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Metaphorical Conceptions of Health

The meaning of health has been debated among Western philosophers and medicine practitioners for over two millennia (Loudon, 1997). Woynarowska (2007) points out that to date at least 300 various definitions of health have been proposed in medicine, psychology, pedagogy, sociology, as well as other disciplines preoccupied with the human condition, yet a common interpretation of the meaning of health has not been worked out. As emphasized by Mateusiak, Gwozdecka-Wolniaszek & Januszek (2011), the concept of health is multidimensional, relative, and prone to alterations not only from individual but also historical, cultural, and socio-economic perspectives. For that reason, an unequivocal definition of health remains as elusive as it is fundamental to our existence (Korwin-Szymanowska, 2014).

Employing the framework of Contemporary Theory of Metaphor (Lakoff, 1993; Lakoff & Jonson, 1999), this paper discusses the concept of health as a conceptual metaphor on the basis of empirical data from language corpora. This study focuses in particular on ontological sources of health conceptualizations, taking into consideration the theory of objectification (Szwedek, 2007, 2011) and force dynamics in language and cognition (Talmy, 1988). Data found in national reference corpora for British English (BNC) and Polish (NKJP) show that, for example, both English and Polish speakers often conceptualize health as a fragile plant or a precious object, which indicates that, despite cultural influences (cf. Kövecses, 2005), key conceptual aspects of human health are essentially universal across languages and cultures.

References


