When does a metaphor cease to be a metaphor?
The case of schizophrenia

Abstract:
Metaphor is regarded by many as a central mechanism in scientific thought (Boyd, 1979; Leary, 1990; Knudsen, 2003), and many expert terms originated as metaphors. The term schizophrenia ('split mind'), coined in 1908 as a replacement term for dementia praecox ('prematurely out of one’s mind') serves as an illustration thereof. Is it possible for such an expert term to stay alive as a metaphor, or is the status as expert term incompatible with metaphorical vitality? Although several metaphor researchers have discussed the life and death of metaphors (Lakoff, 1987; Deignan, 2005; Müller, 2008; Steen, 2007; Allan, 2013; Goatly, 2011), it is still not entirely clear exactly when and how a metaphor ceases to function as a metaphor. In order to fully examine the question of metaphoric vitality in expert terms, it is crucial not to conflate the different levels concerned in metaphor: linguistic/conceptual and individual/collective.

I have investigated the question of metaphoric vitality in expert terms by using schizophrenia as a case. My primary research material consists of nine Scandinavian text books on psychiatry from three time periods: c. 1900, when the term for the mental disorder was dementia praecox, c. 1950, when schizophrenia had fully replaced dementia praecox in psychiatric nomenclature, and the period after 2000, i.e. the textbooks that are currently used in the education of physicians. I have examined the metaphorical vitality of the term by combining different researchers’ criteria for metaphorical vitality in collective thought and language such as productivity, explicit mentioning of target domain, transparency etc.

The term schizophrenia met all aforementioned criteria. This indicates that schizophrenia may still be alive as a metaphor on the collective level in the psychiatric language community, both linguistically and conceptually.

Although my material is too limited and too small to conclude with certainty that schizophrenia is alive as a metaphor in the psychiatric language community, let alone in the mind of the individual psychiatrist, my findings nevertheless make it difficult to conclude with certainty that the term is a dead metaphor. The findings are relevant not only linguistically, in regard to the discussion of metaphoric life and death, but also for psychiatry, where there is an ongoing discussion of whether or not to replace the term schizophrenia with a new term (Lasalvia, Penta, Sartorius, & Henderson, 2015).
References:


