

SEM35. Language, health and wellbeing: Individual and collective perspectives from past to present

35A 12 September h. 14:00-16:00, PN 10

35B 13 September h. 8:30-11:00, PN 10

Convenors

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Abstract

From Early and Late Modern medical texts to contemporary public health campaigns, the language of wellbeing has evolved alongside scientific advancements and social transformations producing a variety of texts and discourses which deserve close examination for the role they have in popularizing and disseminating information, and directing individual and collective choices.

The seminar will examine the multi-faceted relationship between language and health, with a focus on wellbeing across both historical and contemporary contexts. Drawing on a range of texts and discourses, the contributions will address how the English language has evolved in its representations of health and illness, offering insights into the socio-cultural contexts that have informed these discourses. Employing methodologies such as corpus linguistics, discourse analysis, and (historical) pragmatics, this seminar will investigate how English has been employed to conceptualize, communicate, and negotiate health and wellbeing. By integrating diachronic and synchronic perspectives and highlighting both personal and collective experiences, contributors will analyze linguistic shifts in medical discourse and the ways in which language shapes, and is shaped, by changing understandings of health.

Potential topics may include:

- Life course health, old age, midwifery, mental and public health.
- Linguistic representations of health and illness in historical and contemporary medical discourse.
- The role of metaphor and framing in shaping perceptions of wellbeing.
- Medical writing and the evolution of health-related terminology.
- Public health campaigns and their linguistic strategies.
- The impact of digital communication on health discourse (e.g., social media, telemedicine, etc.).
- Narrative structures in patient experiences and medical case reports.
- Gender, identity, and power dynamics in medical discourse.

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SEM35. Papers

35A 12 September h. 14:00-16:00, PN 10

- *Writing well-Being in eighteenth-century correspondence* (Giovanni Iamartino, Università degli Studi di Milano)
- *Well-being terminology and discourse in 19th-century British medical texts* (Alessandra Vicentini, Università degli Studi dell'Insubria / Ilaria Gorini, Università degli Studi dell'Insubria / Gilberto Giannacchi, Università degli Studi dell'Insubria)

- *The construction of collective wellbeing in Victorian public health discourse* (Laura Tommaso, Università del Piemonte Orientale)
- *“Live like athletes”: The language of the healthy body in Oswald Mosley’s fascist writings* (Anna Anselmo, Università degli Studi di Milano / Anna La Torre, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona)

35B 13 September h. 8:30-11:00, PN 10

- *The lexis of childcare and wellbeing in early infancy: Exploring (late) 18th-c. British medical writing* (Elisabetta Lonati, Università del Piemonte Orientale)
- *Shaping longevity: Language and well-being in Modern English medical texts* (Elisa Ramazzina, Università degli Studi dell’Insubria)
- *“A julep for childbed women”: Pregnancy and wellbeing discourses in eighteenth-century domestic lexicography* (Martina Guzzetti, Università degli Studi dell’Insubria)
- *Health beyond our years: A linguistic analysis of the discourse of the scientific community vs. providers of radical life extension services* (Francesca Cappellini, Università degli Studi di Milano)
- *Metaphors for a healthy life: An exploration of a science popularization corpus* (Sara Corrizzato, Università di Verona / Valeria Franceschi, Università di Verona / Gloria Mambelli, Università di Verona)

SEM35. Abstracts

“Live like athletes”: The language of the healthy body in Oswald Mosley’s fascist writings

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This paper examines the discursive construction of the healthy, disciplined body in two foundational texts of British fascism: *The Greater Britain* (1932) and *Fascism: 100 Questions Asked and Answered* (1936) by Oswald Mosley. Drawing on methods from critical discourse analysis, the study explores how Mosley mobilises metaphors, imperatives, and anatomical imagery to articulate a vision of the ideal citizen as both biologically fit and ideologically aligned. Across both texts, health is framed not as a private good or human right, but as a political resource – a condition of moral and civic legitimacy. The repeated slogan “live like athletes” encapsulates a key tenet of fascist morality: only bodies trained in discipline, strength, and purpose are worthy of liberty. The body is presented simultaneously as a site of national regeneration and a symbol of unity, echoing the corporate-state metaphor in which society is likened to a human organism directed by a central brain.

The paper further analyses the gendered rhetoric of health. Men are invoked as virile and combative citizens, whose strength underwrites their fitness to lead and fight. Women, by contrast, are primarily valued for their reproductive health and maternal function; motherhood is not merely domestic but “organised and corporate”, politicised within the fascist state. The notion of the microcosm of a national manhood reborn crystallises the aim of producing a racially and morally purified citizenry through bodily governance.

Ultimately, the paper shows how Mosley’s fascist vision transforms the body into a medium of ideological inscription, where fitness becomes proof of loyalty and health becomes the condition of political personhood.

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Health beyond our years: A linguistic analysis of the discourse of the scientific community vs. providers of radical life extension services

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In the last few years, the topic of Radical Life Extension (RLE) has reached new height in the public discourse as well as in the scientific community, where much of the discourse concerned itself with discussing the scientific truthfulness of such processes, such as regenerative medicine to counter the aging process, brain preservation techniques, and cryonics (Moshakis, 2019). The emergence of this new topic has often been linked to the well-being of people in their old age, as the concept of extending one's lifespan almost indefinitely could mean people experiencing more years of good health, delaying or even preventing many age-related diseases and disabilities (Anderson, 2019).

The aim of this contribution is, therefore, to provide an overview on how the scientific community as well as the websites that provide these services related to RLE frame their discourse when it comes to selling what can be a scientific truth or just a hope to the ageing population.

To do so, Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) (Benzécri, 1979, Le et al., 2008, Clarke et al., 2021) was carried out on two corpora containing respectively n=137 academic articles on RLE and the webpages of n=29 websites of RLE services providers, in order to uncover what are their main topics of interest and how do they argue their linguistic choices in their scientific explanations as well as promotion of health beyond the years through RLE. The main dimensions were then analysed according to Biber's (2013; 2019) theory on registers and subregisters, with the aim of finding the main and most representative subregisters related to RLE in the two contexts. More specifically, a number of them will be analysed more in depth and compared in order to see how the scientific community frames this new concept of health and how it is promoted by the companies that provide said services.

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Metaphors for a healthy life: An exploration of a science popularization corpus

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Figurative language, such as metaphors and similes, has been established as an effective strategy to make technical and specialized concepts more accessible and understandable to non-experts (e.g., Scotto di Carlo, 2014; Mattiello, 2019). It is indeed widely employed in popularization discourse, including professional and scientific communication addressing a lay audience. The aim of this paper is to investigate how the general concepts of health and well-being are presented by professionals in spoken texts addressed to a non-expert audience. More specifically, a corpus-assisted analysis was carried out to determine what roles metaphors play in ensuring effective and accessible communication that may influence people to adopt healthier behaviors and lifestyles. The data was drawn from the SciencePop Corpus, developed at the University of Verona, which consists of 104 annotated transcripts of interviews and monologues involving international professionals/experts discussing topics pertaining to human health and well-being.

The combination of corpus analysis techniques and of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) allows for the exploration of a larger sample (Stefanowitsch, 2006): the use of a concordancer to extract instances of the terms 'health' and 'well-being' helps narrow down the context in which to identify metaphors used to define the notion of health. The metaphorical mappings employed in the corpus illustrate how the conceptualization of health and well-being contributes to making these topics more accessible and engaging to a non-expert audience, providing insights into the recontextualization strategies employed in science popularization.

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“A julep for childbed women”: Pregnancy and wellbeing discourses in eighteenth-century domestic lexicography Martina Guzzetti (Università degli Studi dell’Insubria) ma.guzzetti@uninsubria.it

This paper investigates the representation of pregnancy and wellbeing in eighteenth-century domestic lexicography compiled by women. By examining a corpus of thirteen domestic dictionaries of the period, such as, among others, Eliza Smith’s *Compleat housewife* (1727), Arabella Atkyn’s *Family magazine* (1741) and Lydia Fisher’s *Prudent housewife* (1788), this research traces the intersection of language, medicine, and (gendered) cultural norms surrounding pregnancy and maternal health.

The study employs a critical historical-lexicographical methodology, combining linguistic analysis with contextual research into the medical, social, and gendered discourses of the time. Through a comparative approach, the paper will first identify headwords related to women’s reproductive cycle, pregnancy, childbirth, and lying-in. Secondly, it will explore how notions of wellbeing were integrated in the entries, for example in sections about instructions for the practitioner assisting child-bed women, or about the dissemination of medical knowledge to lay patients. Lastly, the study will investigate the role of domestic lexicography in shaping public understanding of women’s reproductive health, emphasising how these lexicons were not merely practical tools but also vehicles for disseminating knowledge about women’s bodies, their reproductive functions, and their wellbeing.

The investigation aims to reveal discourses that went beyond patriarchal control over women’s bodies while also providing insights into the complexities of maternal health in the context of eighteenth-century (domestic) life. Expected results include a deeper understanding of how domestic lexicography contributed to the shaping of cultural norms around pregnancy and wellbeing: by examining these dictionaries, this research will also underscore the role of language in reinforcing or challenging medical and social authority in eighteenth-century Britain.

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Writing well-being in eighteenth-century correspondence

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As part of a current research project on the discourses and contexts of well-being in the history of English (PRIN20228JCCPN), the aim of the essay is to focus on a relevant sample of eighteenth-century British correspondence to show how the themes of health and psycho-physical well-being – and conversely that of malaise and illness – become the subject of reflection and sharing. Indeed, while falling within the conceptual category of ego-documents, letter-writing takes place in a social dimension, which primarily concerns the addressee but potentially opens up to others, also taking into account that letters were often conceived and drafted with a publication in mind. This, at least, in the case of literary figures and highly educated people, such as those whose correspondence will be analysed in the paper: Samuel Richardson, John Cleland and Horace Walpole among the men; Mary Wortley Montague, Hester Lynch Piozzi and Fanny Burney among the women.

By adopting a sociolinguistic and discourse-analytical approach, the paper will examine how the idea and ideal of well-being were linguistically and rhetorically crafted and intersected with issues of gender and class in the correspondence of the abovementioned letter-writers.

Arguably, the resulting data will provide useful insights into the evolution of the concept of well-being, somewhere between the introduction of the neologism *well-being* in the translation of Baldassar Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*, published by Thomas Hoby in 1561, and the presence of the concept of well-being at the heart of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

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The lexis of childcare and wellbeing in early infancy: Exploring (late) 18th-c. British medical writing

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The general aim of this study is to explore late 18th-c. medical writing to retrieve the lexis related to childcare and wellbeing in (early) infancy. The main sources for the analysis are British reference works for a multilayered readership of experts and non-experts, male and female audience. In particular, the corpus includes a variety of writings on midwifery, such as treatises, observations, case notes, lectures, etc., written by physicians, surgeons, midwives and men-midwives. Such works are focused on many different aspects of pre-natal conditions and parturition, but also on after-birth and upbringing, specific treatments to preserve and improve the health of mother and child, and the prevention of illnesses. Medical works of this kind testify to the increased interest in healthy infancy and childhood as fundamental stages of human life. They deserve specific attention as a distinct part of medicine (e.g. midwifery and nursing), since “the human species can only be preserved by taking proper care of the infant race” (Armstrong’s *An essay on the diseases most fatal to infants*, 1767, 2). Hence, the need to expand medical research on infancy and childhood and disseminate good practices (e.g. regimen and the non-naturals, such as food, exercise, air, etc.).

The focus of the study is mainly qualitative (e.g., collocates of ‘child’, ‘children’, ‘infant/s’, etc., semantic preference, textual representation of childcare and wellbeing), but the research path necessarily includes preliminary corpus-based quantitative approaches (retrieval of collocates and clusters, frequency and relevance, KWIC; AntConc 4.3, 2024).

The study will highlight how late 18th-century lexis related to (early) infancy is extremely relevant to represent contemporary interest in childcare and wellbeing “before the formal recognition of paediatrics as a medical specialty” (Williams, 2007, 75).

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Shaping longevity: Language and well-Being in modern English medical texts

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This paper investigates the conceptualisation of well-being in old age and strategies for life prolongation in a selection of Modern English medical and philosophical texts. Drawing on a corpus of seven treatises, namely Joseph Du Chesne's *The Practise of Chymicall and Hermeticall Physicke* (1605), Francis Bacon's *Historie naturall and experimental, of life and death* (reprinted in 1638), John Heydon's *A new method of Rosie Crucian Physick* (1658), Daniel Sennert's *Nine books of physick and chirurgery* (1658), John Pechey's *A plain introduction to the art of physick* (1697), and George Cheyne's *An essay of health and long life* (1724) and *The English malady* (1733), the study examines how language shaped the ageing body as both a therapeutic site and a moral project.

Using a historical discourse-analytical approach (Brinton, 2015), the paper investigates how lexical and rhetorical choices contrast “green old age” – linked to clarity, serenity, and physiological harmony – with “decrepit old age”, defined by rigidity, dryness, and ethical decline. Metaphors such as “radical moisture”, “lamp of life”, and “balsam of life” reflect medieval and Renaissance humoral frameworks (Porter, 2006) while shaping cultural imaginaries of ageing. The loss of radical moisture anchors narratives of bodily decay, while its preservation supports ideals of dignified longevity (Smith, 1998).

Recurring expressions such as “lengthen out their days”, “preserve their faculties”, or “live as long as crows” convey more than medical advice: they normalise specific hygienic, dietary, and emotional disciplines. These include temperate eating, exposure to fresh air, moderate exercise, and emotional restraint. Such rhetoric codifies medical instruction into rituals of well-being, where successful ageing depends on thinking, speaking, and acting within established boundaries. The study argues that language not only reflects but actively constructs longevity as intelligible and achievable through self-regulation. Elderly well-being emerges not as an anomaly but as the reward for disciplined living (Thomas, 2009), articulated through consistent linguistic choices.

Set against a backdrop of urbanisation, religious introspection, and evolving public health discourses, these texts portray old age as a malleable condition (Ottaway, 2004). It is not conceptualised as degeneration but as the reward for virtuous living, through which attaining longevity and late-life well-being becomes possible.

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The construction of collective wellbeing in Victorian public health discourse

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In the early years of Queen Victoria's reign, mounting public concern prompted Parliament to recognise the urgent need for reforms aimed at improving the lives of men, women, and children in the poorer sectors of society. Social reformers advocated for causes such as safer working conditions, sanitary improvements, and access to universal education (Newsome, 1997; Hopkins, 2013). In particular, as infectious diseases like cholera and tuberculosis swept through Europe and Britain in the 1830s and 1840s, the British government initiated a series of foundational public health reforms (Poovey, 1994; Hamlin, 1998).

By adopting a corpus-based discourse studies approach (Taylor & Marchi, 2018; Baker, 2023), integrated with perspectives from historical discourse analysis (Brinton, 2001), this paper explores the discursive construction of collective health and wellbeing in Edwin Chadwick's *Report on the sanitary condition of the labouring population of Great Britain* (1842). This seminal document not only reflects the reforming spirit of the era but also contributed to the institutionalisation of public health as a field of knowledge and practice, while shaping the emerging scientific discourse on disease prevention.

Preliminary results show that the text combines factual reporting with persuasive elements, reflecting Chadwick's dual aim: to inform and to instigate reform. Specifically, while grounded in scientific evidence and statistical reasoning, the *Report* also incorporates a strong moral appeal, portraying the alarming sanitary conditions affecting the labouring population not only as a public health crisis, but as a moral failing of society. This framing engages the audience's ethical sensibilities and justifies public health reform as essential to the nation's progress and stability, constructing collective wellbeing at the intersection of morality, governance, and social order.

In light of these findings, this study emphasises the role of both corpus methods and historical discourse analysis in tracing the linguistic underpinnings of health narratives. Moreover, it contributes to broader scholarly discussions regarding the enduring influence of past health discourses in shaping modern understandings of wellbeing, civic responsibility, and biopolitical governance.

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Well-being terminology and discourse in 19th-century British medical texts

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This paper explores the terminology of well-being in British medical discourse by examining a corpus of 19th-century medical dictionaries and journals. The aim is to investigate how concepts related to physical and mental well-being were defined, contextualised, and shaped within specialist sources that addressed physicians, practitioners, and students of medicine during a period of significant change in the medical field (Bergoldt, 2008).

The study draws on five medical dictionaries published between 1809 and 1882 – namely, Bartholomew Parr's *The London medical dictionary* (1809), Robley Dunglison's *A new dictionary of medical science and literature* (1833), Richard Hoblyn's *A dictionary of terms used in medicine and the collateral sciences* (1835), James Copland's *A dictionary of practical medicine* (1858), and Richard Quain's *A dictionary* (1882). These works are cross-referenced with terms listed under “well-being” in the OED Thesaurus to trace the presence, meaning, and evolution of the concept across the century. Unlike modern dictionaries, these historical resources often include extended entries resembling treatises or

case narratives, offering valuable material for contextual and discursive analysis. The same terms are then searched for in the *Lancet* (1823) and the *British Medical Journal* (1840), which were – and remain – the two most authoritative medical-scientific journals in Britain.

Preliminary results suggest that the idea of well-being was not limited to the mere absence of disease, even in specialised resources such as these. Interestingly, despite the attestation of the term ‘well-being’ in English as early as 1561 (OED, s.v. ‘well-being’), it does not appear in any of the medical dictionaries examined. It emerges for the first time in 1857 in the *British Medical Journal*, in an article titled “Poor law medical relief” – an occurrence that points to the layered socio-medical conceptualisation of the term. Instead, several related terms such as ‘health’, ‘sanity’, ‘salubrity’, ‘valitude’, ‘happiness’, and others are recurrent in dictionary entries and deserve close analysis to reconstruct the shifting vocabulary around well-being.

By integrating lexicographical and discourse-analytical approaches (Taavitsainen, 2008; Brinton, 2015), the paper sheds light on how medical language reflected and contributed to evolving understandings of well-being in the long nineteenth century. The study stems from a research project on the discourses and contexts of well-being in the history of English (PRIN20228JCCPN).

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