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Ambiguous metaphoricity and emotional experiences: Allowing room for flexibility

Recent work in cognitive linguistics has shown that literal and metaphorical ways of thinking are often closely intertwined; everyday physical experiences can acquire metaphorical meanings and metaphorical language can provoke behavioural and physical responses which correspond to the literal meanings of the metaphors. The human tendency to experience a phenomenon as both literal and metaphorical at the same time becomes particularly salient in the context of traumatic experiences. It can arise as a direct consequence of such an experience and it can also serve as a coping mechanism to help people come to terms with their trauma. In this paper I explore different areas of human experience where this phenomenon arises: bereavement following pregnancy loss or the death of a child; the experience of childhood abuse relating to faith and belief; and the development of schizophrenic delusions in response to childhood trauma. Drawing on data from interviews with people who have experienced these situations, I show how individuals conflate literal and metaphorical meanings in an attempt to reconcile the contradictory realities that they are experiencing. In some cases, metonymic relationships can be observed between the traumas and the alternative realities that they trigger, which partly explains why they are neither purely literal nor purely metaphorical. I argue that it is important for those who support people in these situations to acknowledge that concurrent realities can coexist and to accept that an experience can be both literal and metaphorical at the same time. Attempting to categorise an experience as either literal or metaphorical can be misleading, and at times detrimental for those involved. However, inevitably, the two conflicting simultaneous realities, which are a genuine and important part of people's lived experience, come up against practical constraints and an apparent need to draw hard boundaries. I discuss cases where this situation has arisen and suggest possible ways of handling it in a sensitive manner.