Health and disease as conceptual metaphors arising from cognitive embodiment

Abstract: The meaning of health and disease has been debated among Western philosophers and medicine practitioners for over two millennia. Taking into account data found in the British National Corpus and the Corpus of Contemporary American English, this paper discusses an array of conceptual mappings of health and disease, as general conditions of human functioning, onto two basic dimensions of embodied experience, which include UP–DOWN and STRONG–WEAK scales. From this perspective, health and disease are metaphorical concepts that form a gradable antonymy, where contrasting properties are represented in terms of scales running between two poles. Within such scales health and disease can be graded against different norms. Moreover, both health and disease can be relative, multidimensional, and prone to alterations not only from individual, cultural, and socio-economic but also linguistic perspectives. This may be the reason why unequivocal definitions of health and disease still remain as elusive as they are fundamental to our existence.

Keywords: health, disease, conceptual metaphor, metonymy, objectification, gradable antonymy, cognitive corpus-based linguistics