

BOOK REVIEW

Edited by Zsófia Demjén

**Applying Linguistics
in Illness and
Healthcare Contexts**
Contemporary Applied Linguistics



LINGUISTICS TO HEALTH: DIVERSE METHODS AND CONTEXTS

Zsófia Demjén (Ed.). APPLYING LINGUISTICS IN ILLNESS AND HEALTHCARE CONTEXTS: CONTEMPORARY APPLIED LINGUISTICS (2020), London: Bloomsbury. 384 pp., ISBN: 978-1-3500-5765-4 (HB).

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As a global pandemic exposes the diversity and necessity of our healthcare systems, and amid a growing recognition of the humanities' important role in medicine, Zsófia Demjén's edited collection offers a timely showcase of what linguistics can offer when applied to health and healthcare.

As Demjén establishes in the Introduction, linguistics is a significant partner in bridging traditional divides between the arts and sciences, since attending closely to language "provides the conceptual and methodological glue to connect lived experiences, practices and texts with medical science" (p. 5). Indeed, the core principle throughout this volume is that of grounding research in real-life interactions (whether a clinic in Malawi or an online forum), and in how these findings can then be *applied* to real-life scenarios, at micro and macro levels, to inform healthcare moving forwards. Readers of diverse levels of experience in linguistics or related disciplines (i.e. students and established academics alike), as well as readers with no prior knowledge of linguistics but with an interest in its health applications (such as healthcare professionals), would therefore benefit from this volume.

With this broad target audience in mind, the Introduction begins by explaining linguistics and its health applications before it outlines the book's structure and aims. Each subsequent chapter begins by introducing the authors' linguistic sub-field(s) and health topic, providing a useful orientation for less

familiar readers. Similarly, all chapters clearly outline practical implications of their linguistic research, whether that is informing training, foregrounding patient narratives or exposing certain terminology as problematic. The chapters are organised thematically into four parts: *The Experience of Illness* (orienting around the language of people with lived experience of health conditions); *Relating to Each Other* (how relationships are negotiated between patients and professionals in healthcare contexts); *Illness in the Mass Media* (how health topics are framed in more monolithic public communications); and *Professional Practices and Concerns* (how language impacts professionals' experiences and practices). Meanwhile, frequent signposting to other chapters foregrounds the numerous methodological, theoretical and situational interrelationships across the whole book.

The breadth of this volume is impressive. Despite being UK-oriented (understandable, considering that this is where its editor and majority of contributors are based), the volume spans a range of international settings (the Netherlands, Hong Kong, Chile, Malawi, and the United States) in its 13 chapters. For these, it is encouraging to see original languages provided alongside the authors' English translations where appropriate. This book also brings together a range of emerging and established linguistics scholars, as well as healthcare practitioners (7 of the 32 contributors have a clinical background), which facilitates the volume's goal of a two-way dialogue between linguistics and health. Regarding contexts, the volume attends equally to mental and physical health and its constituent chapters consider a range of stakeholders, including patients, clinicians, receptionists, news agencies, governments, charities, companies and researchers. General Practice and specialist clinics are considered alongside broader sites of health discourses, such as the news media and the internet. Chapters explicitly explore the role of language in treating, managing and/or preventing ill-health, as well as surrounding processes, such as accessing care, diagnostic processes, and professional or public attitudes.

Readers with an interest in methodology will enjoy the diverse qualitative and quantitative methods employed across chapters, with authors drawing on the following approaches:

- General, cognitive or critical discourse analysis
- Conversation analysis
- Interactional sociolinguistics
- Rapport management, relational work and (im)politeness theory
- Narrative analysis
- Critical metaphor analysis
- Corpus linguistics

Corpus linguistics is particularly prominent in this volume; it underpins Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 12, and to a lesser extent, corpora inform Chapters 7 and 9, too. Although certainly an over-representation relative to other methods, it does reflect

an increase in the popularity of corpus methods (due partly to the more widespread availability of big health datasets; Lupton, 2017), and each chapter applies varying tools and approaches to give different kinds of insights.

Noting this corpus bias, the volume begins with Brookes (Chapter 2) introducing readers to this quantitative method's fundamental principles and stages in the context of examining how people with the contested eating disorder diabulimia construct the condition in an online support group. He takes readers through three standard analysis techniques (keywords, concordance lines and collocations), providing a useful grounding for subsequent chapters. For instance, in Chapter 3 Kinloch and Jaworska use corpus-assisted discourse analysis to compare the collocates of postnatal depression across three datasets (Mumsnet, media reports and patient information documents) to triangulate lay, media and professional discourses. Demonstrating the value of a mixed-methods approach, despite finding similar themes (e.g. biomedical explanations) and sometimes identical lexis across the three corpora, conducting close textual analysis reveals more nuanced differences in how postnatal depression was represented in each. The authors propose that people do not necessarily identify with the collective label of postnatal depression, and that a change is needed in how postnatal depression is discursively constructed to recognise the multiplicity of people's lived experiences.

The problematisation of language use in current clinical practice is a clear thread throughout the volume. Semino, Hardie, and Zakrzewska (Chapter 4) utilise corpus tools to show that the 78 linguistic descriptors of pain in the popularly used McGill Pain Questionnaire vary greatly in their frequency in everyday English (e.g. "stinging" versus "lancinating"), and in the strength of their collocative association with pain. By analysing 800 patients' questionnaire responses, they found patients were significantly more likely to choose a stronger collocate to describe their pain. They conclude that this undermines the clinical value of the current diagnostic tool by biasing patient responses, and therefore that attending to word frequencies and collocational strengths could make future diagnostic questionnaires more comprehensible.

As other chapters reveal, the need to clarify terminology is by no means limited to clinical texts intended for use by patients. In the penultimate chapter, Loew, Mitchell, Weetman, Millington-Sanders, and Dale show that despite using standard terminology surrounding palliative and end of life care, the GPs that they surveyed did not have a shared conceptualisation of what it entailed. Meanwhile, Galasiński and Ziółkowska (Chapter 13) use critical discourse analysis to convincingly highlight the need to change the standard definitions of suicide used in research to include (rather than background or exclude) the person, and to acknowledge that their actions happen over time and under particular circumstances (p. 362). This is a fitting final chapter, since it reminds researchers and practitioners that lexico-grammatical choices can equally influence research priorities and approaches by foregrounding certain aspects of a health topic while backgrounding or excluding others – a sobering and crucial point to remember.

Equally, chapters 8 and 9 highlight the ramifications of linguistic choices in public health communication and the press. Despite being based on older datasets (2009-2011 and 2006-2011 respectively), both struck me as particularly relevant to current coronavirus communications. Tang and Rundblad (Chapter 9) use cognitive discourse analysis to show how British and American news media representations differ from those of governments and the water industry when reporting on contaminants in drinking water to create a “health scare”. They examine how differences in grammatical agency, lexical specificity and non-literal language contributed to a skewed representation of a health situation (here, water contaminants), including who was responsible for what, and the uncertainties that existed. Meanwhile, in Chapter 8, Atanasova and Koteyko use critical metaphor analysis to expose the prevalence of war metaphors in two British newspapers’ reports on obesity. They argue that this framing can encourage stigma towards obese individuals. Contributing to a longstanding debate on war metaphors (e.g. George, Whitehouse, & Whitehouse, 2016; Semino et al., 2017; Sontag, 2001), Atanasova and Koteyko critique its application to chronic conditions such as obesity, arguing that while “infectious diseases offer the patient and society the possibility to mobilize against a foreign ‘enemy’, in the case of obesity the patient and the ‘enemy’ appear to overlap” (p. 231). It is difficult not to draw parallels here with Elena Semino and Veronica Koller’s ongoing linguistic research into non-war-related metaphors for covid-19 (interested Twitter users can engage with this through #ReframeCovid). They also advocate for diverse metaphors, proposing that war metaphors can also encourage stigma and unhelpful behaviours for this infectious disease (Lancaster University, 2020).

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Refreshingly, Chimbwete-Phiri and Schnurr (Chapter 5) examine an instance of good linguistic practice. They use interactional sociolinguistics to analyse an antenatal HIV/AIDS consultation at a successful clinic in Malawi, drawing out noteworthy discursive strategies, namely using questions, and incorporating local knowledge, metaphors and narratives. These are recommended for establishing a best practice in similar group counselling contexts. Similarly innovative data-driven recommendations materialise from Demjén, Marszalek, Semino, and Varese’s opening chapter, which analyses reported interactions between voice-hearing individuals and their voices. They suggest that helping hearers to linguistically change how they relate to their voice (namely regarding (im)politeness and discursive power strategies) could improve some of their more distressing and antagonistic relationships.

The chapters consistently highlight the need to better attend to linguistic nuances in health. In particular, Thurnherr, Rudolf von Rohr, and Locher (Chapter 7) emphasise that narratives always achieve multiple interactional and interpersonal functions, cautioning against simply taking them at face value. Through micro-analysis of empathy practices in online counselling, Stommel and Lamerichs (Chapter 6) argue that while counselling guidelines recommend explicit empathy displays, these are not necessarily appropriate in this medium. Meanwhile,

Sikveland and Stokoe's (Chapter 10) conversation analysis of receptionists' phone calls with patients in a general practice surgery finds that institutionally prescribed terms such as "urgent" and "routine" can cause undue confusion and resistance, and that attending to patients' linguistic clues about the urgency of their request in their opening turns is more effective. Finally, in Chapter 11, Zayts and Lazzaro-Salazar analyse semi-structured interviews with migrant medical professionals to call for a more nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of the sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic challenges that they face, ranging from professional power dynamics to (in)direct language norms. These endogenous recommendations show real potential for improving health and healthcare practice.

Within the book's 384 pages, then, the contributors cover a commendable variety of individuals, scenarios, locations, and methodologies. A reviewer can always suggest more inclusions were there not pragmatic restrictions. Indeed, Demjén anticipates critiques that this volume only examines verbal communication (and not, for instance, visual or kinetic) by advocating the need for their own detailed, individual volumes. Considering the book's emphasis on situating applied linguistics within health and healthcare, the most noticeable imbalance for me (and one that reflects the field more generally) is an implicit focus on helping professionals to bring in change from above, rather than considering how patients can also improve healthcare. Empowering users of health services to lobby for change, including by involving them in processes of research design, conduct and authorship, offers an alternative, more participatory route that could better facilitate recommendations for an increasingly patient-led healthcare system. This additional focus would be a welcome inclusion in any future editions.

What Kinloch and Jaworska recognise in Chapter 3 through their triangulation of lay, media and professional discourses is that there is no isolated voice when it comes to (ill)health. This is a real strength of the book; throughout, rigorous linguistic analyses expose just how deeply health is embedded in sociocultural practices, values and language use. Appropriately, a GP is given the last word. In the epilogue, Dr Jonathon Tomlinson notes the need for a two-way dialogue between linguistic research and its specific context in health, to ensure greater relevance and impact for health professionals and patients. This book is certainly a significant step in that direction, and I would highly recommend it to linguists and health professionals, students and established scholars alike.

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