English, although one of the most prevalent intensifiers observed, *close*, evokes an image of physical proximity).

Moreover, at a more thematic level, by recognizing the metaphorical conceptualizations that underlie the lexical choices made and determine the ways in which certain items are understood in specialized fields, writers will not only themselves be assisted in acquiring understanding of a domain, but will also be able to develop strategies to take advantage of these in the creation of texts that are easy to understand and coherent with others in the domain.

All of these factors may be useful in the teaching of translation and terminology. Their study may help students to see and understand the role that metaphorical conceptualization plays in texts in specialized domains, and may sensitize them to these phenomena in their work, improving the overall quality of the texts produced.

References

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