

Cancer and Emotions –

The Moment of Diagnosis and Metaphoric Transformation¹

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Abstract

The following article concentrates on the cancer patients' emotions and metaphor-like expressions employed in Finnish cancer patients' written narratives. The aim is to analyse the significance of metaphors when they occur within cancer narratives to emphasise the internal and external transformations that follow the moment of cancer diagnosis. According to the materials analysed moment of cancer diagnosis may be interpreted as the most crucial in terms of the cancer experience, which for many cancer patients causes inner chaos and loss of the self. In recent discussions metaphors concerning illnesses and health have been interpreted as stigmatising markers in political, social, and cultural discourse. This article demonstrates how personal emotions become verbalised and expressed using metaphors, and how these metaphors function as a socioculturally bound key to comprehend and make comprehensible individual emotions.

Keywords

*Emotions,
metaphors,
cancer,
diagnosis,
transformation*

If the pathological drama surrounding cancer may be thought of as a path full of emotion, then there are several reasons why the moment of diagnosis may be considered the most critical point on this path. Most people lack any personal experience of cancer and, therefore, the moment of diagnosis is one that often evokes in the patient the most drastic sociocultural images. These images contain information gained via language, tradition and the everyday communication framed by social setting. According to popular explanatory models, cancer is imagined as a secretive, evil and dramatic illness, which has achieved the qualities of a modern mythological disease. The material at hand² as well as the current

discussion forum for Finnish cancer patients³ demonstrates how people are afraid of cancer, because of its unknown origin and associations with painful death. Numerous Finnish cancer patients claim that the word cancer (in Finnish *syöpä* 'the eater') sounds like death for them. It is worth emphasising that because of the close connection with death and the lack of accurate scientific clarification what actually causes it, cancer represents a threat to human existence, and therefore the concept of cancer represents a taboo in the individual mind as well as in sociocultural discourse. Having cancer is still considered an abnormal situation, and is even approached in some cases as a form of deviance.

Individuals diagnosed with cancer must adopt the role of cancer patient, which separates them from others. For these reasons the moment of diagnosis represents *the* significant event on the disease path, an event that irrevocably breaks the normal flow of life.

It is important to note that most people who receive a cancer diagnosis find themselves in an entirely new and surprising situation. In many cases the diagnosis of cancer causes people to lose their negotiated identity and their previously established place within society. Using the terms and language of cultural studies, they go through a transformation. In his work concerning stigma and identity, the Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman put forward the idea that “the stigmatised individual tends to hold the same beliefs about identity that we [others] do.” (Goffman 1963, 7) Although some cancer patients refuse to adopt the role of stigmatised cancer patient, despite social expectation, (Frank 2000, 135–156) none of them is protected from the shock that follows diagnosis. Thus, Goffman’s statement stands: as the diagnosis of cancer is received, most people identify themselves with reference to the existing sociocultural understanding as stigmatised cancer patients. Because of this understanding of cancer as a lethal disease, many people treat the cancer diagnosis as a death sentence. Accordingly, the moment of diagnosis is filled with uncertain emotion that are difficult to express. In the following article I analyse Finnish cancer patients’ writings⁴ dealing with their personal cancer experience in order to point out how metaphors and metaphor-like expressions are employed to express cancer patient’s inner feelings. I wish to demonstrate the significance of metaphors as a socioculturally bound key that accurately

allows description of the significant transformation that takes place with(in) individuals as they receive the cancer diagnosis.

Expressing Emotions in Writing

The diagnosis of cancer causes inner chaos. In order to calm this chaos, people must go through various emotions in order to regain their ‘original’ identity. The philosopher and humanist Georg Henrik von Wright has suggested that with the help of language, people may express, describe and compare their emotions so that others may understand them. (von Wright 2001: 595–622) Based on analysed materials verbalising the cancer experience is a complicated task for two reasons: firstly, the word ‘cancer’ represents a taboo in everyday communication; and secondly, cancer evokes strong emotions. For these reasons, cancer patients must carefully decide on the audience, time and place when expressing their concerns, thoughts and feelings about cancer. Otherwise they risk losing their social position as well as friendships and relationships with colleagues. It is also difficult for family members to discuss cancer, and in cases where the progress of the illness causes physical or psychological issues, patients often prefer to stop discussing it, or even hearing about it. Therefore cancer patients must find and employ other methods of self-expression.

Some discover painting as a form of therapy (see Figure 1), others music, but perhaps the most common way to express unspoken issues is through writing. Firstly, writing is a possibility for self-expression, which helps to clear the mind and make complicated issues understandable. Secondly, people choose to write instead of speaking because, as cancer patients, they will soon have experiences reinforcing the fact that cancer is a sociocul-

turally stigmatised issue that should not be discussed in public.



Figure 1. Drawing added to a cancer narrative

The Moment of Diagnosis

The moment of diagnosis marks the beginning of an individual's 'cancer path'. According to the material at hand this particular experience is mainly sensed as a physical or bodily experience containing vivid images and sensations which remains beyond the understanding of others. Although many people succeed in staying calm and controlled in the eyes of outside observers at the moment of diagnosis, their writings prove that for a while they lose their connection to the outside world. They forget the hospital personnel or other people around them, as well as their sense of reality. As they absorb the diagnosis they go through a variety of emotions.

After reading numerous accounts of personal cancer experience I realised that

the participants in the competition employed particular words when expressing their emotions and feelings. I noticed that instead of unfolding a set of emotional ups and downs after receiving the diagnoses, the respondents used certain metaphoric expressions containing various images and sensations. For example, regarding the moment of diagnosis, the expression *putosin syvään mustaan kuiluun* (I fell into deep black hole) was repeated so often that it became repetitious. As an objective observer and reader I could not stop myself from asking why people used such a simple metaphor, rather than using other, better defined, words that would perhaps have been more accurate.

At first I suspected that the use of metaphoric expressions contained a linguistic restriction of some form that forced people to hide their true feelings. After having posed this to my colleagues on several occasions I began to doubt whether this primary assumption was correct. In fact my colleagues from within the field of folklore took a contrary view, pointing out that the use of metaphor should be considered more as a form of poetic freedom that can describe feelings far more accurately than other forms of description. According to Finnish folklorist Anna-Leena Siikala, metaphors, words of effect and verbal associations used as individual expressions in narratives "may, because of the unusual nature, draw attention to particular items and thus act as expressions of evaluation." (Siikala 1990: 23–25) Consequently, the use of language in connection with critical sensations aroused my curiosity and encouraged me to observe and study the use of metaphoric expressions within cancer narratives. During this process my initial assumption concerning the way metaphors are used in the expression of

emotions altered several times, leading to the conclusion that metaphoric expressions have major significance in the communication of personal emotions.

Metaphors in Health and Illness

Discourse

The use of metaphors in the discourse on health and illness is not a new topic. The American journalist Susan Sontag is well known for her criticism of illness metaphors in political and social discourse. (see Sontag 1978; 1988) Above all, Sontag has pointed out the significance of metaphor in the construction of meaning within the discourse on illness. Her statement is clear: plague, cancer, AIDS, are names for illnesses which, in their own value-laden and stigmatising way, are used as markers in political, social, and cultural discourse.

The Slovenian folklorist, Mojca Ramšak (2007), has examined the use of metaphors in both the cancer patients' and doctors' accounts of cancer. Inspired by Sontag's writings, and Lakoff's and Johnson's works on the significance of metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Lakoff 1987), Ramšak exposes numerous "killing metaphors" based on the characteristics of binary opposition present within Western reasoning: everything concerning illness is bad, everything concerning health is good; everything that is up is good, everything that is down is bad. (see also Onikki 1992: 33–59) Consequently, Slovenian cancer patients *fall* into depression as they hear their diagnosis. They are forced *down* by their illness, or their life becomes "shadowed by darkness". Cancer marks "the end of the life path" or "the end of the earthly road." (Ramšak 2007: 23–45) My experience with cancer

patients' narratives allows an assumption that similar metaphoric expressions are common to other Western cancer patients.

Metaphors concerning health and illness are based on an opposition in which health is presented as the normal condition, and illness as abnormal. The French historian Michael Foucault has argued that such binary thinking began to spread in Western medicine as medical science began to distinguish the difference between the normal and pathological condition. (Foucault 2006 [1963]: 40–41) Nevertheless, ethnomedical studies of rural tradition and ethnomedical thinking demonstrates that folk healers, as well as mainstream doctors, define diseases as various kinds of malevolent forces endangering human beings. Falling ill was interpreted as a violation of the norms with illness seen as a punishment for transgressive behaviour. (Harjula 1986: 15) In a similar way, conventional medicine represents ill health as an abnormal condition that ought to be avoided by all means. There is nothing new about defining illness as a deviance within the sociocultural context. Thus, *falling* ill is just another cultural experience mediated by language.

Sontag's followers have claimed that illness metaphors used in political, medical, and social discourse are entirely inexcusable. Illness metaphors, including the word cancer, are interpreted as stigmatising, divisive and politically incorrect. I agree that viewing patients as 'diseased bodies' represents a serious and unfortunate confusion on the part of modern medicine. However, I hope to show that even if we succeed in changing the healthcare system, the way people think and express themselves would remain unchanged. The Canadian psychologist, Ulrich Teucher, has studied cancer narratives and metaphors. He suggests, somewhat differently, that

the texts as metaphor and the metaphors in the texts can reveal a writer's general orientation towards the body and self, illness, life and death. As such factors and orientations differ, often radically, each cancer narrative tells a distinct story. Moreover, the language of each narrative reveals an astonishing variety of attributed or assumed meanings that appear particularly crucial in cancer. Metaphors that may seem constructive and therapeutic to one patient or writer (or to his/her readers) can be destructive and further traumatizing for others. (Teucher 2003, 1–2)

Thus, what Teucher says is that it is necessary to analyse the range of metaphoricality in cancer discourse in order to conceptualise cancer within particular linguistic (and cultural) setting.

Because of my use of a folkloristic approach, my particular interest is somewhat distant from the study of political, medical, or social issues concerning health and illness. My foremost aim is to comprehend how individuals feel on hearing the word cancer, how they experience the illness process, how they express their experiences and why?. This is not a psychological concern, rather it is a desire to present the complexities that are present when trying to understand how metaphors work. Within the broadest meaning of cultural studies, I aim to present the way in which metaphors function as 'pictures words' "in constant interaction with social situation, cultural values, the poetic tradition, and so forth." (Friedrich 1991: 24) In order to illustrate the complexities present in understanding the role of metaphor, I examine how metaphors work and what they do in particular situations. Based on the material at hand I present the metaphoric expression

as a valuable linguistic tool used in the sharing of ideas, including those relating to the social transformation, physical suffering and the emotional rollercoaster that follows the diagnosis of cancer.

The Meaningful Power of Metaphors

In every language there are numerous words that describe human emotions. Words like fear, confusion or sadness are foremost socioculturally agreed markers. Words describing emotions carry certain sociocultural meanings. The Canadian literary theorist Northrop Frye has said that, "what makes a word a word is its difference from other words, and what gives the words a public meaning for a community is the disentangling of them from the associations of those who use them." (Frye 1985, 585) My analysis of cancer narratives illustrates that socioculturally agreed words describing emotions are not necessarily the best tools with which to describe the personal experience of cancer. Rather, people employ metaphors, or metaphor-like expressions, as shown in the following, taken from patients' writings (436)⁵ P: (see next page).

If we assume that people go through a moment of great shock, filled with conflicting emotions, how should we explain the employment of sometimes trivial metaphors to describe this significant experience? What are the meanings of such metaphors in cancer narratives?

Concerning human beings, cultures, and the use of language, linguistic anthropologists have pointed out that our everyday language use is restricted by subconsciously accepted rules and customs that lack rational explanation. On the other hand, folklorists and anthropologists have demonstrated that people share mythical

(1) iltapäivän auringossa pilvi leikkasi taivaan lakea (2) kaiken kirkkauden tieltään (3) pimeään mahdilla se laskeutui yli elämänhetken (4) aika pysähtyi (5) ihmismielen taivas ja toivo putosivat tyhjyyteen (6) noin se oli ollut sinä yhtenä syyskesän päivänä; (7) kuin kesä vielä olisi ollut (8) vain vähän viileämmän ja kaukaisemman auringonvalon alla (9) valon jonka pilvi leikkasi pois. [---] (10) lopullinen varma tieto oli isku, jota ei heti käsittänyt (11) kun se tuona päivänä tuli kohdallemme (12) silloin ihmismielen taivas ja toivo putosivat tyhjyyteen (13) vain kolme sanaa ja kaikki (14) koko eletty elämä (15) hävisi mustaan syvyyteen (16) SE ON SYÖPÄ

(1) in the evening sun a cloud cut the ceiling of heaven (2) away from the brightness (3) with the power of darkness it was setting above the moment of life (4) time stopped (5) the heaven of the human mind and hope fell into emptiness (6) so it had been on this late summer day (7) with some summer left (8) under the slightly cooler and more distant sunlight (9) light that was cut by sun [---] (10) the final confirmed information was a blow that was not immediately graspable (11) on that day when it arrived to us (12) then the heaven of the human mind and hope fell into emptiness (13) only three words and everything (14) the whole life lived (15) disappeared into the black deepness (16) IT IS CANCER

images which, in oral and literary tradition, as well as in everyday reasoning, may be interpreted as poetic formula. Accordingly, one might suggest that the use of ‘pictures words’ during the verbalisation process is a subconscious decision fixed by a form of linguistic code. It is more challenging to decide whether the code that directs the use of metaphors in texts should be approached as a linguistic restriction or a poetic freedom.

In his study concerning *polytropy*, the anthropologist Paul Friedrich attempts to unite the two opposing approaches. (Friedrich 1991: 17–55) Friedrich has proposed that tropes, or ‘extended words’, may express images, modality, formality, contiguity, analogy, vertical analogy, condensation or expansion. According to Friedrich’s assumption, the main task of the metaphoric expression is to mediate the real (external) world. (Friedrich 1991: 54–55) The problem with Friedrich’s conclusion is that it is based on a poetic account (literary text) full of figurative speech, while the written cancer narrative lies between the oral and written tradition of self-expression, without fulfilling the expectations of folklore or literature. However, because of its ‘fixed’ written form cancer patients’ writings may be approached as autonomic discourse that “creates an intertextual universe within certain contextual frames.” (Apo 1995: 139) The main task of cancer narratives is to represent the self in various aspects. Thus, the respondents do not only mediate the real world, but also multiple images of the self which in various ways relate to cancer. During the composition of thematic narratives the respondents combine methods of traditional expression (folklore) with elements of literary tradition (literature), making the interpretation process more complex.

The Interpretation of Metaphors as “Works in Miniature”

The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1974, 65–110) has pointed out two main problems with the study of metaphoric expressions in text. The first problem concerns the process of interpretation, and the second the role of metaphor. As indicated above, metaphors in a text are tools of both self-expression and self-interpretation. Interpretation is generally seen as reader dependent, whereas the interpretation process contains both text-interpretation and the self-interpretation. Thus, the metaphoric expressions in text may be approached from multiple perspectives, and be understood in multiple ways. For textual studies this means that in different texts metaphors contain different meanings depending on the context in which they are being employed. Thus, the main problem of interpreting the use of metaphoric expressions lies in the complexity of their character, a situation exacerbated by the desire of respondents to make their experiences understandable. Therefore, we may ask how metaphor functions and what metaphor does in the written narratives describing the moment of diagnosis.

In his writing Paul Ricoeur asks: “Is metaphor a work in miniature?” (Ricoeur 1974, 97–98) Is metaphor the smallest possible primary textual unit within a background text? And if we define the metaphoric expression as a primary unit, is a metaphor a narrative? In order to be defined as a primary textual unit the metaphor must, according to Ricoeur’s suggestion, adopt at least five criteria involving paradox, which I shall examine in more detail.

Firstly, as Ricoeur put it, to consider a metaphoric expression as a discourse it must occur as an event that includes a general meaning (*event* and *meaning*). Although metaphoric expressions are used in text in various ways, they clearly contain the idea/picture of a person being transformed as they move towards a new situation. Thus, in the current context of cancer diagnosis, which causes for an individual the socioculturally accepted transformation to cancer patient. The latter contains the meaning of the transformation event.

From the folklorist’s point of view, the moment of diagnosis (event) may be interpreted as a symbolic act of transformation: moving from one status to another (meaning). The metaphors used in Finnish cancer patients’ narratives are not refined in the literary sense. People use spontaneously chosen metaphors that have a more ‘fixed’ meaning in culture and language:

Sitten koitti se musta perjantai, joka
pudotti minut ihan jonnekin mustaan
monttuun. (332)

Then came the black Friday that dropped
me entirely into some kind of black hole.
(332)

Tultuani kotiin sairaalasta, silloin vasta
tunsin kuin olisin pudonnut johonkin
pimeään monttuun. Yhden illan itkin
aivan ääneen, se itku tuli jostakin hyvin
syvältä minusta, samalla aivan kuin olisi
isketty joku leima olemukseeni: syöpäsai-
ras, se olet nyt. (155)

As I came home from the hospital I felt as
though I was falling into some kind of
dark hole. One evening I cried out loud.
This cry came from some kind of deepness
inside me. At the same time some kind of
stigma was set into my nature: cancer
patient, that’s what you are now. (155)

Siitä alkoi varsinainen surutyö, päivisin yritin olla iloinen ja huumorikin joskus pääsi esiin. Mutta yöt olivat tuskien taivalta. Olin aivan kuin syvän kuilun reunalla. Valoa ei näkynyt mistään, ei pilkahdustakaan. Yritin tasapainotella etten putoaisi syvyyteen. Itkin itseni uneen. (482)

So began my sorrow. During the day I tried to be happy and even made jokes. The nights were full of misery. I felt as though I was hanging above a deep hole. There was no light to see, not a sight of it. I tried to balance and not to fall into the deepness. I cried for so long that I fell asleep. (482)

Secondly, according to Ricoeur's second paradox, the metaphor must contain contrasting traits, involving certain inner opposition (singular identification and general predication). When I was examining the narratives and deciding on themes for further analyses, I noticed the importance of nature and seasonal change for cancer patients. It appeared that nature in its various forms is often used as a tool for self-expression and inner identity negotiation. Accordingly, respondents make use of nature and seasonal change to express their inner feelings. Certainly, the most pregnant metaphor was a tree as a symbol of the human being and of continuous life. Equally important was the road metaphor, symbolising the course of life, and even more significant the metaphor of a side road (*inexperienced path*) as a representation of the illness. Metaphors and metaphoric descriptions like these need careful examination in another text, as they describe situations that are not covered within the current article. However, it is worth citing both examples – nature and the road – in order to emphasise the fact that metaphors are a very important form of self-expression for cancer patients. It is possible to argue that metaphoric expressions are not only figurative speech referring to bodily sensations, but, at least in the context of cancer narratives, they also contain representations of significant events.

Thirdly, the metaphoric expression must include some polarity between what 'I say', and what 'I do' by the act of saying (*the propositional act* and *the illocutionary acts*). This particular metaphor demonstrates how lightness turns to darkness and the sensation of 'being up' changes to 'being down'. The Czech linguists Ladislav Holy and Milan Stuchlik, have proposed that the way people use language is dependent on the situation in which they find themselves, and that every expression forms part of the discourse. (Holy & Stuchlik 1981: 22–23) These examples indicate that the extent of physical sensation influences the way in which metaphor is employed. In addition, the shock caused by cancer may extend over a longer period, appearing occasionally as emotional outbursts hidden from others. In the first two of the three examples above, the diagnosis of cancer made the recipient feel 'as if they were falling', thus by using this saying (*I say*) they accurately picture their sensations (*I do by saying*) regarding the symbolic act of transformation. In the third, the person felt as though she was 'hanging above a deep hole', which indicates the continuous inner struggle against the expected transformation. These examples clearly indicate the powerful nature of metaphoric expression as being dependent on situation and context.

Fourthly there must be an implied polarity between *sense* and *reference*, between what is said, and what it is said about. Here again, to trace the inner paradoxes within

metaphors, and to discover the fifth criterion, it is important to be aware of the context and situation. In written texts, unlike oral communication, the number of thoughts that remain unfinished, and the number of implied meanings, is limited as the writer has no option for self-expression other than carefully chosen words. The preference for metaphoric expressions over socioculturally defined words during the verbalisation process may be explained as a human desire to be understood. While discussing metaphors, the cognitive scientist Mark Turner has proposed that a metaphor unites different spheres of perception and accordingly enables concepts or words to expand. (Turner 1987: 17) According to Turner's suggestion, people employ metaphoric expressions to verbalise personally experienced (*inner*) sensations in this expanded way. As mentioned above, all human beings have their own set of physical sensations based on experience. Individual sensations, therefore, form an inner sphere of experience. As physical experience becomes verbalised, it becomes a part of the conceptual sphere, and thus graspable by others. This assumption is one of the central ideas in linguistic discussions concerning the meaning of metaphoric expressions in discourse. The American linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have suggested that metaphor guides conceptual distinction in ordinary conversations. (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 4) Consequently, the task of metaphor is to unite conceptual spheres while expanding the meaning of words.

Fifthly, the final criterion considers discourse as having two kinds of reference: the 'reality reference' and the 'self reference'. In this sense the expression 'falling into darkness' is comprehensible as an appropriate linguistic tool for the 'reality reference' and the 'self reference'. It demonstrates the significant event of diagnosis, referring to individual sensations, the moment of transformation and to the extent of feelings experienced by the patient. Thus, the patient's selected metaphoric expression as marker of a critical transformation, becomes understandable and meaningful to the reader. In this manner metaphoric expressions do indeed appear as miniature works within the context of wider thematic narratives.

The Moment of Diagnosis as the Moment of Symbolic Transformation

As I studied the available texts, I discovered three types of metaphor used to signify the event of transformation. Accordingly, the cancer diagnosis may cause changes to vertical, external and inner alignment within Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) categories of structural, ontological and orientational metaphors. Firstly, changes of vertical alignment signify movement from above, similar to the falling presented previously. In this way cancer

Aavistin jonkin olevan huonosti, kun minut kutsuttiin lääkärin huoneeseen. Ruokakärryt olivat juuri käyneet, mutta siihen se ruoka jäi. *"Pato murtui"*. *Vaikka sain jotain rauhoittavaakin, tuntui kuin elämä olisi siihen loppunut*. Syöpä oli silloin vielä kova sana, "Ei siitä selviä," ajateltiin. (030)

I sensed something was not right as I was invited to the doctor's office. They had just brought some food, but there it stayed. *'The dike broke'*. *Although they gave me some sedatives, I felt that my life was coming to end at that moment*. Cancer was a tough word back then: 'This is not survivable,' people thought. (030)

patients describe their situation as drowning (*hukkuminen*) or sinking (*uppoaminen*). The patient may also feel that a “dike broke” (*pato murtui*):

Secondly, external changes may be projected onto the world, which stops entirely (*aika pysähtyi*) as with the first text example, or onto the sky, which suddenly becomes covered with a black veil, dark smog or clouds (*musta huivi, musta sumu, sumuverho*):

Oli se kurja päivä, kun sain sen tiedon. Lääkäri seurueineen seisoj siinä sänkyni päässä. Sanojin että se oli sitten syöpä. Niin oli, he vastasivat. *Oli niin kun musta huivi olisi heitetty pääni yli.* (023)

That was a rough day, the day I received this knowledge. The doctor stood there by my bed with his assistant. I asked if it was cancer. Yes, it was, they answered. *It was as though a black veil had been thrown over my head.* (023)

Thirdly, the type of metaphor represents change in the self. Accordingly, people say that the diagnosis felt like a “tree trunk” or a “stone had fallen on me”. The diagnosis may also cause a “feeling of cold, brokenness,” or “emptiness”:

En tiedä miten kykenin ajamaan kotiin, olin ihan poikki, itketti, mutta ei kyyneltäkään tullut. *Olin ihan tyhjä kuin pois heitetävä maitopurkki, pelkät kuoret jäljellä.* (046)

I do not know how I managed to drive home. *I was totally broken*, I felt like crying but no tears came. *I was as empty as a milk carton that ought to be thrown away, only the container was left.* (046)

The role of the metaphors used as examples here is particular to the context of cancer narratives as they unite the experience, the emotions and the imagination. Paul Ricoeur has said, on the nature of metaphors, that,

there is a structural analogy between the cognitive, the imaginative, and the emotional components of the complete metaphorical act and the metaphorical process draws its concreteness and its completeness from this structural analogy and this complementary functioning. (Ricoeur 1978: 159)

Thus, the presented changes in vertical, external, and inner alignments captured in metaphors represent the transformation process. Accordingly, what Ricoeur has called “works in miniature” accurately represent situational changes, changes in the world, and, first and foremost, changes in the self, which makes metaphor an important textual unit when ‘reading’ cancer patients’ experiences, thoughts, and, more importantly, emotions.

Metaphor as a Socioculturally Bound Key

In folklore studies metaphoric expressions have been interpreted as the relics of mythical reasoning (Siikala 1992: 155–183), or, in contrast, as representations of organised human reasoning set within a particular context. (Apo 1995: 26–29; 2001: 66–68; Timonen 2004: 307–328; Tarkka 2005: 76–79) Therefore metaphors transmit ancient human experience, while in a certain situations they appear as context dependent representations. For example, sorrow as an emotion may be described as a central feeling in Kalevala-metre lyric songs. According to Finnish folklorist Senni Timonen this emotion is described as something inside the singer's body: in the head, in the heart, in the torso or under the feet. Folk singers picture their sorrow as feeling like ice or burning like fire. The sorrow may also appear as a being who changes the self. (Timonen 2004: 326–328) It appears the images of transformation used in cancer narratives represent mythical thought, acknowledged as a well established, pre-existing part of culture. I suggest that the poetic freedom present within metaphor is used when respondents construct their particular “work in miniature” and make it a part of their thematic writing. Metaphor contains the freedom to choose a suitable word order, as well as the requisite amount of emotion in order to mediate the situation in which cancer sufferers find themselves.

As the relics of mythical reasoning, metaphors constantly reappear in new contexts and situations. To understand this statement, it is necessary to return to Paul Friedrich's assumption concerning the socioculturally complex nature of metaphor posed at the beginning of this article. By its origin, metaphor is culture-bound and rich in mythical images. Within the text, this

image becomes interpreted and verbalised either consciously or subconsciously according to the situation and context. Metaphor may be defined as a heterogeneous tool containing linguistic code. This code mediates our cultural, social, and poetic understanding of the world and makes the metaphor “the sinking ship” (see Lakoff and Johnson 1980) into a true image of serious trouble.

From my point of view what metaphor does regarding the moment of diagnosis in cancer patients' writings is crucial. Following on from Senni Timonen (see Timonen 2004: 309) I want to point out that metaphor works as a “socioculturally bound key” to the world of emotions. In the form of a “miniature work” metaphor allows people to describe their sensations and feelings about significant experiences. As representations of personally experienced shock and transformation, metaphors appear as coherent, poetic, utterances in the context of cancer narratives. Thus, they produce an opportunity for a reader to understand, picture and feel the lived physical sensations of cancer sufferers.

Conclusions

The moment of cancer diagnosis may be interpreted as the most crucial in the cancer experience, which for many cancer patients causes inner chaos and loss of self. Metaphoric expressions appears to be an excellent linguistic tool, extending the empirical and conceptual spheres and making real events and personal emotions comprehensible in a variety of ways. I concentrated on the metaphors used in Finnish cancer patients' written narratives because these texts create a suitable context within to understand that metaphors, are in primary terms, used for self-expression and self-interpretation.

Approaching metaphors from multiple perspective demonstrates the significance of metaphors as “works in miniature” when they refer to an individual’s emotions at the time of diagnosis within the context under study. The use, meaning and function of metaphors within the discourse on a particular socioculturally stigmatised illness, namely cancer, demonstrates how bodily experience becomes verbalised and expressed as culturally bound key with which to comprehend and make comprehensible, individual emotions.

When using metaphors, cancer patients are able to demonstrate their changed situation: their transformation into cancer patients. This particular event, represented in metaphor, contains respondents’ feelings about the cancer diagnosis as well as their sociocultural understanding of being a cancer patient. Individuals suddenly face the world from a different perspective. The outside world is no longer the same, and, which is more important, as a result of these changes people with cancer do not feel themselves to be the same people they were before their diagnosis. They have *become* cancer patients.

Notes

1. This research was supported by the Jenny and Antti Wihuri Foundation.
2. The current data was collected through a writing competition. The texts concentrate on Finnish cancer patients’ personal experience during the second half of the 20th century. The writing competition, *Kun sairastuin syöpään* took place in 1994. It was organised by the Finnish Cancer Patients’ Association, the Finnish Cancer Union and the Folklore Archive at the Finnish Literary Society. Cancer patients were asked to describe their experiences, thoughts and feelings based on open-ended questions. Close friends and relatives were also encouraged to contribute their experiences. The results of the writing competition were as follows: altogether 672 cancer narratives were collected, consisting of 6384 pages. Among the writers were 599 female and 65 male

participants. The youngest writer was 12 and the oldest 98 years old. The most active writers were between 50–54 years and 70–74 years. The dominant professions among participants were medical workers and teachers. The collected texts varied in their length, although they all showed the human need to share personal experience and analyse how the cancer experience had affected the path of personal life.

3. <http://www.cancer.fi/keskustelut/> [accessed 01.09.2009]
4. See more about the writing competitions organised by the Folklore Archive at the Finnish Literary Society. (Nirkko 2005, 169–178)
5. Here and below in this article I refer to the text examples of the writing competition “The Challenge of Life: My Life with Cancer” only with archival numbers. The original texts as well as the detailed information about the respondents may be gained from the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society.

Quoted archive records

The Finnish Literary Society’s Folklore Archive = Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seuran Kansanrunousarkisto, Syöpä-aineistot (1994)

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