

## Metaphor in an online discussion forum for survivors of relationship abuse: *You think your ex is a nurse shark, huh?*

The overarching goal of this paper is to explore ways in which survivors of relationship abuse use metaphor to communicate about various aspects of their experience, and in this way to shed light upon their underlying conceptualizations of identity, abuse and recovery. The empirical data consists of the metaphorical language produced in a publically available online discussion forum for anonymous posters, accessible without password protection. The forum allows survivors of relationship abuse to start and/or respond to threads about their experience in an abusive relationship (usually with a love partner, but sometimes a family member, colleague, and/or platonic friend).

The present study explores metaphor published in almost 4000 threads with roughly 9.6 million words, produced in English by 4124 individual contributors from around the world: so-called 'Big Data' made possible by the ready availability of massive amounts of text from e.g. social media sources (see e.g. Larsson, 2015; Steen-Johnsen & Enjolras, 2015). These threads were produced over a four-year period, and were harvested, processed and uploaded to the Wmatrix web interface tool (<http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/wmatrix/>) for semantic domain tagging. This material constitutes a unique corpus through which the authentic language of abuse survivors may be analyzed.

This paper follows the methodology employed in the *Metaphor in end-of-life care* project (<http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/melc/>; see e.g. Koller, Hardie, Rayson, & Semino, 2008). The focus of the present investigation is language tagged for the domain of *Living creatures: animals, birds, etc.*, and subsequently identified as metaphor using MIPVU (Steen et al., 2010). The analysis shows how survivors use variations of related underlying conceptual metaphors to communicate their understanding of differing aspects of the trauma they have suffered:

Sense of...	Example
Self	I have never felt so much like a <b>butterfly</b> in complete metamorphosis.
Abuser	he isn't anyone .... a <b>chameleon</b> who changes clothes and opinions based on who he is with.
Third party	When she contacted me again just before christmas it had started to go sour with her primary target/enabler <b>mutt</b> .

Abuse experience	He led me down the <b>Rabbit</b> Hole and at the bottom, I found his empty soul.
Recovery	thanks to this site and people like you I no longer feel like a crazy Fatal Attraction <b>bunny</b> boiler.

The findings from this research contribute towards a greater understanding of the experience of abuse victim/survivor, and validate perceptions, needs and feelings of such people as universal, rather than limited to the 'exaggerations' of a selected few.

### References

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