

SEM42. A human and humane approach? Metaphor, argumentation and (counter)institutional discourses

12 September h. 16:30-19:00, PN 10

Convenors

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Abstract

Are the metaphors underlying institutional discourses on current burning issues reliable predictors of the “human and humane” (Panebianco, 2021) approaches they advocate and claim to incorporate in their policy-making processes? Are the metaphors used to criticize the dominant institutional discourse effective in creating counter-discourses that challenge the dominant ones? Do dominant discourses and counter-discourses use the same metaphorical frames (Kövecses, 2009; Burgers, Konijn & Steen, 2016)? If so, what are the different properties selected to build their arguments?

We call for contributions that address these questions –both from the perspective of metaphor theory (Charteris-Black 2011; Musolff & Zinken, 2009; Lakoff, 1993) as well as from the perspective of argumentation theory (van Poppel, 2021, Wagemans, 2016) – and thus investigate the role of metaphors in relation to their argumentative function in both dominant discourses and discourses that produce a resistance to the dominant ones. We especially encourage the submission of papers that explore issues related to sustainability, health and well-being, economic and social policies concerning and influencing the public debate as well as the personal sphere.

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SEM42. Papers

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- *Sustainability at work: Dialogic practices for healing in the face of conflict* (Federica Ferrari, Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna / Anthony Dion Mitzel, Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna)
- *Institutional discourse and online communities: A metaphor analysis of eating-disorder communication* (Francesca Luisa Seracini, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore di Milano)
- *Conceptualising the principles of humane experimental technique: Metaphors and argumentation in 3Rs and NAMs discourse* (Ilaria Rizzato, Università di Genova / Daniele Borgogni, Università di Torino)
- *Mapping metaphors in news discourse: The discursive construction of sustainability* (Laura Narisano, Libera Università di Bolzano)
- *Diverging frames: Metaphors of inclusion in special needs education in the United States* (Cecilia Boggio, Università di Torino)

SEM42. Abstracts

Diverging frames: Metaphors of inclusion in special needs education in the United States

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Abstract

In recent months the topic of inclusive education has taken the spotlight due to the current US administration's intention to move the oversight of special needs education out of the Department of Education (ED) and into the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Given that the history of schooling for students with disabilities in the US has been marked by exclusion, this so-called bureaucratic reorganization would only be its latest manifestation.

The concept of inclusive education is relatively recent. It was only with the United States Congress's enactment of the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act* (commonly referred to as Public Law 94-142) in 1975, which mandated the integration of students with disabilities into public schools across the country, that the word "inclusion" started to enter the discourse of education. Then, in 1990, with the implementation of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (commonly referred to as IDEA), politicians and educators alike started to label their effort to integrate the education of students with special needs into the US public school system as "inclusive education", i.e., an education which is equal and qualitative for all.

My study is a critical analysis of the discourse of inclusive education as it is laid out by both Public Law 94-142 and IDEA. Drawing on Conceptual Metaphor Theory, frame analysis and research on the argumentative potential of metaphors, I demonstrate that the texts of these two laws embed four conventional conceptual metaphors, namely, inclusion as a goal, as a building, as a process and as hospitality. Most importantly, I show that each of these four metaphors advances a particular standpoint on inclusion that may determine the way in which inclusive education is put into practice.

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Sustainability at work: Dialogic practices for healing in the face of conflict

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In times of increasing interpersonal and professional polarization, this presentation proposes a communicative model of sustainability rooted in persuasion and dialogic pragmatics. We contemplate how workplace and interpersonal communication can enhance mutual understanding, emotional independence/safety, and productive collaboration. Drawing on George Lakoff's theories of metaphor, moral framing, and identity, recent communication psychology (e.g., "11 Tips for Talking to Someone You Disagree With"), and Ferrari's (2018) model of "persuasion sustainability", we define sustainable dialogue as that which enables relational symmetry, persuasive balance, and clarity of intent over time. We present a tripartite framework for evaluating dialogic sustainability in accordance with the three sustainability factors for the analysis of persuasion: 1. relationship (symmetrical/asymmetrical); 2. way of persuasion; and 3. goal of persuasion. Using metaphor analysis and multimodal examples, we demonstrate how breakdowns occur linguistically and

emotionally, as well as how sustainability awareness and practices can pre-empt and/or repair these ruptures and fractures in strategic/everyday communication, thus providing guidelines for rebalancing problematic cases to promote more healing from a wider interactional perspective.

Sustainable communication, we argue, is not necessarily conflict-free but conflict-capable, i.e., able to withstand disagreement without resorting to erasure, aggression, or gaslighting. Charisma, listening, and the emotional tenor of a conversation often prove more influential than formal logic. Some examples from media (e.g., *Modern Family* (2009-2020, ABC), *Gaslight* (1944), *Marriage Story* (2019), *Saturday Night Live* (1975-present, NBC) political sketch parodies, and Abbott & Costello's "Who's on First"), illustrate how non sustainability can develop into a climax from misunderstanding to denial, reversal and other non-necessarily fair strategies, operating rhetorically and sometimes comically, making visible the thin line between irony and emotional harm. Sustainability factors analysis can help promoting awareness and practical guidelines for more sustainability and healing. Ultimately, we argue that sustainability at work is not solely about environmental or economic models, but about how people speak, listen, persuade, co-exist, and crucially *heal* through dialogic means. Therefore, communication, when practiced with care, reciprocity, and long-term vision, becomes a renewable resource for mutual recognition and shared purpose.

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Mapping metaphors in news discourse: The discursive construction of sustainability

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Metaphors can facilitate the process of grasping unfamiliar concepts by mapping them onto more familiar ones (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Conventional metaphors, due to their widespread usage, may convey implicit assumptions that are taken for granted; on the other hand, creative metaphors can be utilised more deliberately to challenge prevailing narratives (van Poppel, 2021). This makes metaphor a particularly valuable lens through which to examine how public understanding of complex and multifaceted issues, such as sustainability, is shaped. Although the term has entered mainstream discourse and become widely recognisable, it remains conceptually opaque and open to multiple interpretations (Purvis et al., 2019). Frequently framed as development that allows humanity to meet its current needs without permanently damaging the ability of future generations to do the same, its vagueness and flexibility allow it to function as a "floating signifier" (Catenaccio 2019). The media, by virtue of its role in constructing representations of social issues (Baker et al. 2013), plays a central part in shaping public conceptions of sustainability.

This study investigates how sustainability is metaphorically framed in British and Italian newspapers through a corpus-based analysis. A 2,259-article dataset was compiled from mainstream national outlets over the three months following the release of the EU's 8th Environment Action Programme (European Commission 2022). Metaphors were identified within concordances for *sustainab-* and *sostenib-* using an adapted version of MIPVU (Steen et al. 2010), and analysed through Musolff's (2006) scenario-based framework to investigate their discursive implications.

The JOURNEY metaphor emerged as the dominant frame, typically portraying the implementation of sustainability as a long-term, effortful but worthwhile activity. However, scenario-level analysis revealed less common variants within the JOURNEY domain, depicting the adoption of sustainable measures as a turn or highlighting the need to accelerate this process, implying a shift or urgency in action. Moreover, rare and more creative metaphors were found to offer more critical perspectives on dominant sustainability narratives. Overall, the study shows that while the press generally upholds conventional framings of sustainability that support incremental change, alternative, potentially disruptive discourses, can emerge through more creative metaphors.

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Conceptualising the principles of humane experimental technique: Metaphors and argumentation in 3Rs and NAMs discourse

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This paper will look at metaphors as conceptualising tools in 3Rs and NAMs discourse. The former acronym, standing for Replacement of animals in experimental research, Reduction of the number of laboratory animals and Refinement of experimental techniques involving animals, was coined by Russell and Burch in their seminal *The Principles of Humane Experimental Technique* (1959), posing the problem of the suffering of animals used in medical and pharmaceutical laboratory research aimed at humans for the first time. Ever since then, an increasing number of researchers has called for complete replacement of animals in laboratories, so that the definition of this type of commitment has changed to Non-Animal Methods (NAMs), shifting the focus to the development of research techniques that do not involve animal testing in the first place. Since the standard procedure for institutional approval of therapies and drugs implies a compulsory animal testing phase, the use of animals in medical research is taken for granted both in experimental practices and in discursive practices addressing them. NAMs, on the other hand, have the lower status of alternative methods; to reach the goal of animal replacement they need to prove more reliable and efficient than traditional methods, which makes the question of reconceptualising medical research without animals and spreading this vision across the scientific community and public opinion a very urgent one.

Discursive representations of scientific research heavily rely on metaphoric language to effectively convey complex meanings. For this reason, this paper looks at the metaphors employed by 3Rs and NAMs discourse and analyses their functions in criticising animal research models and constructing solid arguments in favour of non-animal methods and techniques. The study is based on a corpus of articles and book chapters focusing on the promotion and advancement of non-animal methods. The model for metaphor interpretation and analysis that appears more apt to do so is that of conflictual metaphor devised by Prandi (2017), not only because it actively addresses scientific discourse, but also because it distinguishes between conventional metaphors and conflictual metaphors. The former rely on consistent conceptual structures belonging to a shared heritage of everyday expressions emerging from polysemy, as described by Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Conflictual metaphors, on the other hand, are living metaphors challenging our shared conceptual structures and going beyond the boundaries of already shared language use. In this sense, conflictual metaphors represent an important part of the mechanisms of conceptual creativity made possible by linguistic expressions. Such creativity is pivotal both in devising new scientific theories and models and in effectively communicating and discussing existing ones.

This paper will apply this model to 3Rs and NAMs discourse, highlighting the conventional and conflictual metaphorical conceptualisations it adopts to construct argumentative patterns against the use of animals in research and in support of animal-free experimental techniques.

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Institutional discourse and online communities: A metaphor analysis of eating-disorder communication

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Metaphor is a powerful linguistic device that both shapes and reveals how individuals understand and relate to experiences, including those in health contexts. Metaphors can influence how people feel about an illness by shaping their emotions to match the way the illness is described in words (Hendricks et al., 2018, p. 276). In mental health, metaphorical framing plays a pivotal role in constructing public and personal narratives. However, the extent to which institutional health communication aligns with individuals' lived experiences - particularly in digital discourse - raises important questions. This has significant implications for health literacy, which relies on people being able to recognise, understand, and apply health information in ways that resonate with their lived realities (Augustosky et al., 2023). In light of growing calls for clarity, empathy, and inclusiveness in health-related discourse (Shen, 2011; Augustosky et al., 2023), examining how metaphors function across different communicative domains can provide a meaningful contribution to current discussions.

This study examines the metaphorical language used in institutional discourse on eating disorders (EDs) and compares it with that found in Reddit communities. It explores whether the metaphorical frames presented by institutions reinforce or challenge the narratives created by peers online. For the purpose of the study, two English-language corpora were compiled: (1) institutional texts from ED organisations such as Beat and NEDA, and (2) posts from ED-related subreddits (r/EatingDisorders; r/EatingDisordersOver30). Grounded in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), the analysis employs Metaphorical Pattern Analysis (Stefanowitsch, 2004, 2007) in combination with MIPVU (Steen et al., 2010) to identify dominant metaphor clusters.

Findings indicate that while some metaphorical frames overlap across institutional texts and online community discourse (e.g., ED is a fight; recovery is a journey), they often serve distinct argumentative functions and draw on different source domain properties, reflecting to varying degrees the person-centred - or 'human and humane' - perspective that characterises institutional discourse. Institutional metaphors tend to empower and guide individuals toward help and recovery, whereas community metaphors reveal a more emotionally complex and ambivalent reality, framing recovery as a cyclical rather than linear process. Additionally, some metaphors - e.g., food is a threat - are more specific to the discourse within online communities, thus performing a counter-discursive role by foregrounding concerns that tend to be less visible in institutional narratives.

As Augustosky et al. (2023, pp. 50-51) argue, empathetic communication - rooted in audience-centred metaphorical framing - builds trust and promotes greater engagement with health recommendations. In this light, the findings of the present study can support institutional communicators in better aligning their messages with the lived experiences and concerns of individuals with EDs. Additionally, the study provides valuable insights for students specialising in communication and English for Medical Purposes.

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