Evidence-based metaphors for diabetes care
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PI: Fabrizio Macagno & Maria Grazia Rossi

Metaphors are crucial instruments of communication, especially in chronic care communication. They can make technical or unfamiliar concepts familiar, and thus can be used for explaining medical notions or promoting adherence, compliance, or lifestyle changes. However, at the same time, they can be sources of misunderstanding and confusion. Choosing the most effective metaphors thus becomes a fundamental clinical challenge for chronic care.

The growing need of evidence-based metaphors is the challenge that this project addresses. The goal is to develop a theoretical model of metaphor interpretation and a coding scheme for evaluating metaphor effectiveness. We will apply theoretical advances to the analysis of a corpus of Italian and Portuguese doctor-patient interviews in diabetes care. The metaphors used in doctor-patient interactions will be subjected to a twofold analysis. On the one hand, their effects on the medical communication will be classified considering their role in promoting understanding or causing misunderstanding, communicative gaps, or lack of understanding. On the other hand, the metaphors used will be analyzed considering their relations with the interlocutors' common knowledge and the reasoning underlying the speaker's use of a specific metaphor.

The project has three objectives, two theoretical and one practical. First, a pragmatic and functional theory of metaphor interpretation will be developed, filling a gap in the literature of philosophy of language. The idea is to conceive metaphors as the object of a process of best explanation of meaning, in which the various presumptions concerning the possible function of the metaphor in the given dialogue, language use, beliefs and values are assessed. This model is aimed at pointing out the role of context and common knowledge in metaphor understanding. The second objective is to develop a coding scheme for capturing degrees of misunderstanding in dialogues, addressing a crucial problem in communication and discourse studies. The communicative effectiveness of a metaphor will be evaluated based on how the interlocutor replies to the metaphorical utterance (the interlocutor's uptake of the utterance). The empirical goal, concerning the area of communication in diabetes care, is to provide an evidence-based corpus of effective (and ineffective) metaphors concerning diabetes, in which they are also classified and assessed based on the theoretical advances, pointing out whether, why, and how they can be the source of understanding and misunderstanding. The output is an instrument that will be used in doctors' training and communication courses (also offered to patients). The theoretical insights and empirical instruments developed can be applied to several other areas of communication.

Objectives

The project has four objectives, two theoretical and two empirical:

1. Theoretical (THo). To develop a functional model of metaphor interpretation, based on models of functional textual interpretation. This model can provide an explanation of metaphors in terms of presumptions, or expectations about the interlocutor's behavior, linking the idea of common knowledge to argumentation. This model will be used for distinguishing different types of metaphors depending on how much they are shared (lexicalized) or are instead creative.

2. Epistemological (EPo). To develop a model for assessing the pragmatic effectiveness of metaphors grounded on the notion of relevance. Metaphorical utterances can be evaluated based on the observable replies by the interlocutor. The interlocutor can either request a clarification, pointing out his lack of understanding, fail to contribute to the conversation, or continue the dialogue. In this latter case, the reply can be pragmatically irrelevant, showing a misunderstanding of the purpose of the utterance or its message. The different levels of lack of or poor understanding will be distinguished and a coding scheme developed.

3. Empirical (EMo). THo e EPo will be the background for analyzing metaphorical utterances in doctor-patient interactions in diabetes care. Metaphorical utterances will be classified according to their creativity and effectiveness, and the most effective ones will be selected and further analyzed, bringing to light the factors and the structure underlying their successful use.

4. Social (So). The most effective metaphors and the underlying factors leading to the creation or use of effective metaphors will be made available to health providers working in diabetes or chronic care through publications, scientific and professional meetings, and communication courses. This result is expected to have a direct impact on the improvement of providers' competence in verbal communication and an indirect impact on patient self-management and on patient engagement.

Team

- Fabrizio Macagno
- Maria Grazia Rossi
- Irene Maria Palmares Dias Carvalho
- Sarah Bigi
- Rosalice Botelho Wakim Souza Pinto
- Adriana Padilha da Rosa Ramos
- Filipa Campos da Silva

Partners

- Associação Protetora dos Diabéticos de Portugal (APDP)
- Health Reasoning