Metaphors and identities on an online forum dedicated to pain

Elena Semino, Yufeng Liu and Jane Demmen (Lancaster University)

ABSTRACT

Becoming seriously and/or chronically ill can challenge and disrupt our sense of who we are, in terms of our bodies, minds, and social roles. While a substantial literature exists on metaphor and illness, the use of metaphor to represent identities has received little attention. This paper focuses on similes as a particularly relevant manifestation of metaphoricity in language. An 8-million word corpus of contributions to the online forum Pain Concern is investigated via a combination of corpus linguistic methods and in-depth qualitative analysis. We explore how contributors to the forum use similes to describe their own (changing) self-perceptions due to living with pain and its consequences. To this end, we introduce and demonstrate a multi-component analytical framework, which, as we show, is equally applicable to the analysis of metaphorical expressions. The framework includes a consideration of: source concept; type of identity; and viewpoint. With regard to our data, we show how similes are used to convey mostly unwelcome changes in the persons' perception of themselves in physical, psychological and/or social terms, potentially resulting in estrangement, low self-esteem, isolation and disempowerment. More broadly, we suggest that our framework is applicable to the study of metaphorical representations of identities in the context of illness generally.

Keywords: pain, identities, simile, metaphor, online forums

1 Introduction

Becoming seriously and/or chronically ill can challenge and disrupt our sense of who we are, in terms of our bodies, minds, and social roles (e.g., Kelleher & Leavey, 2004; Henriksen &

Hansen, 2009). This transition has often been described metaphorically, most notably in published memoirs about illness. Susan Sontag (1979) opens her seminal book *Illness as Metaphor* by describing illness as "a more onerous citizenship". She continues:

> Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of the other place. (Sontag, 1979, p. 1)

Dancygier and Sweetser (2014) compare Sontag's "dual citizenship" with the metaphor of "deportation" used by author and journalist Christopher Hitchens to describe his experience of cancer:

> Hitchens […] describes being transported to the hospital as *a very gentle and firm deportation, taking me from the country of the well across the stark frontier that marks off the land of malady*. The emergency ward is referred to as *a sad border pos*t, and later he refers to himself as *a citizen of the sick country*. (Dancygier & Sweetser, 2014, p. 185; italics in original)

In both cases, metaphors are used to express fundamental, unwelcome and disempowering changes in identity.

This paper is concerned with how contributors to the online forum Pain Concern describe metaphorically their own perceptions of themselves as people affected by chronic pain. In the extract below, for example, a forum contributor talks about having gained weight due to pain medication:

1. My GP doesn't seem to be concerned about it at all meanwhile I walk about like a beached whale. I have never been overweight and I feel embarrassed and physically uncomfortable.

The simile "like a beached whale" expresses the person's perception of themself as a body in physical space, and specifically their increased size and difficulties in walking. The second sentence spells out how this perception contrasts with the person's past and preferred identity as a non-overweight person, resulting in embarrassment alongside physical discomfort. This interaction between bodily changes, self-perceptions, and awareness of others' viewpoints has been described as characteristic of the experience of chronic illness (e.g., Millward & Kelly, 2004).

This paper focuses on similes as a particularly relevant manifestation of metaphoricity in language, as explained below. Using a combination of corpus linguistic methods and in-depth qualitative analysis, we investigate how contributors to the Pain Concern forum use similes to describe their own (changing) self-perceptions due to living with pain and its consequences. To this end, we introduce and demonstrate a multi-component analytical framework, which, as we show, is equally applicable to the analysis of metaphorical expressions (e.g., "I can't move anymore I'm a beached whale!", from the Oxford English Corpus). The framework includes a consideration of: source concept or domain (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2020); type of identity (Zimmerman, 1998); and viewpoint (e.g., Dancygier & Sweetser, 2012). In this way, it makes it possible to consider the broader implications of metaphorical patterns for the framing of the self both as a private and a social construct. Regarding our data, we show how similes are used to convey mostly unwelcome

changes in the persons's perceptions of themselves in physical, psychological and/or social terms, potentially resulting in estrangement, low self-esteem, isolation and disempowerment.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 contextualises our study against the background of previous literature. Section 3 introduces our corpus of data and analytical framework. Section 4 presents the results of the application of our framework to the corpus. As well as spelling out the framing implications of the patterns we identified in the use of similes, Section 4 also shows how corpus linguistic methods can be used to scale up the analysis to the study of other manifestations of metaphoricity in language. Section 5 provides our overall conclusions and suggests that our framework is applicable to the study of metaphorical representations of identities in the context of illness generally.

2 Literature review

Pain is one of the most basic and fundamental human experiences. It varies greatly in terms of its causes, quality (what it feels like), severity and duration, and is one of the most common reasons for consulting primary care physicians (Timmermans *et al*., 2024). Chronic pain, defined as pain that lasts longer than three months, is estimated to affect between 10% and 50% of adults worldwide (Andrews *et al*., 2018) and can have an impact on people's mental health, social relationships and professional lives (Hadi *et al*., 2019). Health-related online forums such as Pain Concern provide anonymous and accessible spaces in which people can share their experiences of illness and exchange advice, information and support (e.g., Sanger *et al*., 2023).

Metaphor is well known to be an important tool in communication and cognition. It 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 (e.g., Semino, 2008). This definition subsumes different ways in which metaphoricity can manifest in discourse,

including what Steen *et al.* (2010) call "direct" and "indirect" metaphor. Direct metaphor captures explicit comparisons between unlike things, and particularly similes such as "I walk about like a beached whale". Here the uncomfortable experience of moving around after putting on weight is talked about in terms of the predicament of a large animal that is unable to move. Indirect metaphor captures the use of metaphorical expressions, where the contextual meaning of a word contrasts with a more basic meaning of that 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 (Pragglejaz Group, 2007). This applies, for example, to the use of "burden" in "I'm fed up with the pain and I'm just being a burden to my wife and kids", taken from the Pain Concern forum. The contextual meaning of "burden" is to do with being a cause of difficulties to others because of being in pain. This contrasts with the basic meaning of "burden" as a heavy load that is difficult to carry. However, the problems caused by someone who is unwell and dependent on others can be understood by comparison with the difficulties involved in carrying a heavy object.

In terms of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), direct and indirect metaphors can be seen as different kinds of linguistic metaphors, i.e., realisations of conceptual mappings from a "source" to a "target" conceptual domain (e.g., WEIGHT and DIFFICULTY). Indeed, as we show below, the word "burden" also occurs in similes, or direct metaphors, on the Pain Concern forum (e.g., "I feel like a burden") to express the same perception of oneself as causing problems for others. Additionally, similes and metaphorical expressions have also been studied in contrast with each other (e.g., Gentner & Bowdle, 2008). In particular, simile structures involving "like" in English have been found to be preferred over "A is B" metaphorical statements when a novel meaning is being expressed (Gentner & Bowdle, 2008; Roncero *et al.*, 2016). These have also been suggested to encourage more open-ended interpretations (Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez, 2020).

Illness is among the subjective, sensitive and poorly delineated experiences (or target domains) that tend to be expressed and conceptualized in terms of better delineated, image-rich and intersubjectively accessible experiences (or source domains). Previous work has shown how metaphors are used to express the lived experience of, for example, cancer (Semino *et al*., 2018), motor neuron disease (Locock *et al*., 2012) and mental health problems (Knapton & Rundblad, 2018). There have also been discussions of the potential benefits and pitfalls of different choices of source domain, such as WAR in relation to cancer (Sontag, 1979; Semino *et al*., 2018), and of metaphor use by different participants in clinical or therapeutic settings, such as psychotherapy (Qiu & Tay, 2025).

With regard to pain, a substantial amount of work exists on the use of metaphor to express the physical sensation of pain (e.g., Bullo, 2021; Lascaratou, 2007; Semino, 2019). This body of research shows how the pain associated with, for example, trigeminal neuralgia or endometriosis tends to be expressed via metaphors involving different kinds of causes of damage to the body, such as stabbing or burning, and how pain is sometimes personified as an assailant or torturer.

However, relatively few studies have addressed directly the ways in which metaphors can be used to represent identities, and changes in identities, whether in the context of pain, illness or more generally (e.g., Coll-Florit *et al*., 2021; El Refaie, 2019). Within Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Lakoff (1996) accounted for expressions such as "I am not myself today" in terms of what he called the 'split-self' metaphor, and introduced a typology that has been used and extended in subsequent work on metaphors in autobiographical accounts of paralysis (Emmott, 2002) and depression (Demjén, 2015). El Refaie (2019) has questioned the relatively static view of the body suggested in work on embodiment in cognitive science, including Conceptual Metaphor Theory. By analysing the metaphors used in graphic

narratives of cancer and depression, El Refaie supports instead a dynamic view of the body as unstable, fluid and changeable, particularly in the context of illness.

In the examples we presented earlier, relatively intangible aspects of people's identities while ill are described in terms of physical entities or processes, from heavy objects to being deported. More broadly, these different metaphors for the experience of illness represent individual identity as fragile and subject to change. This is consistent with the poststructuralist view of identities as partial, dynamic, transient, relational, context-dependent, and constructed and negotiated through discourse (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). We cannot do justice here to the vast literature on identities in discourse analysis (e.g., De Fina *et al*., 2006). For the purposes of our framework, we employ Zimmerman's (1998) influential distinction between three different aspects of identities (described in more detail in Section 4.2): "discourse identities" (e.g., story-teller), "situated identities" (e.g., caller to emergency helpline) and "transportable identities" (e.g., being a woman).

Finally, our opening example shows how metaphorical descriptions of identities, whether via similes or metaphorical expressions, are unlikely to be neutral or detached, but rather typically reflect particular perspectives and evaluations. The simile "walk about like a beached whale" suggests a negatively evaluated self-perception and involves both the perspective of the person themself and the perspective of others watching her walk, leading to embarrassment. As Dancygier and Sweetser (2014, p. 216), puts it, "figurative meanings, like literal meanings, are inherently viewpointed". For example, they suggest, Hitchens' use of the metaphor of deportation expresses a personal, experiential viewpoint on the illness, in contrast with the more general, socially-oriented viewpoint of Sontag's "dual citizenship".

Viewpoint – the position from which situations and events are perceived and presented – has long been a central concept in the study of narrative (e.g., Genette, 1988; Fowler, 1996). More recently, it has been discussed by cognitive linguists as an important

aspect of construal (e.g., Dancygier & Sweetser, 2012; Vandelanotte, 2017), including, as we have mentioned, in relation to figurative language. In spite of differences in emphasis and terminology, different approaches tend to recognise several dimensions of viewpoint (i.e., not just spatial, but also temporal, psychological, evaluative/ideological, etc.) and to identify similar types of linguistic expressions as particularly relevant to viewpoint, including deixis, references to mental/emotional states, evaluative expressions, and metaphors. Cognitive linguistic approaches also emphasize the tendency for multiple viewpoints to be simultaneously present in cognition and discourse:

> we are not just *capable* of multiple viewpoints; we are in fact incapable of keeping to one single viewpoint of space, or of cognitive structure, when other humans are present. (Sweetser, 2012, p. 2)

This is particularly relevant to chronic pain because, as with example (1), it affects both the individual's subjective experience of themselves and their awareness of how others may perceive them in interactional and social contexts.

Our study builds on these different strands of work by focusing on metaphorical descriptions of what it is like to be a person affected by pain.

3 Data and methods

3.1 A corpus of posts on an online forum dedicated to pain

Pain Concern, which started in May 2012, is a UK-based charity online forum managed by the company HealthUnlocked, who run over 300 online "communities" dedicated to different health conditions. For this study, we compiled a corpus of 89,717 contributions (8,318,226 words in total) posted on the forum between May 2012 and October 2020. HealthUnlocked

provided us with a download from the Pain Concern forum consisting only of posts written by people who, at the point of registration, had consented to their contributions being used for research purposes. Ethics approval was granted by the LUMS-FASS Ethics committee at Lancaster University.

Contributors to the forum do not have to disclose their demographic characteristics. However, based on the posts where this information is provided, there is considerable variation in terms of age, gender and type/cause/intensity of pain (Collins & Semino, 2024). More specifically, contributors tend to legitimise their status as contributors to the forum by describing their pain as "constant", "daily" and/or "chronic" (Collins & Semino, 2024).

3.2 Similes relevant to identities in the corpus

The core part of this paper (Section 4) focuses on the representation of identities via similes, as a form of direct metaphors, for two reasons. First, as previously mentioned, similes have been associated with more novel and open-ended meanings than corresponding metaphorical expressions, or indirect metaphors. As such, similes are potentially particularly relevant to conveying aspects of experiences, such as chronic pain and its consequences, which are sensitive and highly subjective. Second, our corpus is too large to be analysed manually, and systems for the automatic detection of metaphors are not (yet) sufficiently reliable or comprehensive for our purposes (e.g., Yang *et al*., 2021; Puraivan *et al*., 2024). Similes have predictable linguistic realisations in English (notably involving the use of "like" as a preposition) and can therefore be relatively easily retrieved using concordancing tools in corpus software packages.

In order to identify relevant similes in our data, we employed the concordance tool in the online corpus software Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff *et al*., 2014) to search for the word "like" as a preposition in the Pain Concern corpus. This resulted in 2,216 hits (NB:

exploratory searches of other potential simile structures involving 'as' resulted in much smaller numbers of hits and were not therefore pursued further). Each concordance line was then manually examined to identify cases that corresponded to the definition of similes as "explicit statements of comparison that involve clearly 'unlike' things, or what may be described as elements of two different conceptual domains in the relevant context" (Deignan *et al.*, 2013, p. 26).

This process resulted in the identification of 1,045 similes, which were further manually examined to identify those that are used to describe the writer of the post, or, in a few cases, other people in pain via a noun phrase immediately following "like", as in "like a beached whale" in (1) above. This resulted in a set of exactly 400 similes involving the representation of the identity of the person experiencing chronic pain.

3.3 Analytical framework

Our analytical framework was developed in order to answer the following overarching question: How do contributors to the Pain Concern forum use similes to represent their identities as people affected by pain? To this end each simile was categorised in terms of:

- Source concept, e.g., Animal, Burden, etc.;
- Aspect of identity captured by the simile: discourse, situation and/or transportable identity (Zimmerman, 1998);
- Viewpoint markers: pronouns, evaluative expressions, etc.

The analysis was carried out through an iterative bottom-up process of coding, discussion and revision that involved all three co-authors.

The extracts in Table 1 exemplify the main patterns in our data. Table 1 also provides a classification of each simile in terms of the three components of our analytical framework, which we now introduce in turn (Note that throughout we use letters – A to F – to refer to the

examples in Table 1; all other examples from the corpus are numbered sequentially; in the table we underline only the relevant similes rather than all linguistic metaphors; in example A, the simile in the second sentence is repeated in a shortened form in the final sentence).

TABLE 1 HERE

3.4 Source concept

The grouping of linguistic metaphors based on similarities in their literal/basic meanings is a staple of the analysis of metaphors in discourse. Different approaches differ in terms of the nature and status of the relevant categories, depending on whether they refer to, for example, source domains (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Reijnierse & Burgers, 2023), metaphor scenarios (Musolff, 2006), vehicle groupings (Cameron *et al*., 2010), or a combination of these (e.g. Dancygier & Sweetser, 2014; Kövecses, 2020). Broadly speaking, however, all the different approaches to the analysis of metaphors in discourse share a concern for the potential framing effects of the patterns identified in the data, namely, how different metaphors involve different ways of understanding, experiencing and/or evaluating the topic in question.

We adopted the broad notion of "source concept" to capture different types of literal meanings of the head nouns in the noun phrase that follows the word "like". For example, the simile involving an upside-down turtle in example E in Table 1 was classified under the source concept 'Animal'. The level of granularity of labels for source concepts was determined based on the patterns in the data. For example, the label 'Physical object' was adopted to subsume a wide variety of references to disparate objects in the similes (e.g., "rag", "toy", "corkscrew"). In contrast, similes involving references to human beings displayed distinct patterns which were captured separately under the labels 'Age' (for very old and very young human beings), 'Drug Addict' and 'Criminal'. Where a particular head

noun occurred repeatedly in our data and was not semantically related to the head nouns in other similes, the source concept label is the same as the word, as for "zombie". Overall, however, our analytical framework for identities is compatible with different approaches to the classification of linguistic metaphors into semantically related groupings.

3.5 Types of identity

In Zimmerman's (1998, p. 90) framework, discourse identities are "integral to the moment-by-moment organization of the interaction", including, for example, current speaker/listener, questioner, story teller, etc. In our data, this applies when similes capture the role of the writer as forum contributor, as in example B in Table 1. Situated identities apply and give rise to "particular types of situations", e.g., emergency telephone calls or, as in example C, interactions in hospital emergency departments. Transportable identities "travel with individuals across situations and are potentially relevant in and for any situation and in and for any spate of interaction", e.g., age, gender and ethnicity. They are described as "usually visible" but not necessarily oriented to in any given situation (Zimmerman, 1998, pp. 90-91). Examples A and B orient to age as a transportable aspect of identity.

We followed Zimmerman in treating the three types of identities as potential aspects of the perceptions expressed by individual similes. In other words, a single simile may involve more than one of Zimmerman's three types of identities.

3.6 Viewpoint

While any linguistic expression or textual phenomenon can in principle signal viewpoint, the most relevant for our purposes are:

- Characteristics captured by source concept in the simile, e.g., externally visible or not;

- Grammatical person of the subject of the verb introducing the simile, e.g., "I" in "I feel like a burden" in example F in Table 1;

- The nature of the verb introducing the simile, e.g., the sensory verbs "sound" in example B in Table 1; and

- Evaluative expressions in the co-text explicitly suggesting a positive or negative attitude towards the relevant identity, e.g., "hate" in example B and "unfortunately" in example D in Table 1 (cf. Fuoli *et al.*'s 2021 approach to evaluation and metaphor, which makes use of Martin and White's 2005 related notion of 'stance').

We should note that each of the components of our analytical framework draws from previous work. Our contribution lies in combining these components into a single analytical framework.

4 Data analysis: Similes and identities in the Pain Concern corpus

4.1 Source concepts in the corpus

Table 2 provides raw and normalised frequencies of source concepts that were represented in at least 10 similes out of the 400 in our data, accounting for 316 similes (79% of the total).

TABLE 2 HERE

The most frequent source concepts fall into three broad groupings:

- Human beings, including:
  - Age (Young or Old);
  - Social roles, such as Drug addict;

- Non-human sentient beings, including Zombies and Animals;

- Physical objects, including Burden as well as Balloon, Puppet, etc.

The similes falling into each group capture different aspects of the persons' perceptions of themselves within the broad experience of pain.

The age-related similes fall into two distinct patterns, i.e., references to very old age (e.g., "like a 94 year old") or very young age (e.g., "like a kid"), where neither applies to the post's author. When people describe themselves as very old, they typically capture unwelcome bodily changes, in terms of appearance, strength, agility and/or stamina. In (A), the writer describes themself as a "(98 years old) grandpa" in contrast with their previous role of "fitness model".[1]

When people describe themselves negatively as very young, they tend to capture either: (i) exhibiting uncharacteristically immature behaviours such as being unable to control their emotions, as in example (B); or (ii) being patronised in interactive social contexts, for example by health professionals or family members (e.g., "My last meeting with the pain specialist, I was treated more like a child than a [sic] expert"). In contrast, the structure "like a baby" can be used positively in relation to the ability to sleep soundly, usually after taking medication.

The similes referring to social roles mainly involve drug addiction, as in example (C), or criminality more generally (e.g., "I just don't appreciate feeling like a criminal when I explain why […] I need medicine for pain"). In all cases, the similes capture the experience of being made to feel, usually in healthcare settings, that one's request for pain medication does not reflect a legitimate need. The author of example (C) explicitly comments on the unfairness of this perception, which has made them reluctant to access healthcare services.

---

[1] The similes in our data often assume stereotyped and potentially stigmatising views of people, based on age or body shape/size.

The similes involving non-human entities include two patterns: the description of the writer as a zombie or as an animal. The references to zombies are used to capture the side effects of medication in terms of drowsiness, as in example (D). The Animal similes, on the other hand, are much more varied, depending on the animal involved (and its conventional associations) and the aspect of the person that is being captured. Example (E) demonstrates a pattern where the Animal similes describe some aspect of the person's body in the physical environment. While, in context, there may be an element of light-heartedness, these similes dehumanise the person in pain, and emphasize the undignified position they find themselves in (cf. also example 1). Other Animal similes capture different aspects of the author's self-perception, such as fear (e.g., "like a chicken") and the feeling of being experimented on in medical settings (e.g., "like a guinea pig").

Finally, the similes involving physical objects dehumanise the person and may express unpleasant physical symptoms (e.g., "I blow up like a balloon"), humiliation (e.g., "being treated like an object by NHS doctors"), or, in the case of "like a burden", low self-esteem and potentially guilt and shame in relation to partners or family members on which the person has come to depend for help.

4.2 Type/Aspect of identity in the corpus

Because chronic pain tends to affect the entirety of people's lives, most similes in our data (327 out of 400, i.e., 82%) involve or challenge some aspect of transportable identities, such as age or even being fully human. A smaller proportion (107 out of 400, i.e., 27%) involve a situated identity and only five involve what may be described as a discourse identity, usually alongside a situated identity and an aspect of transportable identity. For instance, example (B) in Table 1 ("I hate sounding like a baby") captures the discourse identity of the author of a particular type of post, i.e., one expressing trepidation or fear about trying a new medication.

Moreover, the simile involves a situated identity (insofar as the forum itself is a setting involving particular practices, roles and relationships) and an aspect of transportable identity, i.e., age. The similes that include discourse identities in our data may involve not just Young Age (e.g., "Apologies if I sound like a brat"), but also Animals as source concepts (e.g., "I know I sound like a chicken but I am just so tired of this whole thing"). They all express self-awareness and have a self-deprecatory component, as the person suggests that their post makes them sound weak, scared, immature or impatient.

With regard to situated identities, the similes in our data relate to different kinds of settings and relationships. Example (C) captures the identity of the patient interacting with healthcare professionals in a hospital Accident & Emergency Department. The perceived imposition of the identity of a "druggy off the street" potentially exacerbates the power differential in the relationship between patients and health professionals, especially as the latter have control over whether or not to prescribe/dispense medication. Other similes that capture the situated identity of a patient in a healthcare setting involve animals as source concepts (e.g., "When they treat you like a guinea pig with medication") and young age (e.g., "surely all patients should be a priority and treated with a bit of respect instead of being treated like a recalcitrant child"). In addition, the Criminal similes tend to apply to situations where the person applies for a benefit due to being unable to work, and again capture the feeling of being treated as not having a legitimate need (e.g., "They went over the form all over again with me and mum too. I felt like a criminal").

Example (F) ("like a burden") involves the situated identity of partner in a romantic and likely co-habiting relationship. It suggests that, because of the pain, the person is a source of problems and/or unable to contribute as they used to do, and therefore an inadequate partner. This follows explicit references to feeling "guilty" and "worthless" in the relationship. Similar feelings of guilt, regret and/or frustration about unwelcome changes in

the person's situated identity as a partner or family member are also expressed by the Young Age similes (e.g., "I know he will be watching me closely now when I cook and it just makes me feel like a child").

In addition to potentially capturing situated identities, the similes involving animals or physical objects also suggest how being in pain can affect the most fundamental aspect of transportable identity, i.e., being human. The Old Age similes such as example (A), on the other hand, capture the way in which pain can affect chronological age as an aspect of transportable identity, making the person feel distant from their actual age in terms of their body and ability to do things, across situations and contexts (e.g., also "when i sit some where a long period of time and i get up like a 80 year old"). Similar considerations apply to the Zombie similes, in that they capture an unwelcome change in the person's self-perception and abilities that, as Zimmerman (1998) puts it, "travel" across contexts. Here, however, the focus is on the ability to remain conscious and appropriately alert, which can be hampered by pain relief medication. Not surprisingly, the Zombie similes tend to be used alongside reports of changing or refusing medication, because of intolerable side effects.

4.3. Viewpoint in the corpus

In our data, depending on the source concept, the similes describe different kinds of characteristics, which may be more or less intersubjectively accessible. For example, the Old Age similes and some Animal similes express characteristics that are in principle visible to others (e.g., "like a grandpa", "like an upturned turtle"), and therefore potentially suggest both the persons' internal viewpoints on themselves and others' external viewpoint on them.

With regard to the grammatical subject of the verb introducing the simile, the vast majority of cases in our data (366 out of 400 similes, i.e., 91.5% of cases) involve the first person singular, usually explicitly realised by the pronoun "I" or a noun phrase that contains a

first person singular pronoun (e.g., "my face"). Other things being equal, these suggest that the viewpoint of the author of the post is included, potentially alongside others' viewpoints, as in the examples in Table 1. In the remaining cases, the grammatical subject of the verb introducing the simile is a plural first person pronoun (6 instances, 1.5% of cases), a second person pronoun (20 instances, 5% of cases), or a third person referent, whether a singular third person pronoun/noun phrase (7 instances, 1.75% of cases) or a third person plural pronoun/noun phrase (1 instance, 0.25% of cases):

2. so when we are put together side by side we just look like a pair of summo [sic] wrestlers

3. like you i am in lots of pain, its hard sometimes to keep going to the dr's, i could go every day with something different, and you do feel like a burden.

In example (2), which involves "we", the simile (humorously) describes the visual appearance of the writer themself and a friend – both with stomachs bloated by pain medication. This potentially allows for the presence of the other person's perspective, as well as suggesting how others visually perceive them. Example (3) begins with a statement of similarity between the writer and the addressee ("like you") with respect to the severity of pain and its consequences. The use of the generic "you" as the subject of the verb introducing the simile ("like a burden") subsequently suggests that the simile reflects the shared viewpoint of the speaker and the addressee, as well as of anyone else in a similar position.

As shown by the examples in Table 1, different kinds of verb are used to introduce the similes in our data. Verbs of cognition/emotion/perception such as "feel", "look" and "sound" are markers of subjectivity, and are highly relevant to viewpoint (Fowler, 1996).

The verb "feel" is itself a conventional metaphorical expression whereby cognitive/emotional experiences are described in terms of touch. This verb precedes "like" in 151 of cases in our dataset (37.75% of cases), and explicitly signals the internal, subjective perspective of the speaker. In Table 1, this applies to the first simile in example (A), and examples (C) and (F). Example (C) contrasts with the others because of the presence of the causative structure, "make me feel". This indicates that the writer's subjective perception of themselves is externally imposed by others' interactional behaviour towards them. Here, therefore, we potentially have a combination of viewpoints, i.e., the writer's own and the viewpoint that the writer attributes to the Accident & Emergency staff based on their behaviour.

A similar combination of viewpoints applies in the 10 cases in our data where the verb that precedes the simile is "treat", as in "if there is anywhere l can get all this test done without me being treated like an object by NHS doctors". The verb "treat" describes interactional behaviour, but it implicitly attributes to NHS doctors the perception of the writer indicated by the simile ("an object"), as well as suggesting that this is how the writer perceives themselves within those interactions. These markers of multiple viewpoints tend to be associated with situated identities.

The use of the verb of perception "sound" in example (B) involves a conventional metonymy, whereby auditory perception stands for understanding via reading. This verb, which introduces 12 similes in our data, foregrounds the external viewpoint of others on the forum (i.e., how they might perceive the writer), as well as including the internal perspective of the writer themself. This is connected with the management of the writer's public image we have mentioned previously. A similar combination of viewpoints is involved in the 23 instances where the verb that precedes the simile is "look", as in "I look like a 90yr old stooping or crawling to the loo!" and "I now look like a pachyderm". As a verb of visual

perception, "look" indicates how the writer thinks others see them, as well as how they see themselves.

With regard to evaluative terms, the examples in Table 1 are representative of our data in that the writers negatively describe or attempt to reject the perceptions of themselves indicated by the simile. This is explicitly stated in examples (B) ("I hate …"), example (C) ("I shouldn't be treated like this") and example (D) ("unfortunately"). In contrast, there are a small number of cases in which the writer evaluates positively the identity suggested by the similes: "I hope all [physiotherapy sessions] will assist in my moving around like a young boxer". Here the writer embraces (cf. "I hope") the potential future version of themself that is suggested, somewhat humorously, by the comparison with a young boxer.

4.4 So what? Framing implications

The application of our framework ultimately aims to better understand the lived experiences, and particularly the challenges, of people experiencing illness by studying the ways in which they describe themselves metaphorically. This involves spelling out the framing implications of the patterns identified in the data. The similes used by the posters on the Pain Concern forum show that, as a consequence of the pain and/or medication, they tend to perceive themselves as diminished and inadequate in terms of their:

- Bodies: e.g., "like a 98 years old grandpa", "like a beached whale"

- Minds: e.g., "like a zombie"

- Emotions: e.g., "like a baby", "like a chicken"

- Social roles and worth: e.g., "like a druggie", "like a guinea pig, "like a burden"

Overall, this suggests a sense of estrangement from the version of themselves that has emerged as a result of experiencing chronic pain, and of disempowerment within and across

social contexts, particularly as a member of a couple/family/household and as a patient in healthcare settings. As we have seen, these perceptions are mainly presented as originating from the persons themselves, but also often suggest or imply others' viewpoints, and particularly healthcare professionals and family members.

However, some similes in our data contrast with the main patterns we have just described by projecting an identity that is framed positively:

4. I know I must be addicted to the codeine as when I get my prescription […], I feel like a kid in a sweetshop! I actually feel excited.

5. And the car when parked up gets admiring looks (it is definitely the car not me I look like a cross between Quasimodo and the Hobbit) lol!

Examples (4) and (5) put a positive spin on, respectively, the need for pain medication and changes in physical appearance and ability as a result of the pain, which normally result in negatively evaluated identities. However, in (4) and (5), the reference to "kid in a sweetshop" evokes a cheerful Young Age scenario, while the intertextual reference to Quasimodo and the Hobbit provides a humorous hyperbolic description of physical deformity (cf. also "lol" in example 5).

4.5 From direct to indirect metaphors: scaling up the analysis of similes using corpus tools

We have already explained why we have focused on similes for the purposes of our analysis. However, our approach applies equally to self-descriptions via metaphorical expressions, or indirect metaphors. Moreover, the analysis of similes in a corpus can be used as the basis for

scaling up the analysis via standard corpus linguistic tools to more varied patterns of metaphoricity in the whole dataset.

The analysis of our concordance of "like" enabled us to identify 95 similes involving the noun "zombie". However, a search for "zombie" in the whole corpus returns 225 hits. An analysis of the complete set of occurrences reveals that, not surprisingly, all are metaphorical descriptions of the ways in which medication negatively affects the person in pain, with no substantial differences between cases involving similes (direct metaphors) or metaphorical expressions (indirect metaphors), as in "The gp gave me pain killers that made me a zombie."

The same approach to extending the analysis beyond similes can be applied to datasets that have been semantically annotated. For English, for example, USAS (https://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/usas/) is a tagging program that automatically assigns a semantic category tag to every word or multi-word expression in a corpus. It includes 21 general semantic domains (e.g., "Time") and 232 more specific subdomains (e.g., "Time: New and Young" as a subdomain of "Time"), and is implemented in the online corpus comparison tool Wmatrix (Rayson, 2008). Previous studies have shown how it is possible to study metaphorical patterns in large corpora by searching for instances of semantic domains that, broadly speaking, may correspond to the source domains of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (e.g., Semino *et al.*, 2018). In our case, examining concordance lines for the semantic tags "Time: New and Young" (cf. Young Age metaphors above) and "Crime" (cf. Criminal metaphors above) revealed, respectively, examples such as the following:

6. [DESCRIPTION OF FALL AND INABILITY TO GET BACK UP] I thought I'm going to have to be a toddler and shuffle bum to the stairs

7. I'll […] see what [EMPLOYMENT AGENCY] recommend for a semi-comatose, babbling, drug-filled, incomprehensible one-armed bandit.

Both approaches to scaling up the analysis are particularly appropriate to cases where the term or semantic domain in question is likely to be used metaphorically in a sufficient proportion of cases to justify looking through concordance lines in order to identify relevant instances. Nonetheless, a principled combination of these approaches is likely to be useful to extend the kind of analysis we have demonstrated from similes to metaphorical expressions.

5 Conclusion

The use of metaphor to represent identities, and changes in identities, has so far received relatively little attention. In this paper we have introduced an analytical framework for the study of metaphorical representations of identities, and applied it to a context – chronic pain – where bodily symptoms can deeply affect the whole person's sense of self, in cognitive, emotional and social terms. Consistently with the findings of previous studies of metaphorical descriptions of, for example, cancer and depression (El Refaie, 2019; Coll-Florit *et al.*, 2021), we have shown how contributors to the Pain Concern online forum describe themselves in ways that suggest a disruption, as a result of the pain, with who they used to be and who they would like to be, including in relation to other people in their lives. These findings are potentially relevant to the care and support of patients with chronic pain, especially given that, in our data, identities that people find unbearable or stigmatising are presented as resulting from the use of prescription drugs or from experiences of interactions in clinical settings.

Our approach is demonstrated in relation to similes for primarily practical reasons. We have also shown, however, how well-established corpus tools can be used to scale up an

analysis of similes to metaphorical expressions in a large corpus. We anticipate that new developments in the automatic detection of metaphors in discourse might make this process ever more efficient and reliable.

Similarly, we see our analytical framework as a starting point for others to develop and adapt to different health-related contexts and datasets where metaphorical representations of identities are relevant.

References

Andrews, Pamela, Martijn Steultjens and Jody Riskowski. (2018). Chronic widespread pain prevalence in the general population: A systematic review. *European Journal of Pain, 22*(1), 5-18. https://doi.org/10.1002/ejp.1090

Bucholtz, Mary and Kira Hall. (2005). Identity and interaction: a sociocultural linguistic approach. *Discourse Studies, 7*(4-5), 585-614. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461445605054407

Bullo, Stella. (2021). "The bloodiness and horror of it": Intertextuality in metaphorical accounts of endometriosis pain. *Metaphor and the Social World, 11*(1), 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1075/msw.19002.bul

Cameron, Lynne, Graham Low and Robert Maslen. (2010). Finding systematicity in metaphor use. In Low Cameron and Robert Maslen (Eds.), *Metaphor Analysis: Research Practice in Applied Linguistics, Social Sciences and the Humanities* (pp.116-146). Equinox.

Coll-Florit, Marta, Salvador Climent, Marco Sanfilippo and Eulália Hernández-Encuentra. (2021). Metaphors of Depression. Studying First Person Accounts of Life with Depression Published in Blogs. *Metaphor and Symbol*, *36*(1), 1–19.

Dancygier, Barbara and Eve Sweetser. (Eds.). (2012). *Viewpoint in Language: A Multimodal Perspective*. Cambridge University Press.

Dancygier, Barbara and Eve Sweetser. (2014). *Figurative Language*. Cambridge University Press.

De Fina, Anna, Deborah Schiffrin and Michael Bamberg. (2006). *Discourse and Identity*. Cambridge University Press.

Deignan, Alice, Jeannette Littlemore and Elena Semino. (2013). *Figurative Language, Genre and Register*. Cambridge University Press.

Demjén, Zsófia. (2015). *Sylvia Plath and the Language of Affective States Written Discourse and the Experience of Depression* (1st ed.). Bloomsbury Publishing.

El Refaie, Elisabeth. (2019). *Visual Metaphor and Embodiment in Graphic Illness Narratives*. Oxford University Press.

Emmott, Catherine. (2002). "Split selves" in fiction and in medical "life stories". In Elena Semino and Jonathan Culpeper (Eds.), *Cognitive Stylistics: Language and Cognition in Text Analysis* (pp. 153-182). John Benjamins.

Fowler, Roger. (1996). *Linguistic Criticism* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

Fuoli, Matteo, Jeannette Littlemore and Sarah Turnder. (2022). Sunken ships and screaming banshees: metaphor and evaluation in film reviews. *English Language and Linguistics*, *26*(1), 75–103. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1360674321000046

Genette, Gerard. (1988). *Narrative Discourse Revisited*. Cornell University Press.

Gentner, Dedre and Brian Bowdle. (2008). Metaphor as structure-mapping. In Raymond W. Gibbs Jr. (Ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought* (pp. 109-128). Cambridge University Press.

Hadi, Muhammad Abdul, Gretl A. McHugh and S. José Closs. (2019). Impact of Chronic Pain on Patients' Quality of Life: A Comparative Mixed-Methods Study. *Journal of Patient Experience, 6*(2), 133-141. https://doi.org/10.1177/2374373518786013

Henriksen, Nina and Helle Ploug Hansen. (2009). Marked bodies and selves: a literary-semiotic perspective on breast cancer and identity. *Communication and Medicine, 6*(2),143-52. https://doi.org/10.1558/cam.v6i2.143

Kelleher, David and Gerard Leavey. (Eds.). (2004). *Identity and Health*. Routledge.

Kilgarriff, Adam, Vít Baisa, Jan Bušta, Miloš Jakubíček, Vojtěch Kovář, Jan Michelfeit, Pavel Rychlý and Vít Suchomel. (2014). The Sketch Engine: ten years on. *Lexicography, 1*, 7-36. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40607-014-0009-9

Knapton, Olivia and Gabriella Rundblad. (2018). Metaphor, discourse dynamics and register: Applications to written descriptions of mental health problems. *Text & Talk*, *38*(3), 389–410. https://doi.org/10.1515/text-2018-0005

Kövecses, Zoltán. (2020). *Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory*. Cambridge University Press.

Lakoff, George. (1996). Sorry, I'm not myself today: The metaphor system for conceptualizing the self. In Gilles Fauconnier and Eve Sweetser (Eds.), *Spaces, Worlds and Grammar* (pp. 91–123). University of Chicago Press.

Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson. (1980). *Metaphors We Live By.* University of Chicago Press.

Lascaratou, Chryssoula. (2007). *The Language of Pain: Expression or Description*. John Benjamins.

Locock, Louise, Fadhila Mazanderani and John Powell. (2012). Metaphoric language and the articulation of emotions by people affected by motor neurone disease. *Chronic Illness*, *8*, 201-215.

Martin, James R. and Peter R. R. White. (2005). *The Language of Evaluation: Appraisal in English*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Millward, Louise M. and Michael P. Kelly. (2004). Introduction. In David Kelleher and Gerard Leavey (Eds.), *Identity and Health* (pp. 1-18). Routledge.

Musolff, Andreas. (2006). Metaphor scenarios in public discourse. *Metaphor and Symbol, 21*(1), 23-38.

Pragglejaz Group. (2007). MIP: A method for identifying metaphorically used words in discourse. *Metaphor and Symbol, 22*(1), 1-39.

Puraivan, Eduardo, Irenem Renau and Nicolás Riquelme. (2024). Metaphor Identification and Interpretation in Corpora with ChatGPT. *SN Computer Science*, *5*(8), Article 976.

Qiu, Amy H. and Dennis Tay. (2025). Literal and Metaphorical Cross-Domain Mappings: How They are Used and Responded to in Psychotherapy. *Metaphor and Symbol*, *40*(3), 241–258.

Rayson, Paul. (2008). From key words to key semantic domains. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics, 13*(4), 519-549.

Reijnierse, W. Gudrun and Christian Burgers. (2023). MSDIP: A Method for Coding Source Domains in Metaphor Analysis. *Metaphor and Symbol, 38*(4), 295–310.

Roncero, Carlos, Roberto G. de Almeida, Deborah C. Martin and Marco de Caro. (2016). Aptness Predicts Metaphor Preference in the Lab and on the Internet. *Metaphor and Symbol, 31*(1), 31–46. https://doi.org/10.1080/10926488.2016.1116908

Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez, Francisco José. (2020). Understanding figures of speech: Dependency relations and organizational patterns. *Language & Communication, 71,* 16–38. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2019.12.002

Sanger, Sally, Suzanne Duffin, Rosemarie E. Gough and Peter A. Bath. (2023). Use of Online Health Forums by People Living With Breast Cancer During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Thematic Analysis. *JMIR Cancer, 9*, e42783–e42783.https://cancer.jmir.org/2023/1/e42783

Semino, Elena. (2008). *Metaphor in Discourse*. Cambridge University Press.

Semino, Elena, Zsófia Demjén, Andrew Hardie, Sheila Payne and Paul Rayson. (2018). *Metaphor, Cancer and the End of Life: A Corpus-Based Study*. Routledge.

Semino, Elena. (2019). Metaphorical descriptions of pain on a Trigeminal Neuralgia Forum: Pushing the Boundaries of Cognitive Linguistics. In Christopher Hart (Ed.), *Cognitive Linguistic Approaches to text and Discourse: From Poetics to Politics* (pp. 73-92). Edinburgh University Press.

Sontag, Susan. (1979). *Illness as Metaphor*. Allen Lane.

Steen, Gerard J., Aletta G. Dorst, J. Berenike Herrmann, Anna A. Kaal, Tina Krennmayr and Tryntje Pasma. (2010). *A Method for Linguistic Metaphor Identification: From MIP to MIPVU*. John Benjamins Publishing.

Sweetser, Eve. (2012). Introduction. In Babara Dancygier and Eve Sweetser (Eds.), *Viewpoint in Language: A Multimodal Perspective* (pp. 1-24). Cambridge University Press.

Timmermans, Stefan, Tanya Stivers, Keith Cox and Amanda McArthur. (2024). Patients in Pain. *Communication & Medicine*, *19*(2), 137–151. https://doi.org/10.1558/cam.22881

Vandelanotte, Lieven. (2017). Viewpoint. In Babara Dancygier (Ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics* (pp. 157-171). Cambridge University Press.

Yang, Qimeng, Long Yu, Shengwei Tian and Jinmiao Song. (2021). Collaborative semantic

representation network for metaphor detection. *Applied Soft Computing*, *113*, Article

107911. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.asoc.2021.107911

Zimmerman, Don H. (1998). Identity, context and interaction. In Charles Antaki and Sue

Widdicombe (Eds.), *Identities in Talk* (pp. 87–106). Sage Publications Ltd.

Table 1 – Overview of analysis of six similes from the corpus

	Example	Source concept	Type of identity	Markers of viewpoint
A	I exactly know how you feel. I now feel <u>like a 98 years old grandpa</u>. […] If injections help me, I would be glad to take them for the rest of my life and live in peace and doing things that I used to love doing. I was a fitness model, and now I'm literally <u>like a grandpa</u>.	Age: Old	Transportable: Age	First person singular pronoun: "I" Viewpointed verb: "feel" Evaluative expressions: "glad", "in peace", "used to love"
B	Thank you so much for sharing your experience. It has given me the courage to try this new med. I hate sounding <u>like a baby</u>, but this is really the first med in 9 years that I have actually been nervous about.	Age: Young	Discourse: Author of post complaining about medication Situated: Contributor to online forum Transportable: Age	First person singular pronoun: "I" Viewpointed verb: "sound" Evaluative expression: "hate"
C	I don't want to go to A&E. […] Everytime I have delt with them they make me feel <u>like a druggy off the street</u> when I have never ever ever abused the medication or asked for more than I should. I Shouldn't be treated like this.	Drug addict	Situated: Patient in healthcare setting	First person singular pronoun: "I"

				Viewpointed verb in causative structure: "make me feel" Evaluative expressions: "don't want", "shouldn't be"
D	My Dr put me on [MEDICATION NAME] and they were the worst weeks of my life. As pain relief they are great unfortunately I was <u>like a zombie</u>! I couldn't stay awake	Zombie	Transportable: Human being	First person singular pronoun: "I" Evaluative expressions: "worst", "unfortunately"
E	Gradually […] my body started down the protest road once again. It came to a head about 2 weeks ago when I couldn't get out of bed. […] [NAME OF PARTNER] sort of pushed, pulled and rolled me around the bed. Nope I was rocking back and fro <u>like an upside down turtle.</u>	Animal	Situated: Body in domestic setting Transportable: Human being	First person singular pronoun: "I" Evaluative expressions: "protest road", "came to a head", "nope"
F	As someone with chronic pain I feel guilty and worthless that I can't have the relationship I did have with my partner. I feel <u>like a burden</u>.	Physical object	Situated: Partner in relationship Transportable: Human being	First person singular pronoun: "I" Viewpointed verb: "feel" Evaluative expressions: "guilty", "worthless"

Table 2 – Source concepts with at least 10 occurrences

Rank	Source concept	Raw Frequency	Frequency per million words
1	Zombie	95	11.42
2	Physical object	77	9.26
3	Animal	55	6.61
4	Age	52	6.25
5	Drug addict	27	3.25
6	Criminal	10	1.20