

*Klaudia WENGOREK-DOLECKA*

## **METHOD IN MADNESS. ON A CULTURAL AND CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF *INSANITY***

Language is grounded in our conceptual system. As argued by numerous authors (among others Kövecses 1986, 1990, 1995, Lakoff 1987, Lakoff and Johnson 1999), the study of meaning presents scholars with important clues to the cognitive organisation of knowledge underlying both our linguistic and non-linguistic behaviour. Everyday language of idioms, metaphors, metonymies, proverbs, sayings, collocations, etc. constitutes a rich source of information about systems of cultural cognitive models which speakers of a language employ to make sense of the world they live in.

It is the purpose of this paper to analyse lexical expressions pertaining to the domain of *Insanity* in English with a view to uncovering a cognitive model of *Insanity* which motivates them. The analysis will be based upon the assumption that lexical categories are organised conceptually around cognitive prototypes and that relations inside and between categories are cases of extension of meaning from prototypes via metonymic and metaphorical mappings (see, for example, Lakoff 1987). The cognitive model of *Insanity* we arrive at will be shown not only to underlie our linguistic behaviour but also to play no small role in our understanding of and attitudes towards mental illness and the mentally ill.

### **1. The Metonymies and Metaphors of *Insanity***

At first sight, the terminology used to talk about insanity seems rather opaque – an idea expressed in the following passage from literary criticism:

*[I define madness] as a state of mind in which a character seriously confuses reality as most of us see it with what the character takes it to be. I prefer this as a working definition to vaguer notions like “being out of one’s mind,” or “being mentally deranged.” Definitions like [this] are question begging, in that we wonder what, in turn is meant by such a phrase. (Daalder 1997:105)*

However, a closer look at lexical expressions of insanity reveals that, rather than functioning as arbitrary signs, they form systems of meaning motivated by the underlying conceptual categories, mostly metaphors and metonymies, which are directly grounded in our bodily and cultural experience (Johnson 1987, Lakoff 1987).

Let us begin our discussion by examining expressions which reflect a cultural model of the Behavioural and Physiological Symptoms Of Insanity. People who are considered insane are typically seen as very active and energetic. They display agitated, violent behaviour, moving in a fast and uncontrolled way, flailing their limbs, often screaming and/or laughing hysterically. Some of these patterns of behaviour can metonymically stand for Insanity.

***Agitated/Violent Behaviour Stands for Insanity***

*He was hopping/screaming/spitting mad.*

*Maddened by pain the horse went berserk kicking at the walls of his stable.*

*In the film a man clutching a chain saw runs spectacularly amok.*

*She went wild when she heard about it.*

*He suddenly went psycho and started shooting in all directions.*

*She had an attack of nerves.*

*She'll throw a fit/a tantrum when she sees that mess.*

*She had hysterics when I told her what happened.*

People suffering from mental illnesses are also seen as displaying characteristic Visual Behaviour, usually with their eyes and mouth wide open and/or a sort of contorted facial expression:

***Insane Visual Behaviour Stands for Insanity***

*She had a wild look in her eyes.*

*She was staring mad.*

*He was grinning like mad.*

*Those people looked really mad.*

The most pervasive characteristic of madness is, however, the fact that it impairs normal mental functioning. As a result of an illness, strong emotion, or the influence of drugs or alcohol, the brain stops working properly.

### ***Impairment Of Normal Mental Functioning Stands for Insanity***

*Ellen has been quite delirious with joy.*

*He had delusions.*

*She had auditory hallucinations.*

*She's seeing things.*

*He's got a bad case of the DTs.*

Because of the lack of mental control, the body also stops functioning normally:

### ***Impairment Of Normal Physical Functioning Stands for Insanity***

*He was foaming/frothing at the mouth.*

*He was raving deliriously about something.*

*He was a drivelling idiot.*

*He had jim-jams.*

The fact that we perceive insanity as impairing the functioning of both the psyche and the body means that our conception of madness strongly depends on the way we perceive ourselves, our bodies and our minds. Therefore, before we attempt to define madness, we have to define what it means for us to function normally.

We conceptualise our bodies as systems, i.e. functional units consisting of *interconnected and interdependent* parts (Johnson 1987:87). For any prototypical system to function normally certain conditions must be fulfilled. First, the parts of the system must strike a *balance* of forces (cf. Johnson 1987). Second, the parts have to be *unified*. Third, a system has to be *controlled*.

Conceptualisation of Insanity seems to depend heavily on the Body As System metaphor and the entailments it carries. Let us look at the notion of systemic balance first. In English there are expressions referring to insanity which are motivated by the conceptual metaphor:

### ***Insanity Is A Lack Of Balance***

*He is totally unbalanced.*

*I would describe her as mentally unstable.*

*Anyone who saw us doing this would think we were off our trolleys.*

*Are you off your rocker?*

*She suffered from mental dissolution.*

The Mental Balance in these examples is conceptualised in terms of a Physical Balance of forces which lets us function in a normal way, for instance, prevents us from losing our footing or from losing chemical stability as in the ‘mental dissolution’ example. Historically, the bodily balance was understood as the balance of humours in the organism. The imbalance of those substances was believed to be the cause of diseases, both of the body and the mind. The conception of mental disease itself is based on the metaphor *The Mind Is A Body* (Eve Sweetser 1990, cited in Lakoff and Johnson 1999:235–243), which entails that *Thinking Is Physical Functioning* and *A Well Functioning Mind Is A Healthy Body*. If *Insanity* involves *Impairment Of Normal Mental Functioning*, then, metaphorically (and etymologically), *Insanity Is A Disease*:<sup>1</sup>

***Insanity Is A Disease***

*She is mentally ill.*

*He has a diseased mind.*

*She suffered from a mental sickness.*

*Was she of sound mind at the time of the accident?*

*He is insane.*

The System metaphor via which we conceptualise ourselves also entails that we are constructed out of parts.<sup>2</sup> Many lexical expressions connected with insanity refer to the idea of a person being separated from some important part of him/herself. Thus we can postulate a metaphorical scheme:

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<sup>1</sup> The fact that the symptoms of madness such as raving and delirium and the symptoms of bodily illnesses converge seems to contribute to the metaphor.

<sup>2</sup> Lakoff and Johnson, for example, define the parts as the Subject, *the locus of consciousness, subjective experience, reason, will, and our “essence”, everything that makes us who we uniquely are* and the Self or Selves representing *our bodies, our social roles, our histories* (1999:269). There exists a Subject-Self metaphor schema where the Self is conceptualised as the Container for the Subject conceptualised as a person. The Subject can control the Self only if it (the Subject) is in its normal location, i.e. inside the Container. If the Subject is outside the Container, i.e. the parts of the system are no longer a unity, the Subject is out of control. If we assume that the normal container for the Subject, i.e. our reason and consciousness, is our mind or head, then we infer that if we are ‘out of our mind’ we are out of control of the Self (Lakoff and Johnson 1999).

### ***Insanity Is A Lack of Unity***

*Are you off your head/chump/nut?*

*She was out of her mind with grief.*

*I'm not in my right mind.*

*He was dancing in wild abandon. He abandoned himself completely to his feelings.*

*Thou art estranged from thyself (Shakespeare, *The Comedy of Errors* II, 2).*

*Her poor demented sister had killed herself (on etymological grounds).*

The system cannot function normally when the parts are scattered or missing:

*He is scatter-brained.*

*Those guys are really scatty.*

*All your chairs are not pulled up to the table.*

*You are a bit lacking upstairs.*

*He's lost his reason.*

*She is completely bereft of reason.*

*She's suffering from mental deficiency.*

*You are two tacos shy of a Mexican combination plate.*

*You have a screw loose.*

The metaphor *Insanity Is A Lack Of (Systemic) Unity* highlights two important aspects of madness. First, it reflects the fact that madness impairs normal functioning of a person conceived as a system. Second, it shows that madness involves lack of control.

Madness is, in fact, perceived as an ultimate lack of control, which is reflected in different metaphors with insanity as their target domain. Take, for instance, the *Insanity Is A Force* metaphor:

### ***Insanity Is A Force***

*He is possessed.*

*For that fine madness still he did retain, Which rightly should possess a poet's brain (NPDQ, 148:16).*

*Several cases of demonic possession have been reported in recent months.*

*He's been driven from sanity.*

*He was utterly overwhelmed by madness.*

*A royal madness has gripped our society.*

*As the king's madness takes hold, the state goes slowly into ruin.*

*He's touched.*

In many cultures trance-like states are considered to be cases of possession. Interestingly enough, two words in English which originally referred to the religious practice of ecstatic cults – berserker and whirling dervish – are now commonly used to refer to a crazy person (Kelley 1992:164). A similarity of symptoms between trance-like states and madness may be a good motivation for viewing madness as a result of the influence of some sort of a force. As the examples demonstrate, the force may assume different forms. It may be a supernatural force such as a demon or a spirit, or a very strong emotion as in the following example from literary criticism:

*Leaf feels himself **overwhelmed by his own impulses and emotions**. He **struggles for psychic control**, but his cry: "O! Let me not be mad, not mad sweet heaven; Keep me in temper; I would not be mad (I.V. 47–48) is an acknowledgement of **unknown forces within** which have begun to undermine his customary defences [...]. (Feder 1980:124, emphases mine)*

Other types of influence are possible, especially the power of the natural forces – the Sun and the Moon, as in: *midsummer madness* and *moon-struck lunacy*.

The perception of insanity as a force brings into focus the following inferences. Firstly, possession of a person by the devil, or a demon indicates that the person who is insane is evil. This is frequently reflected in media portrayals of mad murderers, mad doctors, or mad scientists. Secondly, because the force which takes control of a person is usually a negative one, against which the person has to struggle, insanity is considered dangerous:

*I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness (NPDQ, 178:27).*

*And most of all would I flee from the cruel madness of love (ODQ, 535:38).*

*Whom God wishes to destroy, he first makes mad (NPDQ, 160:1).*

*Can you [...] Get from him why he puts on this confusion, Grating so harshly all his days of quiet, With turbulent and dangerous lunacy?* (Shakespeare, *Hamlet* III, 1).

*Until he is forced to recognise his terrible vulnerability by madness itself, Ajax has regarded himself omnipotent* (Feder 1980:93).

*Future historians will recognise our divorce rate as collective madness, socially destructive, but necessary.*

*He had an attack of nerves.*

Thirdly, since an insane person no longer has the control over him/herself, s/he is not responsible for his/her actions. This conception of madness has its reflection in legal procedures and legal language where a defendant may plead insanity to show that s/he was not totally responsible for what s/he had done.

The notion of control is not only important for the way we deal with our internal world, but also, or rather primarily, it is important for our functioning in the external environment. People generally feel safe in their surroundings when they are in control of them. A civilised man tends to divide his world into two spheres: the 'tame' world functioning according to the laws established by society, and the wilderness which is not controllable by social laws and which, therefore, is considered dangerous. This knowledge of the wild world is projected onto our inner lives (see Kövecses 1986). Each person is thought to have a Self which is conceptualised as a wild animal. It is the responsibility of any person to keep that Self under control. If the animal Self is let loose it becomes dangerous both to the person and to the society. And, as Kövecses (1986:23) puts it, *the behaviour of a person who has lost control is the behaviour of a wild animal.*

### ***Insane Behaviour Is Agitated Animal Behaviour***

*Street crazies were howling at passers by like mad dogs.*

*He was foaming at the mouth.*

*He was dangerous, even barking mad.*

*As mad as a buck/a cut snake/a wet hen/a hornet/a March hare.*

*Mad as the baiting bull of Stanford.*

The insane are not capable of controlling themselves and this leads to the common assumption that they are wild and hence dangerous to the society. Indeed, the word *wild* is often used interchangeably with the word *mad* in the sense 'uncontrolled, dangerous or extreme':

*She had a wild/mad look in her eyes.*

*When I told him what I'd done, he went wild/mad.*

*We were all wild/mad with excitement.*

*Oh, Chris has always been wild/mad about Madonna.*

*He was wildly/madly in love with her.*

Finally, the uncontrollability of insanity is emphasised in the metaphor:

### ***Insanity Is Chaos***

*He suffered from mental derangement/disorder of reason/mental disorder.*

*She wanted to come to terms with inner confusion/inner disturbance.*

*A mind in conflict and distress.*

*He was a mixed up kid.*

Chaos is *a state of total confusion and lack of order* (CID). Chaos in a system, means that the system is disorganised and cannot function normally. Disorder ensues typically due to lack of control. If we assume that the control of the mental processes is located in the Mind/Head/Brain and the ability to control something is conceived of in terms of power, then abnormal mental functioning can be understood as the weakening or loss of the power of the mind to control the system, as in: *his reason was undermined* or *O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!* (Shakespeare, *Hamlet* III, 1). The power is often construed as physical strength: *feebleness of mind; he's weak in the head*. If strength, in turn, is understood as hardness, as in *He's a tough guy*, then *softening of the brain* means that the brain has no strength, i.e. no power to control the mental and physical functions of the organism. A similar idea is expressed in the saying *to be bananas* which, as *Dictionary of Contemporary Slang* (1994:25) asserts, probably *originated in the notion of softness in the head*.

## **2. The Prototype**

As mentioned before, metonymies and metaphors contribute to the understanding of a concept by highlighting some of its aspects. Those aspects, which are cognitively most salient, form a cognitive model of the concept. The model of Insanity presented here is a prototypical one. It is a social stereotype which incorporates our cultural expectations about the causes, characteristics, and effects of insanity.



# The prototypical cognitive model of Insanity

## *i. Causes:*

Insanity is caused by brain damage/strong emotion/influence of alcohol or drugs/influence of supernatural powers.

## *ii. Behavioural and Physiological Symptoms:*

A Person who is insane displays Agitated and Violent Behaviour as well as Insane Visual Behaviour.

Insanity impairs normal mental functioning of a Person.

Insanity impairs normal physical functioning of a Person.

## *iii. Characteristics of Insanity:*

The Person who is insane loses control over him/herself.

The Person is not responsible for his/her actions.

Insanity is dangerous to the Person who is mad.

The insane Person is dangerous to the society.

Insanity is evil.

The insane Person is evil.

Now, two questions arise concerning the explanatory force of a model like the one drawn above. The first is how the model actually shapes our understanding of the concept of Insanity, i.e. how and to what extent it influences our perception of insanity and the insane, which is a question about its value as a cultural model. The second question is how it helps us account for the ways we talk about insanity, which is a question about the relation between the lexical and the conceptual structure. We partly answered the first question stating that the cognitive model of insanity is a social stereotype which incorporates and simultaneously shapes our expectations about mental illness and the mentally ill. Employing a cognitive model like this may be a way of protecting ourselves against dangerous realities. As Gilman puts it succinctly in his book *Seeing the Insane* (cited in Wahl 1995:126),

*The mad, especially in the incarnation of the aggressive mad, are one of the most common focuses for the general anxiety felt by all members of society, an anxiety tied to the perceived tenuousness of life. If I am afraid that I am to be attacked, have my goods stolen, loose my status in society, I do not want this fear to be universal, pervading every moment of my life. I want to know who is going to steal my hard-won status. [...] Our response to the perceived aggressiveness of the mad [...] reassures us. We have localised the source of our fear. We know who is dangerous. We respond correctly and we have control over our world.*

### 3. Elaborations and Extensions of the Prototype

Let us now concentrate on the second question, i.e. the question of the link between the lexicon and cognition. As argued by some authors (among others Kövecses 1986), lexical items are defined relative to semantic fields, i.e. *categories of concepts with a prototype in the centre* (141). The intracategorical and intercategory relations between concepts underlying lexical items are based on the similarity relation to the central model. In what follows we look at some aspects of the organisation of the semantic field of Insanity and discuss two kinds of meaning relations between lexical items: collocability and polysemy.

#### 3.1. Collocability

Expressions like *mad-afraid*, *mad-blazing*, *mad-drunk* are based on the part of the cognitive model which refers to the Causes of Insanity. In the first two items it is strong emotion that results in madness, in the last one madness is the result of the influence of alcohol. However, how such collocations work exactly needs further explanation. As Kövecses (1986:130–131) writes, *collocation involves the set of different words that a particular word can combine with [...] [and] the collocational range of a word is in part determined by which other concept(s) the word (more precisely, the corresponding concept) is used to conceptualise*. In other words, it is the question of the extent to which the cognitive models of the collocating words overlap. The key to why the word *mad* goes together with the words: *afraid*, *blazing*, and *drunk* seems to be that the cognitive models standing behind all those words incorporate an intensity scale. When we said earlier in this paper that madness is considered the *ultimate* loss of control, we implied that controllability is a graded phenomenon. Emotions and drunkenness also have their intensity scales, where there is a certain limit beyond which their physiological effects impair normal functioning of an organism (cf. Kövecses 1986:88). This, in turn, means that a person who is too emotional or too drunk suffers from a complete loss of control. Such an overlap between the cognitive models of concepts is responsible for the combinability of the words expressing those concepts.

#### 3.2. Polysemy

Indeed, the prototypical cognitive model not only enables us to see how a single semantic field, such as Insanity, is structured, but it also shows links between semantic fields. If we look up the words *madness*, *madman*, *mad*, *madly*, and *madden* in a dictionary, we will see that they have multiple meanings

which go beyond the domain of Mental Illness. Let us consider a few examples of concepts which can be expressed by means of those words:

**Enthusiasm and Love:** *Jane's mad about Italian food. After twenty years of marriage they are still mad about each other. His girls had no way of telling love's madness from insanity.*

**Anger:** *You'd better avoid him, he's mad as hell at you. It maddens me to see how unfairly John has been treated.*

**Intensity:** *She was madly in love with him. He was working like mad to get enough money to go on holidays. He drives like a madman.*

**Foolishness, Stupidity:** *Ben's got some mad idea to cross the Atlantic in a canoe. To begin a war would be sheer madness.*

Concepts such as Enthusiasm, Love, Anger, Intensity, and Foolishness can be understood in terms of Insanity due to the perceived similarity between the cognitive models standing behind those concepts. Emotion concepts, for instance, have an implicit intensity scale designating a limit beyond which normal functioning and self-control are no longer possible. Our knowledge of insanity as impairing normal functioning of our organisms and involving a complete loss of control allows for a mapping of the concept of Insanity onto the concepts of Enthusiasm and Love. The presence of the intensity scale in the mapping is expressed explicitly in the saying *Mirth without measure is madness*. The mechanism that stands behind polysemy here is a metaphoric extension from the prototypical cognitive model of Insanity to the domains of Enthusiasm and Love. Let us take the metaphorical mapping Love Is Insanity as an example. Apart from the aspects of lack of control and impairment of normal functioning, the metaphor highlights the fact that the person who is in love is not responsible for his/her actions. Rather, love is a force that makes them do things as in the following quotation: *If thou rememberst not the slight folly, That ever love did make, Thee run into, Thou hast not loved* (NPDQ 344:33). Love may also be dangerous to the person who is in love: *And most of all would I flee from the cruel madness of love* (ODQ 535:38). Some contexts may hide certain aspects of the source domain. In the example: *My love's a noble madness* (ODQ 191:15), the aspects of evil, violence and dangerousness of madness are downplayed.

The metaphor Anger Is Insanity<sup>3</sup> in a similar way emphasises the fact that Anger Involves Loss of Control and Impairment Of Normal Functioning as well as the fact that The Person Who Is Angry is Dangerous To Others (cf. Kövecses 1986). The metaphor Anger is Insanity is expressed explicitly in the following sayings: *Rage is brief insanity; Anger is short madness; Anger begins with folly and ends with prayer*. As Kövecses (1986:20) writes, this metaphor is based on *[t]he overlap between the folk theories of the effects of anger and the effects of insanity*. By virtue of this metaphor, the Agitated and Violent Behaviour which

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<sup>3</sup> This metaphor stands behind the central sense of the word *mad* in American English.

metonymically stands for Insanity can also stand for Anger as in the following examples: *He was hopping mad*; *She had hysterics when I told her what happened*; *She'll have a fit when you tell her about it*. Again, the intensity scale implicit in the cognitive model of Insanity plays an important role in the mapping. According to Kövecses (1986:22) in the Anger Is Insanity metaphor, *insanity is understood as a highly energised state, with insane behaviour as a form of energy output*. For example, when we say that somebody is *brain-boilingly mad*, we employ the image of madness as a state of very high intensity, where the intensity scale is the heat scale and the highest point on the scale is the state of boiling. When the words from the domain of Insanity are used to indicate intensity, they profile metonymically the intensity aspect of the whole model. For example: *Kate Mitchell's production [...] has a manic depressive intensity, a madness just beneath the skin of sense*. The association between madness and intensity may be experientially motivated by our perception of people who are mentally ill as very active, agitated, moving in a fast and uncontrolled way. For example, the expression *to do something like mad* is likely to have acquired its sense 'to do something as quickly as you can' (e.g.: *She ran like mad to catch the bus*) due to just this kind of association.

#### 4. Conclusion

The cultural model of Insanity presented in this paper encompasses only a fraction of our actual knowledge of this domain. Nonetheless, the analysis seems to confirm the idea, promoted in other studies of a similar character, that meaning and meaning relations are largely dependent on cognitive structures and schemata such as prototypical models, metaphors and metonymies. Moreover, this paper shows that language and culture appear to be based on and motivated by the same sort of cognitive models. This means our ways of talking can tell us a lot about our understanding of and attitudes towards the social and cultural world we talk about.

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