Figurative mapping of health and disease onto conceptual scales originating from the embodied experience

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The meaning of health and disease has been debated among Western philosophers and medicine practitioners for over two millennia (Loudon 1997). Since health as the general dimension of our biopsychosocial functioning has a tendency to fluctuate and can be affected by countless factors, its exact condition is difficult to specify in absolute terms. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) observe that it tends to be mapped conceptually onto an UP–DOWN scale. While the UP part is associated with the positive condition of the human health, the DOWN part of the scale is associated with the negative condition, i.e. disease. For instance, an alternating positive and negative condition of one’s health can be described in terms of up and down states, e.g. “John’s health had been up and down for years”.

Taking into account data found in the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), this paper argues that health as the general dimension of one’s biopsychosocial functioning can be mapped conceptually onto other scales originating from the embodied experience. Another scale used for the conceptual mapping of the general condition of health is a STRONG–WEAK scale. In this source domain, figurative expressions of health appear to employ a metonymic (Kövecses & Radden 1998; Panther & Thornburg 2007) mapping of strength and weakness as standing for the positive or negative condition of health, respectively, e.g. “Now on antiviral medication, he’s getting stronger”, “She was too weak with AIDS to leave her home”. This mapping fits into the category of metonymic schemas of causation, which are based on a cause-and-effect type of relationship. In this case, an EFFECT FOR CAUSE metonymic relationship is created, in which strength is mapped metonymically onto the positive part of the scale as the effect brought about by good health.

From this perspective, the figurative conceptualization of health as the dimension of human functioning appears to hinge on conceptual mappings derived from basic aspects of embodied experience. The spatialization of health in HEALTH IS UP and SICKNESS IS DOWN metaphors can be attributed to the physical basis: while healthy condition is associated with the upright posture, illness typically forces us to lie down physically. Similarly, the conceptual mapping of HEALTH AS STRENGTH and SICKNESS AS WEAKNESS can be motivated by embodiment: while the physical strength of the human body is associated with good health, weakness is among common symptoms of illness.

From a broader perspective, the figurative mapping of health and disease onto UP–DOWN and STRONG–WEAK scales indicates that health and disease form a gradable antonymy, i.e. a pair of words with opposite meanings, where contrasting properties between the two meanings lie on a continuous spectrum running between two poles (Cruse & Togia 1995). As noted by Croft and Cruse (2004: 169), the principal image-schema for antonymy of this kind is SCALE, which construes a property in terms of more and less. Since within the gradable antonymy health can be graded against different norms, there is no absolute single criterion by which one can tell what it means to be healthy.
References