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## **Metaphorical frames we live by: An interview with Professor Elena Semino (University of Lancaster)**

Professor Elena Semino is an Italian-born British linguist affiliated to the Department of Linguistics and English Language at Lancaster University, UK. Her main research interests are in health communication, medical humanities, stylistics, and metaphor theory and analysis. Currently she is Director of the ESRC Centre for Corpus Approaches to Social Science at Lancaster University and Associate Editor of the journal *Metaphor and Symbol*. She is working on several projects that combine qualitative analysis with corpus linguistic methods and deal with topics such as schizophrenia and autism in narrative, and on the role that metaphor plays in communication about pain, cancer, and the end of life, and, more recently, in re-framing the discourse on Covid-19.

A selection of her most recent publications includes:

- Semino, Elena. (accepted/in press). “Not soldiers but fire-fighters” – Metaphors and Covid-19. *Health Communication*.  
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<https://doi.org/10.1080/13556509.2020.1735759>
- Potts, Amanda & Semino, Elena. 2019. Cancer as a metaphor. *Metaphor and Symbol* 34(2). 81–95. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10926488.2019.1611723>
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- Semino, Elena & Demjen, Zsófia & Demmen, Jane E. 2018. An integrated approach to metaphor and framing in cognition, discourse and practice, with an



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**Tanja Gradečak (TG):** How do you generally and how did you specifically switch from poetic to conceptual metaphor?

**Elena Semino (ES):** I don't think you can oppose poetic and conceptual metaphors, but what I can say is how I became interested in metaphor theory and Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) in particular from the perspective of poetry. My PhD was on the language of poetry and particularly text worlds, and as part of that I had to deal with metaphorical language. Conceptual Metaphor Theory in particular was revelatory to me not just because of what it said about metaphor in general, but because it allowed me to make a connection between the metaphors I was encountering when I was analysing poetry and the metaphors people were using every day in informal language or in other genres that I was interested in. I was particularly influenced not just by Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* but by Lakoff and Turner's 1989 book that applied CMT to poetry *More Than Cool Reason*. Because in that book Lakoff and Turner argue that the metaphors that we find in poetry are often creative exploitations of conventional conceptual metaphors. So, for me the most important discovery was the connection between metaphors used in different genres, specifically poetry and other genres, namely, the fact that they are generally part of the same broad phenomenon, even though there might be some genre specific patterns.

**TG:** Recently you've mostly dealt with health metaphors but from time to time in your research you addressed the use of metaphor in political discourse (Koller & Semino 2009; Semino 2008; Semino & Masci 1996). How do you evaluate the role of conceptual metaphor in current global politics, especially its role in Brexit?

**ES:** As I was saying before, metaphor is central to many discourses and genres, including politics in particular. And here I'm referring to metaphor, not specifically conceptual metaphor. Because metaphor allows us to see one thing in terms of another, it is particularly useful to convey specific perspectives. Political discourse is centrally about different perspectives on issues, and people operating in politics often want to persuade others that their particular perspective is the right one. And so, inevitably, and this has been known for millennia, metaphor is central for political



discourse. Now, if I take Brexit specifically, conceptual metaphors can explain why some metaphorical language that was central to Brexit was not necessarily perceived as such, and therefore not necessarily sufficiently questioned. So for example, and this is something that I discuss with my own students as well, the ballots in the 2016 EU referendum in the UK asked people to choose between “leave” and “remain”. And “leave” and “remain” are, in this case, both very conventional metaphorical expressions for membership or the end of membership of a particular organisation, in this case the European Union. So, they’re fundamentally to do with a conceptual metaphor, whereby “belonging”, or membership, is constructed in spatial terms as being in a particular location with others, while lack of membership, and lack of “belonging”, involves exiting the space that one shares with other people. So, this conceptualisation is so conventional that those expressions wouldn’t have struck anybody as particularly metaphorical. However, that opposition massively simplifies the issue of membership and makes in particular “leaving” sound relatively straightforward. So, if you are in a room full of people you don’t like, you leave and you’re no longer there and the problems have gone away. Now, the power of metaphor to simplify things can be very useful in some respects but in other respects it can be dangerous and I think in the case of Brexit the simplification of “leaving” as something relatively easy and graspable, I think, had consequences. However, when it comes to arguments about Brexit specifically, some of the metaphors we are using for rhetorical purposes were more creative metaphors that were not so easily traceable to a conventional conceptual metaphor. The former French head of the World Trade Organisation, Pascal Lamy, said that (the UK) leaving the European Union is like trying to take the eggs out of an omelette.<sup>1</sup> Obviously, Lamy was critical and was suggesting it wasn’t just difficult, it was impossible. So, in this particular case it was a very specific source scenario that was being used, as a kind of a counterfactual argument: in the same way it is impossible to take the egg out of the omelette, Lamy argued, it is almost impossible or extremely difficult to disentangle (another metaphor!) the UK from the EU. So, what I would say is that metaphor is central in politics and certainly was central in Brexit in so many ways. In some cases what we’ve seen in language is realisations of conventional conceptual metaphors which sometimes are powerful precisely because people are not conscious of their metaphoricity. In other cases it might have been one-off creative conceptual metaphors that were used to make a particular point, but those, because they are so obviously metaphorical, can more easily be questioned. Still they can be very powerful and “taking the egg out of the omelette” is an excellent example of that.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-39295257>



**TG:** Metaphors have been considered as “prototypical initiators of framing” (Krippendorff 2017: 97) and have been used skillfully by both ancient orators and contemporary communication experts. They seem to be a secret weapon, rather than an obvious choice in presenting one’s ideas. Why aren’t metaphors and other figurative language taught in school curricula in a more straightforward, scientifically based manner? Generally speaking, is science communicated well?

**ES:** I suppose the short answer is “I don’t know”. There is often a lack of connection between what is taught in schools and research, so maybe it’s a combination of the fact that we as academics are not always good at sharing our theories, our findings and our insights with schools. And there is also a tendency for curricula, and this varies across countries, especially in the UK, where the national curriculum isn’t always based on expert advice, especially when it comes to teaching English, and there is always a tussle between the government and the experts in various areas, for example on teaching grammar. Having said that, in my university, in Lancaster, we often have events for school teachers and at some of these events we present the work on metaphor and some students have gone on to do projects. I also often talk in schools and when I speak in schools I often talk about metaphor. So, we could do more, we could do better, it’s just that it is not always under our control, but we are doing our best, at least at my university, to enable schools to use insights which might be helpful in teaching and in students making their own discoveries.

**TG:** The choice of one specific metaphor in communication over another may influence the way we perceive a specific issue (Lakoff 2008; 2010; Thibodeau & Boroditsky 2011). Can you give us some examples from your own work on reframing?

**ES:** Well, here there are obviously so many potential examples. I have done only one study that has involved an experiment to try to find evidence of framing effects and that is a study lead by Rose Hendricks that came out in *Metaphor and Symbol* (Hendricks et al. 2019) where we’d looked at the contrast between battle metaphors for cancer and journey metaphors for cancer where we gave people two versions of the text about a person with cancer but one text used the journey metaphor and the other text used the battle metaphor for the disease and in every other respect the texts were the same and then we asked both groups the same set of questions about how they imagined the experience of the person who was ill. We found two differences that we could evidence statistically between the two groups. The people who read the battle version of the text attributed to the person who was ill greater feelings of guilt in case they didn’t get better. This is consistent with the fact that, if



you are unsuccessful in a battle, it may be partly your fault, your responsibility, whereas the people who'd read the journey version of the text attributed to the person a greater ability to accept the situation and so that is also something that is consistent with the fact that it's easier to accept being on a journey than being in a battle.

**TG:** Metaphors can become controversial because of their framing effects: many experimental studies (Thibodeau & Boroditsky 2011) have shown that each metaphor highlights some aspects of the topic and backgrounds others and therefore influences people's reasoning. How do you weigh in on the relevance of experimental approaches to metaphor research? How do linguistic introspection or corpus linguistic methods relate to the experimental data?

**ES:** First of all, all of these ways of trying to understand different phenomena are valid depending on the research questions that one has, and on the data, and the goals of the project. The issue is that, in terms of how they relate to each other, one can be used to test or to triangulate the findings of the other. So, we, for example, did a corpus linguistic project on metaphors and cancer and then used an experiment to test some of the insights that we had on the basis of the corpus linguistic method. So these methods can interact with each other, especially in the triangulation context. I suppose that, in terms of what I could say that would be relevant are two things: inevitably when people do experimental work on metaphor they have to invent texts to give people to read because they have to control many variables. So these texts are artificial to some extent. However, if one bases these texts on linguistic, and particularly on corpus linguistic, evidence on how people actually use metaphors then there is a better connection between the experimental set up and naturally occurring language. Because there is sometimes a danger when someone invents texts for these experiments that those texts might be so different from how people naturally speak or write that then the results might not be easily applicable to real life contexts. So, basing the design of those experiments on corpus linguistic evidence creates, I think, more naturalistic situations.

And the second thing we did in the paper I have mentioned and in another one that is in preparation is instead of just giving people questions that can be answered by giving points on a Likert scale, we've given them open ended questions as well and then used corpus linguistic methods to analyse those open-ended questions. And this adds another aspect on the framing effects of metaphor that might be relevant.

**TG:** Can you tell us something more about the "Metaphor Menu" for cancer patients you and your team have assembled and if you have some recent results on its



effect on patients? Does reframing work in this case?

**ES:** “The Metaphor Menu” for people with cancer<sup>2</sup> is a collection of seventeen metaphors for the experience of having cancer which were all produced by people with cancer either in our data or from other sources that we’ve found. I would just like to explain briefly how the menu came about because it’s probably relevant to the next question as well. I lead a corpus-based project on the metaphors used for the experience of cancer and the end of life by people who had cancer, family carers, and health professionals. And when we looked into patients in particular, what we found was that, like others had suggested, battle metaphors can be counterproductive for patients, for example making people guilty for not getting better, something I’ve already alluded to, whereas journey metaphors did not have any obvious counterproductive elements. However, we also found that different people prefer different metaphors, that what matters is actually not which metaphor you pick, but whether it’s used in context in empowering or disempowering ways. So we found that individual variability in empowerment and disempowerment was more important than the type of the metaphor that was used.

While we were doing our research we had regular meetings with people from the local community in the north-west of England who had some experience with cancer but were not researchers, and we discussed with them and got feedback and asked for suggestions and it was very, very useful. On one occasion we were presenting these results and one of the members of this group asked us: “OK, you are doing all this research, but are you going to do something that is practical and useful, are you going to tell people which metaphors they should use and which metaphors they should avoid so that they would know what to do?” And when this person asked this question, I remember saying we couldn’t do that because we had found there is no good or bad metaphor for everybody at all times but that it very much depends on the context and the person, so that the crucial thing was to find the metaphor that worked best for each individual or enabling each individual to find the metaphor that worked best for themselves. So, basically, in essence I told this person that things were much more complicated than she thought. But then when I went home I wasn’t happy with my answer precisely because I’d said what we researchers often say, that it’s much more complicated than people think. And so I thought: how can we address the spirit of the question if we can’t address the letter of the question? So, clearly, we can’t make a list of good or bad metaphors because that’s inconsistent with the evidence we have. And that’s where the “Metaphor Menu” came in, because the “Metaphor Menu” is about choice and about va-

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<sup>2</sup> <http://wp.lancs.ac.uk/melc/the-metaphor-menu/>



riety; obviously it's a metaphor from restaurants, you know, where different people like different things but hopefully everybody finds something that they like. So, the idea is to give people a range of different metaphors, there are music metaphors, there are nature metaphors, there are metaphors about invasion, metaphors about fairgrounds. So, the idea was to give people variety with alternative framings, and there are battle and journey metaphors because they are so common, and also to give people the inspiration to find their own metaphors. Now, we've only done a small pilot study, but we haven't done any proper tests about the effects of the "Metaphor Menu". However, we've had lots of positive feedback, we've shared it with people with cancer, with health professionals, with charities, it's online, people can download it, it exist in hard copies and it can be used in different places. In Portugal they're creating a Portuguese version of the Menu. We don't have empirical, experimental evidence of the effects of the "Metaphor Menu", but we've been heartened by the number of people who have expressed interest and have been using it. The Metaphor Menu also inspired an initiative to collect metaphors for Covid-19 other than War metaphors: #ReframeCovid. The initiative was started in March 2020 by two Spanish researchers, Ines Olza and Paula Sobrino. Veronika Koller and I joined them and, together, we used Twitter to encourage people to add metaphors in any language to a shared spreadsheet online. We now have more than 500 metaphors in many languages, and a resource that anyone can use.

**TG:** It is obvious that you put great emphasis on the social value of metaphor use, so what is your opinion on the relevance of purely academic approaches to linguistic research? Can linguists allow themselves to live in the "ivory tower"?

**ES:** I would question the idea of the "ivory tower" in the sense that I don't like the way people say that there's the real world and universities. I think that universities are a part of the real world first of all and we shouldn't allow for this distinction to be accepted. So, here I would say two things: first of all, it is absolutely crucial that academics do research that does not have practical applications because one of the greatest gifts of humanity is curiosity, it's about knowing things, finding things out, understanding things. If things were driven only by practical usefulness, why should, for example, space be explored? There are so many areas of science, outside of the humanities that are about curiosity. And that for me in and of itself is of enormous value and if people don't do it at universities where would there be a space where they would do that, so that's very important.

But, I would add two things. First of all, there could be different types of academics. I started off working primarily on research that didn't necessarily have any practical application. And I found myself over time, for different reasons, personal,



academic, you know, sometimes luck, to do research on topics that do have practical applications. But there are many different types of research and there should be different types of academics. I'm still also driven by curiosity as much as I'm driven by the desire to help deal with some issues in different areas.

However, the other thing I would say is that regardless of what research we do and exactly what it is motivated by, I think we should be asking ourselves in what way it could be of interest to people beyond, for example, our own colleagues and students. Because, you know, you can imagine someone who does theoretical research on language, for example, in language typology, who might produce a website to share with everybody the findings of their research, you know, how different languages do particular things, so that people click on different countries where different languages are spoken and see what happens in that language in relation to the phenomena that the researcher studies. Or one can have an exhibition to do with different ways of communicating. Or one could go to schools and tell them about metaphor theory.

So, I think it's important for all of us to think who else might be interested in this and why they would be interested and what can I contribute to sharing the insights that I have that are the results of my curiosity. I think that is a worthwhile enterprise. We may not make people wealthier or healthier but we'll enrich their understanding of the world. We do that when we teach our students, there is no reason why we couldn't do it beyond that. But even that should not be a requirement. What I'm saying is that there are many ways to take our research beyond general articles and books and lectures, and all those ways can be exploited by different people. But it is absolutely essential that we also do blue sky research driven by curiosity. We should not be driven only by societal impact, and even though at the moment I mostly devote myself to research that has societal impact I think all different types of research are valuable.

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