

Metaphorical descriptions of pain on a Trigeminal Neuralgia forum: Pushing the boundaries of cognitive linguistics

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1. Introduction

The extract below is taken from an online forum dedicated to Trigeminal Neuralgia – a condition that causes disabling and overwhelming episodes of pain in the face:

I woke this morning to take my bucket full of meds, it feels like I have had a Mike Tyson night! ¹

At the time when this extract was posted on the forum, the US heavy-weight boxer Mike Tyson had abandoned his previously illustrious career after being repeatedly beaten. Based on this minimal contextualization, it should be possible to infer that the simile ‘it feels like I’ve had a Mike Tyson night’ is used to suggest that this person woke up with the kind of pain in the face that one might feel if they had been repeatedly and violently punched by a professional boxer the night before. But how does someone writing online about a condition such as Trigeminal Neuralgia come to use an expression such as this?

To answer this question, in this chapter I present an analysis of all similar structures (i.e. ‘feels like’ similes for pain) on this particular online forum over a period of five and a half years. In line with the goals of this volume, I first consider the ways in which a cognitive linguistic approach to metaphor can account for the use of this kind of expression to describe the pain caused by Trigeminal Neuralgia (henceforth TN). I then point out the challenges that this kind of data poses to current cognitive linguistic accounts of metaphor. Finally, I reflect on the implications of my findings for the systematic analysis of metaphor in discourse and for the potential contribution of such analysis to the understanding of the lived experience of TN, and to the development of better ways of catering for the needs of people with TN.

2. Background: Pain, metaphor and Trigeminal Neuralgia

Pain is notoriously difficult to communicate (e.g. Scarry 1985). The English language in particular has relatively few words that specialize in the description of pain: ‘hurt’ (as a noun and a verb), ‘pain(ful)’, sore and, less straightforwardly, ‘ache’ (as a noun and a verb, and in the adjectival form ‘achy’).² As these words cannot do justice to the wide variety of pain sensations that can be experienced, it is well known that pain is often described through figurative language, and particularly similes and metaphors (De Souza and Frank

¹ I am grateful to the Trigeminal Neuralgia Association UK for permission to study the language that is used on their patient online forum. Any information that might lead to the identification of individuals has been omitted from the quotes included in this chapter.

² The experience captured by ‘ache’ is sometimes seen as different from that captured by ‘pain’ (as in the expression ‘aches and pains’), or as a type of pain, as in the McGill Pain Questionnaire (Melzack 1975), where ‘aching’ is included as one of many possible descriptors of pain.

2000, Schott 2004, Lascaratou 2007, Kövecses 2008, Biro 2010, Semino 2010, Loftus 2011, Deignan et al. 2013, Bourke 2014).

The most prototypical type of pain arguably results from cuts, burns and fractures, and is known as ‘nociceptive pain’: ‘noxious perception resulting from actual tissue damage following surgical, traumatic, or disease-related injuries’ (Vadivelu et al. 2011: 46). As the causes of this kind of pain are usually visible, whether to the naked eye or through medical technology, adequate responses to nociceptive pain are less dependent on effective communication than in the case of pain that does not result from obvious physical damage. This includes particularly ‘neuropathic pain’, i.e. pain caused by problems in the nervous system, as in the case of TN. Consider, for example, the expression a ‘constant burning pain in her lower abdomen’ (from the Oxford English Corpus). In its most basic, literal sense, ‘burning’ refers to the process of combustion. Here, however, it is used to capture the quality of one of the types of pain that result from problems in the digestive system. This use of ‘burning’ is part of a conventional tendency in English (and other languages) to describe non-nociceptive pain in terms of properties or processes that would cause tissue damage if applied to the body, and hence result in nociceptive pain (e.g. burning, stabbing, splitting).

From the perspective of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (henceforth CMT), pain is one of the subjective, sensitive and poorly delineated experiences (or target conceptual domains) that tend to be communicated and conceptualized in terms of better delineated, image-rich and intersubjectively accessible experiences (or source conceptual domains). In the case of ‘burning pain’, for example, a subjective, invisible sensation is described in terms of a concrete, externally perceptible process. This use of ‘burning’ would be metonymic if it described the nociceptive pain that results from, for example, contact with a flame: in this case, there would be an *association* between the cause of physical damage and the pain experience. In contrast, ‘burning’ in ‘burning pain’ is metaphorical when no contact with flames or hot objects is involved: in this case, the use of the expression suggests a *similarity* between a particular pain experience and the kind of nociceptive pain that would result from contact with a flame or a hot object. The conventional tendency to describe pain experiences in terms of causes of prototypical nociceptive pain has been captured by Kövecses (2008) in terms of a series of conceptual metaphors (or cross-domain mappings) with PAIN as target domain, including, for example, PAIN IS FIRE (e.g. ‘burning pain’) and PAIN IS A SHARP OBJECT (e.g. ‘stabbing pain’). I have proposed the more general formulation PAIN IS CAUSE OF PHYSICAL DAMAGE (Semino 2010, 2011; see also Deignan et al. 2013: 267-302). The metaphors suggested by Kövecses (2008) can be seen as specific variants of this general metaphor.

My opening example is a linguistic manifestation of the conventional tendency captured by the conceptual metaphor PAIN IS CAUSE OF PHYSICAL DAMAGE. In the context of the post, ‘Mike Tyson night’ functions as a metonymic reference to being repeatedly punched by a professional boxer. The resulting physical damage would cause a kind of pain that the forum contributor suggests is similar to his/her own. Even this account, however, does not fully explain the specific choice of ‘Mike Tyson night’ in the context of the interaction among forum contributors. I will return to this point below.

Trigeminal Neuralgia is a serious but relatively rare condition, in that it affects 4 or 5 people per 100,000, with a higher incidence of up to 20 per 100,000 in people over 60 (Frontera et al. 2015: 588). Episodes of pain vary in their frequency and the person is usually pain-free between episodes. However, the intensity of attacks is such that TN has been described as ‘the suicide disease’ (e.g. Pucci et al. 2017) and as causing ‘the world’s worst pain’ (Zakzewska 2006). In addition, the relatively low incidence of TN means that diagnosis is often delayed while other more likely diagnostic avenues are pursued (e.g. dental problems). In addition, people with the condition may find it hard to help others understand the severity of their symptoms, and may not easily find other sufferers or support groups locally. While both pharmacological and surgical treatment options exist, TN is usually difficult to cure completely.

Although figurative descriptions of pain have been studied before, including from a cognitive linguistic perspective, no study has, to my knowledge, focused specifically on TN. Given the extreme nature of the symptoms, descriptions of pain associated with TN should therefore provide a challenging testing ground for existing accounts of metaphors for pain. The focus on online forum data means that I will deal with people’s own authentic and relatively unconstrained descriptions, in the context of interactions within a community that shares the same, infrequent condition. It is well known that, in spite of occasional issues, such online patient communities can have an important function in terms of exchange of information and mutual support (e.g. Prestin and Chou 2014, Allen et al. 2016).

3. Data and method

The general definition of metaphor I adopt in this chapter is as follows: metaphor involves talking and, potentially, thinking, about one thing in terms of another where the two ‘things’ are different, but a similarity can be perceived between them.

This definition encompasses different manifestations of metaphoricity in language, including what Steen et al. (2010) call ‘direct’ and ‘indirect’ metaphor. ‘Direct’ metaphor captures explicit comparisons between unlike things, and particularly similes such as ‘it feels like I have had a Mike Tyson night’: here a pain sensation that is not caused by damage to bodily tissue is described in terms of a physical attack from a human agent that would cause damage to bodily tissue. ‘Indirect’ metaphor captures cases where the contextual meaning of a word contrasts with a more basic meaning of the same word (in the sense of more concrete, more precise and more closely related to bodily action), but the contextual meaning can be understood by comparison with the basic meaning. As I explained above, this applies to ‘burning’ in ‘a constant burning pain in the lower abdomen’. The contextual meaning of ‘burning’ is a particular kind of pain sensation caused by problems in the digestive system. This contrasts with the basic meaning of ‘burning’, which is the process of combustion, and with the type of nociceptive pain sensation that is metonymically associated with combustion. However, the pain caused by acidity in the stomach can be understood by comparison with the pain that results from being burnt.

The data for this chapter was obtained from a corpus of contributions to the online forum of a UK-based association for the support of people with TN and their families. More specifically, the corpus contains 2,250,659 words of contributions which were posted

between January 2008 and May 2013. The vast majority of contributors self-declare as having TN. The posts cover a wide range of topics, including symptoms, medication and its side effects, surgery, living with TN, and so on.

The episodes of pain caused by TN are frequent topics on the forum. The word 'pain' occurs 16,759 times, and is the top third keyword in a comparison between word frequencies in the TN corpus and a general corpus of British English from the same period (the British English 2006 Corpus, compiled by Paul Baker at Lancaster University). To narrow down my analysis, I therefore obtained a concordance of the search string 'feels like' in the corpus. This decision was based on the expectation that, in the kind of data included in the corpus, a substantial number of instances of the expression would be part of descriptions of episodes of TN-related pain.

The search resulted in 254 citations. These citations were manually checked to determine whether (a) they described the pain caused by TN; and (b) they could be classified as similes according to the definition of 'direct' metaphor above. This process resulted in the identification of 152 relevant uses of 'feels like'. In addition, the immediately preceding and following co-text (in the sense of adjacent sentences) was examined for further metaphorical descriptions of pain, whether through direct or indirect metaphor.

4. Main patterns in the data: Conceptual Metaphor Theory and its developments

In this section I present the main patterns in my data and consider how they can be accounted for within cognitive linguistic approaches to metaphor. I begin by applying Grady's (1997) notion of 'primary metaphor', which is an important addition to Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) original version of CMT. I then focus on examples from the data that require a consideration of the relationship between culture and metaphor, and between conventional and creative metaphors. I show more specifically how the most complex and creative similes in the data can be seen as 'blends' in Fauconnier and Turner's (2002) terms. I finish by pointing out some outstanding issues that, I suggest, cannot be easily accommodated within cognitive linguistic accounts of metaphor.

4.1 Primary metaphors

Out of 152 relevant similes in the concordance of 'feels like', 101 can be accounted for, at least in general terms, by the metaphor PAIN IS CAUSE OF PHYSICAL DAMAGE, as in the two extracts below (NB: all quotes from the data are reproduced as in the original, including any typographical errors and grammatical infelicities):

Example 1

Half of my face feels like it's on fire

Example 2

it feels like I've been rubbing my face in stinging nettles

The metaphor PAIN IS CAUSE OF PHYSICAL DAMAGE differs from conceptual metaphors such as LIFE IS A JOURNEY, which received much attention in early work in CMT (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), in that it does not involve multiple systematic correspondences between source and target domain. Rather, it is best described as a ‘primary metaphor’ – a particular type of basic conceptual metaphor initially proposed by Grady (1997) and then adopted in Lakoff and Johnson’s (1999) version of CMT. Primary metaphors capture correlations between subjective experiences (e.g. intimacy) and sensorimotor experiences (e.g. physical closeness). These connections are experienced in what Grady calls ‘primary scenes’, i.e. repeated situations that tend to occur early in human experience. In infancy, for example, intimacy with other people correlates with being with physical proximity. In later stages of development, the same subjective states can occur in the absence of the sensorimotor experiences (e.g. one can feel intimacy with someone who is not physically close). However, the connection persists as a mapping between what are now separate conceptual domains (as opposed to elements of the same primary scene). The primary metaphor INTIMACY IS CLOSENESS explains conventional metaphorical expressions such as ‘close friends’ or ‘distant acquaintances’, where interpersonal relations are described in terms of physical distance.

In the case of pain, the relevant primary scene involves nociceptive pain, i.e. a correlation between the subjective sensation of pain and an external process that causes damage to the body. This explanation works well for examples 1 and 2 above, as they involve basic, natural causes of damage to the body (fire and stinging nettles). Kövecses’s (2008) conventional conceptual metaphors for pain, such as PAIN IS A SHARP OBJECT, can be seen as more specific formulations of the same primary metaphor. As I show in the next section, however, the causes of physical damage included in other pain descriptions draw from a much wider range of experiences.

4.2 Culture and the elaboration of primary metaphors

As Grady and Ascoli (2017: 29) put it, primary metaphors involve associations between ‘fundamental’ concepts which are ‘grounded in universal (rather than culturally determined) aspects of human experience’, such as HEAVINESS, VERTICAL HEIGHT, BRIGHTNESS and, I argue, PHYSICAL DAMAGE. However, many of the descriptions of pain in my data cannot be explained as straightforwardly as (1) and (2) in terms of the realisation of a primary metaphor. In some cases, the difference lies in the nature of the metaphorical entities and processes involved:

Example 3

and feels like a thick knitting needle is being twisred round and round it

Example 4

It feels like a band is tightening round my face

Example 5

My tongue has been continuesly tingly for years and also it feels like i have put my tongue on a battery

Here the causes of physical damage are artefacts (knitting needles, bands and batteries) that are familiar in the cultural context that forum contributors live in (Kövecses 2005), and the relevant stage of technological development. In examples 3 and 4, the choice of metaphorical objects and processes can be described as one of the types of creative exploitations of conventional conceptual metaphor proposed in Lakoff and Turner (1989), i.e. the ‘elaboration’ of a general conventional source concept. The notions of physical damage via, respectively, penetration with a sharp object and tightening, are realised through more specific and less conventional concepts (a knitting needle and a band). Example 5 more specifically relies on the invention of electricity, which, according to Bourke (2014) is a technological development that proved to be a particularly rich and frequent source of metaphors for people in pain (see also Winter and Matlock 2017 on the role of language and culture in reinforcing and enhancing embodied primary metaphors). The description of pain as an electric shock is in fact particularly associated with TN (Zakzewska 2006). My data includes 10 instances of this kind of description, including four instances of ‘electric shock’ and several extended examples such as the following:

Example 6

My pain feels like someone has wired my cheek up to the National Grid and flicks the switch off and on at a time of their choosing. When the zaps hit the pain travels up to my forehead and down to my upper jaw and lip.

Here not only is the ‘National Grid’ a UK-specific term, but the simile also evokes a situation that is far from Grady’s basic primary scene. This kind of situation is best captured by the related notion of ‘scenario’, which has been adopted in some discourse analytic approaches to metaphor as the most appropriate level of conceptual representation for the analysis of metaphorical patterns in authentic language use (e.g. Musolff 2006, 2016; Semino 2008; Semino et al. 2016). Scenarios are mental representations of settings that include participants, entities and possible event/action sequences, and that therefore often manifest in language as ‘mini-narratives’ (Musolff 2006, 2016), as in the case of Example 6. In addition, this example also involves: an explicit reference to a third-person agent causing the physical damage (‘someone ...’), metaphorical movement (‘the pain travels up ... and down’), and, overall, a situation that is, at best, implausible. I will discuss these phenomena in the next sections.

4.2 Metaphor combinations

Example 6 is one of several instances in the data where the pain is explicitly presented as an agent who is causing physical damage to the person. The ‘Mike Tyson’ extract above is an example of this pattern, but the actual process of causing physical damage is left implicit, or, as I have explained, suggested through metonymy. In other cases, however, there are more explicit references to violent actions performed by a metaphorical agent. This often suggests a sense of vulnerability, helplessness and emotional distress:

Example 7

Just feels like someone clobbered me with a crowbar on the right side of my head and like someone has tried to gouge my cheekbone out again

Example 8

I'm also now feeling like I've been repeatedly punched in the cheekbones so it feels like my cheeks are being pulled and tugged in from the inside.....

Example 9

Hi folks, well my friend Mr TN is visiting me 24/7 at the moment with what feels like a large hot poker straight from the fire which he has placed in my right eye and I cant get it out aaaaagh!!!!!!!

Several previous studies have captured these kinds of descriptions through generalisations involving the notions of attack and aggression (e.g. Lascaratou 2007, Biro 2010, Frank 2011). In Grady's terms, the conventional representation of pain as a malevolent aggressor can be described as a complex metaphor that results from the combination of PAIN IS CAUSE OF PHYSICAL DAMAGE with other primary metaphors, such as CAUSES ARE PHYSICAL FORCES (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 53) and, potentially, DIFFICULTIES ARE OPPONENTS. Indeed, in the version of CMT proposed in Lakoff and Johnson (1999), many conventional conceptual metaphors (e.g. LIFE IS A JOURNEY) are described as complex metaphors that involve the combination of several different primary metaphors.

Example 9 above is worthy of further note not just because of the very explicit and potentially humorous personification of TN ('my friend Mr TN'), but also because of an additional way in which it involves the combination of metaphors. Whereas the examples I have quoted so far involve a single metaphorical cause of physical damage, the description in Example 9 combines two, i.e. penetration via a sharp object and burning ('a large hot poker straight from the fire'). The tendency for intense pain to be expressed in terms of scenarios that combine different types of physical damage has been noted before (e.g. Deignan et al. 2013), and was observed repeatedly in my data (e.g. 'Mine feels like someone is pulling a red hot barbed fish hook through the bones and tissue). In Lakoff and Turner's (1989: 70) typology of creative uses of conventional conceptual metaphors, these examples involve 'the formation of composite metaphors', i.e. they combine into a single scenario what Kövecses's (2008) calls PAIN IS A SHARP OBJECT and PAIN IS FIRE.

Several contributors to the forum outline even richer metaphorical scenarios that combine multiple and sometimes idiosyncratic causes of physical damage, as in the extract below:

Example 10

At the moment, it feels like someone of considerable weight (not you FEMALE NAME lol) is standing on the side of my face, wearing stiletto's whilst pouring red hot liquid into my ear. When I get the bolts it feels like someone has decided that I deserve to be cattle prodded!

The first sentence of Example 10 combines three metaphorical causes of physical damage: excessive weight/pressure ('considerable weight'), penetration via a sharp object ('wearing stiletto's') and heat/burning ('pouring red hot liquid'). The following sentence adds electric

shocks via a cattle prod. Both sentences explicitly mention an agent ('someone') which, together with the multiple causes of physical damage, can suggest an overall scenario reminiscent of torture. On the other hand, however, the tone of the extract is rather humorous, as suggested by the jokey clarification that 'someone of considerable weight' does not refer to another contributor to the online forum who is likely to be reading the post. I will return to this humorous tone below. As far as metaphoricity is concerned, Example 10 involves two of Lakoff and Turner's (1989) main types of metaphorical creativity: combination of different conventional metaphors, i.e. Kövecses's (2008) PAIN IS A BURDEN, PAIN IS A SHARP OBJECT and PAIN IS FIRE; and elaboration, i.e. the realisation of the sharp object as stilettos and the source of burning as red hot liquid. The reference to a cattle prod can also be seen as a case of elaboration of the more conventional notion of electric shock.

While this account goes a considerable distance towards explaining both the conventional basis of descriptions such as Example 10 and their creativity, it does not do justice to the way in which the different components combine into a single, dynamic, coherent but counterintuitive whole: while reading the extract, I imagine an overweight person standing in stilettos on an oversize sideways face, pouring some liquid into the person's ear. I expect that something similar applies to readers of the TN forum, and of this chapter. Our ability to imagine something as implausible as this is of course developed from an early age via engagement with different kinds of fantasy, but is not easy to account for in cognitive linguistic terms, and particularly in terms of CMT and its developments. The approach to metaphor proposed within Fauconnier and Turner's (2002) Blending Theory goes some way towards this goal.

4.3 Creative similes as blends

The theory of Blending, or Conceptual Integration (Fauconnier and Turner 2002), accounts for much of human thinking in terms of the ability to combine different mental representations formed during online cognitive activities ('input spaces') into more complex mental spaces ('blends'), in which new meanings can develop dynamically as a result of the interaction of elements from the input spaces ('emergent structure'). A 'conceptual integration network' minimally includes two input spaces, a 'generic space' that contains structures shared by the input spaces, and a blended space.

When applied to metaphor, Blending Theory can account for aspects of metaphorical meaning that cannot be straightforwardly explained in terms of the unidirectional mappings of CMT and its developments. For example, the metaphorical statement 'That surgeon is a butcher' (Grady 1999) is likely to be interpreted as suggesting that the surgeon is incompetent, and therefore a threat to patients. However, the notion of incompetence is not a conventional element of the concept of butcher, which, in CMT terms, functions as the source domain. In Blending Theory terms, the interpretation of the statement involves the blending of elements from two input spaces: Butcher (the source input space) and Surgeon (the target input space). These spaces share some structure (captured by the notion of generic space): they both involve a human being using a sharp instrument to make cuts on bodies. However, there is a contrast in terms of instruments (cleaver vs. scalpel), kinds of bodies involved (dead animals vs. live humans) and goal of cutting (severing flesh vs. healing). When elements from the two input spaces are merged in the blended space, the

combination of the means of butchery with the goals of surgery results in incompetent, and dangerous, professional behaviour. This is the emergent structure that arises from the imaginative development or 'running' of the blend, and that corresponds to the meaning of the metaphorical statement.

This approach has been used in the analysis of humour (e.g. Coulson 2005, Coulson and Pascual 2006) and can potentially be applied to examples such as 10 above. Let me just take this part of the example: 'it feels like someone of considerable weight [...] is standing on the side of my face, wearing stiletto's whilst pouring red hot liquid into my ear'. A possible Blending Theory account of this extract is as follows. The target input space contains the face of the writer of the post. The source input space contains an overweight person in stilettos standing on something and holding a container with red hot liquid in it. This source space is itself a blend between a space with a person in it and three spaces each containing different conventional causes of physical damage (excessive weight, sharp objects, hot fluid). The source and target input spaces are merged into a blended space, where the person from the source space stands on the face from the target space. Note that the relative sizes of the person and the face need to be such that the person can actually stand on the face but still cause discomfort through their weight. When the blend is run, the person from the source space is in a position to both pierce the face with the stilettos and simultaneously pour the liquid into the ear of the owner of the head from the target space. This constitutes a scenario in which considerable nociceptive pain would be experienced. And that is what the writer of the post says that the pain feels like.

While this approach provides a more satisfactory account of how this kind of lengthy simile can be interpreted, it is also rather problematic. Like similar applications of Blending Theory, it can be accused of ad-hocness: one starts from an interpretation of a linguistic example and works backwards to derive a conceptual integration network that explains that interpretation. The accusation of ad-hocness can definitely be levelled at my account in the previous paragraph.

In the next section I will move on to the challenges that my data poses to cognitive linguistic accounts of metaphor. I start with a closer look at 'impossibility' in the scenarios outlined in the similes I analysed and then move on to how specific expressions such as 'Mike Tyson night' arise in the interactive context of the online forum.

5. The challenge of unfamiliar metaphorical scenarios

Example 10 is a particularly clear case of a pattern that is common throughout my data, and in descriptions of pain more generally: the metaphorical processes and/or scenarios that are used to communicate pain are often unlikely to have been experienced directly by the pain sufferer and their audience. This in fact applies to most of the extracts I have presented throughout this chapter, which include having half of one's face on fire, being pierced in the ear with thick knitting needles, being wired up to the National Grid, and so on. Such descriptions arguably involve both metaphor and hyperbole, although invoking the latter concept should not be interpreted as dismissing the credibility of the accounts of pain in the data. On the contrary, it should be recognised that going beyond realistic familiar experiences is necessary to do justice to the nature of TN-related pain. In fact, as has been

noted before), even conventional metaphorical descriptions of pain as ‘stabbing’ or headaches as ‘splitting’ tend to involve experiences that are (thankfully) rare (De Souza and Frank 2000, Pither 2002, Semino 2010, Deignan et al. 2013). Crucially, the successful use of these descriptions does not seem to depend on an assumption that the people involved in communication have direct experience of the metaphorical scenarios.

A more systematic analysis of the data from this particular perspective reveals different degrees to which metaphorical scenarios may be described as implausible or unfamiliar, at least as far as direct experience is concerned. Some instances involve possible but rare or unlikely experiences, such as one’s face being on fire, or being stabbed. The more specific the metaphorical scenario is (e.g. being pierced in the ear with thick knitting needles), the more unlikely it is to have been experienced by the participants in communication, or anyone else. Instances such as Example 10 are not just very specific but also involve details that make the whole scenario unrealistic: as I mentioned earlier, we have to imagine that someone can stand on someone else’s face in stilettos and pour liquid in their ear at the same time. Other cases from the data are more clearly impossible, whether physically (Example 11) or technically (Example 12):

Example 11

The burning feels like acid has been poured behind my eyes

Example 12

I'd like to see him eat when it feels like you have an electric sub-station wired up to your face.

All of this emphasizes the extreme nature of the pain associated with TN, but also poses a potential challenge to cognitive linguistic accounts of metaphor. Within CMT in its various forms, the relationship between source and target domains is often described in terms of a contrast in concreteness, i.e. the source domain (e.g. MOVEMENT) is more concrete and grounded in physical experience than the target domain (e.g. TIME) (e.g. Lakoff and Johnson 1980, Kövecses 2010, Kövecses 2017). It is also recognised in some studies, however, that a contrast in concreteness does not apply all the time, and, even when it does, it may not be the only or main contrast between source and target domains (e.g. Dancygier and Sweetser 2014: 64-67). Other relevant contrasts are expressed in terms of degrees of delineation and image-richness: source domains tend to be more clearly delineated and image-rich than target domains (e.g. Lakoff and Johnson 1980, Grady 1997). Dancygier and Sweetser (2014) make a cogent argument for degrees of intersubjective accessibility being a more appropriate and accurate description of the contrast between source and target domains: source domains tend to be more intersubjectively accessible than target domains, especially in the case of primary metaphors such as MORE IS UP (e.g. ‘prices are going up’) (see also Grady and Ascoli 2017).

So far, one might argue, so good. Pain, and non-nociceptive pain in particular, is not an abstract experience, but it is certainly subjective, poorly delineated and image-poor. This ‘invisibility’ is what makes it a challenge for communication in the first place. In contrast, the various scenarios involving causes of physical damage to the body are concrete, clearly

delineated and image rich, whether or not they are realistic or plausible. However, there is an additional assumption that lies behind the use of the concepts of concreteness, image-richness, intersubjective accessibility etc. to explain the understanding of one conceptual domain in terms of another in CMT: that source domains are more familiar than target domains, or, minimally, familiar enough to be used to make sense of and communicate about target domains. This does not of course necessarily require direct embodied experience. For example, using and understanding WAR metaphors (e.g. 'She lost her battle against cancer') does not rely on first-hand experience of war: what matters is knowledge about war, and that knowledge may be acquired indirectly via reading, watching films, and so on. This works well for WAR metaphors because they primarily rely on factual knowledge about participants, actions and outcomes (e.g. 'losing a battle' is an unsuccessful outcome, and therefore suggests that the person has died).

In the case of pain descriptions, in contrast, what is being conveyed is a physical sensation. The goal, therefore, is to express what it is like to have that kind of pain, so that others know or even feel what that pain is like, through a process that can be described as embodied simulation (Semino 2010). However, as I have shown, this is often done by outlining scenarios that are not familiar or accessible from previous direct experience (although some aspects of those scenarios may be familiar from scenes of crime or torture from news reports, books, films, etc.).

The ability to relate to and potentially simulate those scenarios can be explained in terms of analogy with less extreme but more familiar experiences: e.g. being pierced with a thick knitting needle is an extreme case of being cut; having one's face on fire is an extreme case of being burnt; being attached to an electric sub-station is an extreme case of a minor electric shock, and so on. Nonetheless, the frequency of these metaphorical descriptions, not just in my data but in accounts of pain generally, requires some refinement to some central notions in cognitive linguistic accounts of metaphor, and particularly the assumption of differences in familiarity that lies behind different accounts of the contrasts between source and target domains. This kind of data also raises some questions concerning whether and how is possible to achieve some degree of intersubjective accessibility via metaphors that are not based in shared experiences, or, more fundamentally, whether intersubjective accessibility actually matters to successful communication about pain, in the sense of, for example, eliciting empathetic responses or accurate diagnoses.

6. The challenge of emergent metaphor patterns in discourse

In this final section of the data analysis, let me return to my opening example: 'I woke this morning to take my bucket full of meds, it feels like I have had a Mike Tyson night!'

I have already explained how the simile in this extract conveys the person's pain through a combination of metonymy and metaphorical comparison. The implied scenario of physical aggression is also consistent with the broader pattern I have described, whereby the pain of TN is described in terms of causes of nociceptive pain, including violent attacks from another agent. While this can be explained in terms of a combination of primary metaphors, the reference to Mike Tyson is a culture-specific elaboration of the source of physical harm,

and of course assumes that others on the forum know that Mike Tyson is a former heavyweight boxing champion, and that he ended his career after being repeatedly defeated. However, all of this still does not fully answer the question I started with: How does someone writing online about a condition such as Trigeminal Neuralgia come to use an expression such as this? For example, the simile is potentially humorous, and, unusually, it only makes an implicit reference to a cause of nociceptive pain (i.e. through metonymy, as I mentioned earlier). To explain these aspects of the extract, I need to turn to the context in which it was posted on the online forum.

The post in which this example occurs is part of a series of responses to the post below, which includes Example 10:

On a lighter note gang, how many times during our suffering has someone asked you "what does it feel like?"

Pain is probably the worst thing to put into words, sometimes when I describe it to someone I get the 'wish I never asked' look from them, how about we 'share' our pain descriptions.

At the moment, it feels like someone of considerable weight (not you FEMALE NAME lol) is standing on the side of my face, wearing stilleto's whilst pouring red hot liquid into my ear.

When I get the bolts it feels like someone has decided that I deserve to be cattle prodded!

Come on guys, add your descriptions, let the only pill we take at this moment be a 'Chill Pill' lots of love, crazy but gorgeous (gosh these meds make me type crazy things)

This post makes explicit the individual and social consequences of TN-related pain and exploits the affordances of the forum to set up a space within which contributors can safely describe exactly what their pain feels like, without having to face negative reactions from people who do not share that experience. This is done within a 'humorous frame' (Kotthoff 2006, Coates 2007) that is explicitly set up at the beginning of the post ('on a lighter note gang') and then realised through the poster's own description, as I mentioned earlier, and through the references to 'Chill Pill' and 'crazy but gorgeous' in the final paragraph. Humour is well known to be a way of dealing with adversity, defusing difficult situations, empowering oneself and strengthening social bonds with others, including in the context of illness (Demjén 2016).

A number of other forum contributors respond to this post with their own descriptions of pain. Several of these descriptions are humorous, and pick up on some aspects of the original description, for example via variations on the topic of shoes and stilettos. More specifically, one description of the aftermath of an episode of pain includes the expression 'having been 12 rounds with Ricky Hatton'. Ricky Hatton is a former British boxing champion, and this particular forum contributor explicitly refers to a match with him as the kind of cause of physical damage and pain that best resembles his own experience.

The 'Mike Tyson' simile occurs in the following post, by the contributor who initiate the whole thread. Having provided its context, it is now possible to explain the characteristics of

this simile that are not accounted for by a cognitive linguistic account. The reference to a famous boxer champion builds on the previous reference to Ricky Hatton. The fact that the previous post includes a reference to '12 rounds' makes it possible to use Tyson's name as a metonymy for a whole boxing match, and particularly an uneven boxing match, rather than having to be more explicit for the sake of clarity. And the potentially humorous tone (see also the informal 'a bucket full of meds') is consistent with and reinforces the humorous frame set up at the beginning of the thread and subsequently adopted by other respondents. In this way, this post also both reflects and reinforces a sense of intimacy, solidary and complicity among forum contributors, who do not only share the experience of TN but also ways of talking (humorously) about it.

In other words, the combination of cognitive linguistic concepts and a detailed consideration of the dynamics of the interaction on the forum provides a full answer to my original question as to how the 'Mike Tyson' simile came to be used on the forum to describe TN-related pain. While different aspects of 'context' are increasingly taken into account within a CMT approach (Kövecses 2015), the richness and complexity of 'metaphor performance' in discourse are best accounted for within a Dynamic Systems approach to metaphor (e.g. Gibbs and Cameron 2008, Gibbs 2017a and 2017b, Semino and Demjén 2017). From this perspective, the choices of metaphor made by participants in communication are seen as resulting from the interaction of multiple interrelated cognitive, cultural, pragmatic and linguistic factors, which operate at different timescales. In my specific case, these include: cultural knowledge about violent sports such as boxing and specific knowledge about Mike Tyson in 2008; conventional linguistic and conceptual metaphors for pain in English; the nature of the particular online forum; previous contributions by members of the online forum; relationships between contributors; the specifics of individual experiences of TN; and so on. Within this approach to metaphor, cognitive linguistic accounts make an important contribution as part of a larger framework for making sense of communicative behaviour in context.

7. Conclusions

The systematic analysis of pain descriptions through 'feels like' similes on an online forum dedicated to Trigeminal Neuralgia has highlighted both the strengths and weaknesses of cognitive linguistic approaches to metaphor, and specifically Conceptual Metaphor Theory and its developments.

As I have shown, a cognitive linguistic approach accounts for the tendency to describe TN-related pain in terms of a variety of causes of damage to the body, including both conventional patterns, culture-specific applications and different types of creativity. On the other hand, this approach does not fully explain at least two aspects of the data: the fact that many of the similes evoke scenarios that are unlikely or impossible to be familiar through direct experience; and the specific formal, affective and pragmatic aspects of individual similes in context. I have suggested that the former challenge requires a reconsideration of the notions of contrasts in concreteness, familiarity and intersubjective accessibility between source and target domains in CMT, while that the latter challenge can be met through a Dynamics Systems approach to metaphor, in which conventional

conceptual metaphors are one of a variety of interacting factors that influence metaphor use in discourse.

A more general and important point lies behind both my application of cognitive linguistic approaches to metaphor and my claim that Dynamics Systems provides a more satisfactory and exhaustive account of choices and patterns in my data. The point is that the forms and functions of metaphor in discourse are so varied, rich and complex that they can only be satisfactorily accounted for by bringing together different levels of analysis and different theoretical perspectives. This applies both within and beyond cognitive linguistics, as I have shown, and is consistent with much current thinking in metaphor research. For example, from a cognitive linguistic perspective, Dancygier and Sweetser (2014) advocate a multi-level approach to metaphor, including image-schemas, primary metaphors, different kinds of metaphor hierarchies, and blends (see also Semino et al. 2016). Beyond cognitive linguistics, Gibbs (2017a, 2017b) explains his adoption of a Dynamics Systems approach to metaphor as stemming from the realisation that different theories and methods account for different factors, aspects or dimensions in 'metaphor performance', and therefore ideally need to be brought together, rather than applied and developed separately and in competition with one another.

To conclude, let me return to the data. In many respects, in this chapter I have treated the 'feels like' pain descriptions on the TN online forum as the test bed for what cognitive linguistic approaches to metaphor in discourse can and cannot do. However, my choice of this specific data is motivated by a broader concern for first-person accounts of the experience of illness, and particularly chronic and intense pain such as that experienced by people with TN. The growth of online peer-to-peer communication about illness provides unprecedented opportunities for individual experiences to be shared, and also studied. The kind of analysis I have carried out treats the forum contributors as experts by experience with regards to pain and TN, and identifies patterns in their accounts that can be relevant to the provision of better support and medical care. On the one hand, the associations of vulnerability and emotional distress of many of the descriptions I have presented highlight the need for psychological support, and the role of online fora in the provision of such support. On the other hand, the descriptions of pain on online patient fora can be systematically compared with the linguistic structures used in diagnostic questionnaires (e.g. the McGill Pain Questionnaire, Melzack 1975), and the findings of such comparisons can then be used to develop diagnostic tools that better reflect the ways in which people actually talk about their pain. In this sense, an eclectic and augmented cognitive linguistic approach to metaphor in discourse about pain can help understand and improve communication about pain in both clinical and non-clinical settings.

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