

# Metaphors of movement in psychotherapy talk

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Received 21 August 2017; received in revised form 2 November 2017; accepted 22 December 2017  
Available online

## Abstract

Metaphors of physical movement perform both substantive and organizational functions as they can represent things and construct cohesive links in discourse. This paper examines movement metaphors in psychotherapy talk, a context where both functions are equally salient. Categorical data and discourse analytic methods were used to investigate (i) types of target topics and metaphorical movement, (ii) relationships between topics, types of movement, and speaker, and (iii) how the substantive and organizational functions interact in proximity. There was no three-way interaction but all bivariate associations between topics, movement types, and speaker were significant. Key findings include (i) clients were more likely to use movement metaphors to discuss issues while therapists more likely to discuss therapeutic concepts and construct reference links; (ii) forward movement occurred less frequently than expected as a source for issues while backward movement more frequently than expected as a source for reference links; (iii) therapist metaphors were more likely to depict directions of movement associated with progress, while client metaphors were associated with stagnation, regression, or uncertainty. Clinical implications and directions for future research are highlighted.

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*Keywords:* Movement metaphors; Psychotherapy; Discourse functions

## 1. Introduction

There has been much theoretical and empirical research on metaphors of physical movement. One of the most prominent theories is that movement metaphors are fundamental to language and communication because our understanding of event structure is shaped by source domains which result from recurrent experiences of bodily movement (Lakoff, 1993; Lakoff and Johnson, 1999). At the semantic level, it has indeed been shown that the ontology of events is systematically described with movement-related words across different languages (Kövecses, 2005; Yu, 1998). Discourse analysts have amplified the focus on movement metaphors in at least two ways. The first is to examine what may be called the substantive function of movement metaphors; i.e. how aspects of key sociopolitical topics such as immigration (Hart, 2011), financial processes (Rojo López and Orts Llopis, 2010), and climate change (Nerlich, 2012) are conceptualized by their respective discourse producers as physical movement, and the implications thereof. The second, and less common approach, is to examine their organizational function; i.e. how movement metaphors create cohesive links between different sections of a text or activity by invoking ostensible conceptual metaphors such as PURPOSEFUL ACTIVITY IS A JOURNEY. In such cases, the target topics are not substantive contents of the subject matter under discussion, but pertain to the structure of the discourse activity at hand instead. Cameron (2003), for example, discusses 'classroom

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journeys' where teachers frame lesson objectives as guiding students to arrive at 'destinations', with 'discoveries' and 'sights' along the way. At the linguistic level, there is then a motivation to cross-reference different parts of the lesson by using movement-related words to construct a metaphorical landscape of it. Although the substantive and organizational functions of movement metaphors are conceptually distinct, an underexplored point of interest is how they co-occur or even overlap in particular discourse contexts.

One such discourse context is psychotherapy, a verbal activity where therapists apply mental health principles to assist clients to modify their behaviours, cognitions, emotions and/or other personal characteristics (Norcross, 1990). Metaphors are known to be commonly used across different psychotherapy approaches because of the typically abstract and subjective nature of the contents discussed (McMullen, 2008; Tay, 2013). Mental health professionals and researchers generally agree that metaphors can provide alternative means of expression and understanding, or even enhance the therapeutic relationship between therapists and clients (Kopp and Craw, 1998; Lyddon et al., 2001). In the case of movement metaphors, which as previously mentioned reflect commonly shared embodied experiences, there is a further, intriguing possibility that they provide a basis for enhancing a crucial sense of empathy between therapist and client; i.e. an experiential rather than merely conceptual understanding of another person's situation (Semino, 2010; Tay, 2014, 2016). Research into the characteristics, functions, and variability of movement metaphors in psychotherapy has nevertheless not been forthcoming.

The substantive function of movement metaphors is most obviously realized when physical movement is used as source domain(s) to depict aspects of clients' issues, not unlike the ubiquitous LIFE IS A JOURNEY conceptual metaphor in other discourse contexts. The organizational function is expected to be salient because psychotherapy usually involves multiple sessions where progress is signposted like Cameron's (2003) classroom example, with frequent reference to past or future discussions. However, consistent with the broader research trend highlighted above, there has been a stronger focus on the substantive function of movement metaphors in psychotherapy. Therapists who suggest guidelines on clinical metaphor use (Blenkiron, 2010; Stott et al., 2010) often discuss the practical utility of journey metaphors for a variety of therapeutic situations. In terms of their potential impact, Sarpavaara and Koski-Jännes (2013) examined spontaneous metaphor use by substance abuse clients and found that treatment outcomes positively correlate with a tendency to construe oneself as a traveller completing a personal 'journey' to recovery. Much has also been said about the conceptualization of the therapy process itself as moving from origin to destination, with the therapist as a guide (Aronov and Brodsky, 2009; Tay, 2011; Van Parys and Rober, 2013). It should be noted that the above studies seem to emphasize 'moving forward' as the ideal therapeutic direction, leaving the characteristics and implications of other types of metaphorical movement underexplored. In comparison, the organizational function of movement metaphors has received much less attention. Although the explicit framing of therapy as a journey may well perform an organizational role if it recurrently signposts different treatment phases (e.g. *Last week, you took the first step. Today, I will guide you in taking the next step*), more conventional ways of using movement-related words to organize the structure of therapy (*We will come back to this again next time*) are seldom investigated. Furthermore, since both clients' issues and referential links are susceptible to be construed in terms of metaphorical movement, there is the additional question of how their respective metaphorical logics play out in cases where both topics are discussed in proximity.

This paper examines the characteristics of movement metaphors in a sample of psychotherapy talk, as an initial attempt to address the issues above. A combination of categorical data and discourse analytic methods will be used to answer the following research questions. Implications and future research avenues for both clinical and discourse analytic perspectives on metaphor will also be discussed.

1. How do movement metaphors conceptualize substantive and organizational target topics in psychotherapy?
2. What is the nature of metaphorical movement in these metaphors?
3. What is the relationship between target topics, the nature of metaphorical movement, and the metaphor user (therapist or client)?

## 2. Data and methods

The present dataset comprises 20 transcribed MCT (Metacognitive therapy) sessions, each about an hour long, from two therapist-client dyads. Briefly, MCT practitioners believe that mental health problems arise from unhelpful and extended thinking patterns (e.g. worry and rumination), rather than the contents of specific thoughts (Wells, 2008). Besides discussing clients' issues, therapists also share theoretical models explaining this abstracted view to raise clients' awareness. For the present purpose MCT sessions are therefore likely to contain movement metaphors related to different types of target topics.

The broad methodological steps of metaphor identification, variable coding, and data analysis are outlined below. The research process involved two researchers with postgraduate level training in metaphor and discourse analysis. Due to

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