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## **Literal or metaphorical? Conventional or creative?**

### **Contested metaphoricity in intense emotional experiences**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Metaphor has long been considered a ‘way in’ to people’s experiences, with metaphor analysis being used to gain insights into a range of psychological and physiological phenomena. However, a number of challenges arise when analysing metaphor in such contexts. We reflect on the challenges we have encountered in our research into intensely emotional and/or personal experiences related to bereavement and religious belief. Both areas showcase metaphor operating in the ‘liminal spaces’ of human experience. The spaces between life and death, personhood and non-personhood, and belief and non-belief prove rich ground for metaphor, but the qualities of these metaphors are as complex and elusive as the concepts they are being used to describe.

We explore how metaphoricity in general, and creative use of metaphor in particular, in these contexts are flexible phenomena, opening up new questions as to what ‘counts’ as a (creative) metaphor. We propose three levels at which people use or experience metaphor, show how these interact, and propose a number of methodological factors to be taken into consideration when conducting metaphor research in such complex areas of human experience.

**Keywords:** metaphor, metaphor identification, metaphoricity, emotion

## 1. Introduction and Background

When describing emotional experiences, people often draw on metaphor as it provides an easily understandable way of expressing the experiences in relatively concrete terms. Therefore, analysing the metaphors used by those who experience intense emotional experiences can provide insights into the nature of those experiences. Indeed, metaphor analysis has been used to gain insights into a range of psychological and physiological phenomena, including mental health conditions (Charteris-Black, 2012; Wilson & Lindy, 2013), cancer (Gibbs & Franks, 2002), addiction (Shinebourne & Smith, 2010), and end-of-life care (Semino et al., 2017, 2018).

Conventional metaphors may be effective in providing information about the more ‘shared’ aspects of people’s experiences, but more idiosyncratic aspects of the experiences will more likely be shared through more personalised or ‘creative’ uses of metaphor. Findings from earlier studies suggest that people make particular use of creative metaphor when describing intense personal experiences, in order to communicate the individual nature of the experiences (Colston & Gibbs, 2021; Fainsilber & Ortony, 1987; Gibbs & Franks, 2002; Williams-Whitney et al., 1992).

In previous work, we have explored the conventional and creative metaphors used in contexts relating to bereavement (including child bereavement (Turner et al., 2022 a, b & c), and pregnancy loss (Littlemore & Turner, 2019; Littlemore & Turner, 2020; Turner et al., 2020)), and aspects of religious belief (Turner, 2021; Clarke et al., 2022). All these projects showcase metaphor operating in the ‘liminal spaces’ of human experience: the spaces between life and death, personhood and non-personhood, and belief and non-belief. These spaces prove rich ground for metaphor, but the qualities of

the metaphors used in these situations are complex and elusive, reflecting the nature of the concepts and experiences they are being used to describe.

In this paper, our aim is to explore the challenges that we have faced when doing this work. In line with the overall focus of this special issue, we identify particular challenges faced by the metaphor analyst when analysing language that people use to describe intense emotional experiences. These challenges include difficulties in identifying metaphor, what the unit of analysis should be, and the applicability of existing procedures. These challenges speak to more fundamental concerns with what is meant by metaphor in general and creative metaphor in particular. The focus on creative metaphor is important because, as we saw above, it can tell us about the more unusual or distinctive aspects of people's emotional experiences. It is therefore important to be able to define and identify the many and varied ways in which people make creative use of metaphor. Through this exploration, we aim to challenge binary distinctions between metaphor and literal language and between creative and conventional metaphor. In so doing, we show how metaphor can operate at different levels, and identify different ways in which creative metaphor manifests, all of which draw on conventional metaphorical meanings to some degree.

## 2. Our Approach to Metaphor Identification

In identifying an utterance as metaphorical, we draw on Devylder and Zlatev's (2020) definition of metaphor as:

A (simple or complex) sign in a semiotic system or combination of systems, with:

- a) at least two different potential interpretations;
- b) standing in an iconic relationship with each other, where

- c) one interpretation is more relevant in the communicative context, and
- d) can be understood in part by comparison with the less relevant interpretation.

The beauty of this definition is that it offers considerable leeway as to the complexity of the sign under consideration. Under this definition, there is scope for identifying and analysing extended analogies and metaphors in different semiotic systems. It also allows the analyst to ‘remain agnostic about conceptual structures’ (Steen et al., 2010, p. 9), focusing more on the manifestation of the metaphor rather than on the potential conceptual frameworks underpinning it.

We can see an example of this in one of the comments made by a parent in our study of the impact that a child death has on the parents:

He was stiff and cold and lying in his cot. He was dead. [...] We felt like we were thrown from this one universe of wonderful normality and we were just forcibly thrown out into this awful universe of just misery and pointlessness and just utterly, utterly horrendous.

In the example above, when the parent says that they were ‘thrown out into this awful universe’, the meaning is clearly metaphorical. They are using a spatial metaphor to express the extent and scope of the pain that they are suffering and the fact that the way they feel now is nothing like anything that they have ever experienced before. A striking feature of the example above is that the nature of the metaphorical experience is only apparent when viewed as a whole; it is not easily identified at the level of the lexical unit. Gibbs (2022) argues that the reason why metaphors are so good at conveying personal emotional experiences is that they allow the listener to feel like they are experiencing the metaphorical scene being described, which necessitates an approach

that operates beyond the level of the lexical unit. If we applied a procedure such as the MIP (PRAGGLEJAZ 2007) and the MIPVU (Steen et al., 2010) (henceforth referred to as ‘MIP(VU)’), it would only give us lexical units such as ‘thrown’, ‘universe’, and possibly ‘forcibly’, and it would be difficult to gain any sense of the experience being described from these words alone.

Finally, an approach to metaphor identification that operates at the level of the lexical unit is difficult to employ in the identification of creative uses of metaphor. Such uses nearly always involve the manipulation of form, the extension of a conventional metaphorical mapping, or the juxtaposition of two or more metaphors (see, for example, Fuoli et al., 2022). For this reason, any identification of a creative use of metaphor must take place at the level of the phrase or an even longer stretch of discourse.

We therefore draw on the approach taken by Cameron and colleagues (e.g. Cameron, 2003; Cameron & Maslen, 2010; Cameron et al., 2009) in that we do not restrict ourselves to operating at the level of the lexical unit. However, in line with the MIP(VU) approach, strings are coded as metaphor if their meanings can be understood through comparison with a more basic sense.<sup>1</sup> Under this approach, we would count the string ‘we were just forcibly thrown out into this awful universe of just misery and pointlessness’ as a single metaphor.

However, the deceptively simple metaphor presented above also poses challenges for classification and interpretation at the level of creativity/conventionality. Whilst to the metaphor analyst, this may be considered to be a powerful metaphor which clearly demonstrates the dramatic effects of the loss, to the speaker this may have just been the

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<sup>1</sup> In many ways, our approach to metaphorical ‘experiences’ resembles that taken by Johansson Falck and Okonski (2022) in their work on metaphorical ‘scenes’ as their approach also operates beyond the level of the word.

easiest way of conveying her emotional state. Therefore, whereas a metaphor analyst might label this as a creative metaphor, it may not be creative for the parent who produced it. Some uses of metaphor that are deemed creative by an analyst may in fact reflect conventional ways of speaking in particular social networks, such as support groups. There is a risk of falling foul of the observer's paradox in that the analyst may identify creative metaphor simply because they are looking for it, leading them to see any powerful use of metaphor as creative.

Therefore, when exploring the use of metaphor in accounts of abstract, emotional and personally-charged experiences, there can be no 'one size fits all' approach. In all four of the projects discussed in this paper, the intensely *personal* nature of metaphor posed challenges in our analyses. In this paper, we talk about the challenges that we faced when identifying metaphor in general and creative metaphor in particular in our data. We demonstrate how this experience throws up new questions as to what 'counts' as a metaphor. In doing so, we propose three interacting levels at which people use or experience metaphor: a) 'I talk about it as if it were something else', b) I experience it as something else', and c) 'I believe it is something else'. We show how these different levels interact and conclude by proposing a number of methodological factors to be taken into consideration when conducting metaphor research in such complex areas of human experience.

### **3. Metaphor at the level of language – 'I talk about it as if...'**

Drawing on Devylder and Zlatev's (2020) definition proposed above, metaphor in language can be described as a written or spoken expression where there are two potential interpretations in which the contextually appropriate interpretation can be

understood in part through comparison with the less relevant interpretation. Linguistic metaphors can become conventionalised through use, or a speaker or writer may choose to draw on a lesser-used metaphorical comparison to help to describe their experiences, thus producing a more creative linguistic metaphor. Conventional metaphors may also be creatively extended, as an individual places new emphasis on particular parts of the comparison.

In our data, we encountered a number of challenges in identifying and categorising linguistic metaphor, due to the boundaries between ‘literal’ and ‘metaphorical’, or ‘conventional’ and ‘creative’, becoming blurred. These challenges are discussed below.

### 3.1 Metaphorical or literal? The case of (embodied) metaphors for emotional states

It is common to draw on physical, tangible, bodily-based experiences to help to describe more abstract, emotional experiences. Such comparisons proceed from such conceptual metaphors as EMOTIONAL PAIN IS PHYSICAL PAIN, leading to linguistic metaphors such as ‘to *hurt* one’s feelings’ or ‘his betrayal *cut me deeply*.’ However, our data revealed occurrences where these conventional comparisons seemed to become more ‘literal’ for the individuals using them, or where the boundaries between the two ideas became blurred. The examples below talk about feelings of ‘emptiness’ following pregnancy loss:

- (1) Then he did the injection to stop his heart. I just felt so empty cause he’d been moving around and he wasn’t. [DBB-WP4-T21-FA-9]
- (2) We’re all sort of left, like, with this emptiness inside of us which is very physical as well as emotional [DBB-WP4-T9-M-8]



In these examples, the boundaries between literal and metaphorical meaning are blurred due to the physical loss leading to a literal ‘emptiness’, but this ‘emptiness’ is also used to refer to emotional reactions as in (2). Here, therefore, it is unclear whether the participants’ use of the word ‘emptiness’ should be considered a metaphor, or not.

Similarly, emotional responses can have clear physiological effects. In this example, the speaker explains that her panic had ‘literally overwhelmed’ her to the point that she was experiencing physiological symptoms:

- (3) I’d never had a panic attack like that [...] I was just literally overwhelmed with panic [DBB-WP4-T28-S-7]

Even when there is a clear demarcation between the emotional and the physical, the two can influence each other. Examples (4) and (5) below demonstrate how the experience of physical pain had an effect on the participants’ emotional reactions. In the first, it was only after experiencing the pain of the miscarriage that the emotions were fully ‘felt’, and in the second, the pain of labour was considered necessary to process the experience and to form bonds with the stillborn child.

- (4) I think it wasn’t until I’d passed that baby did the emotions almost catch up with us both? [...] And it was almost like we had to go through the physiological pain [...] before it became real... [...] it was almost like the physical pain had to happen to make those emotions very real somehow. [DBB-WP4-T24-M-11]

(5) I was really pleased that I'd gone through labour with [Stillborn Daughter] cause I felt like it brought me closer to her. [...] I needed to have delivered her and I needed that sort of pain, um, for it to be real. [DBB-WP4-T29-S-8]

These examples demonstrate how experiences of intense emotion can blur the boundaries between the literal and the metaphorical, to the point where emotional pain can be 'literally' experienced as physical pain. The lack of a clear separation between literal and metaphorical here has implications for metaphor analysis of data that deals with intense or traumatic emotional experiences. Therefore, metaphor researchers must remain cognisant of the fact that metaphoricity is always in the eye of the beholder; what appears to be a metaphor for the analyst may be a literal experience for the speaker. 'Metaphoricity' is more likely to operate on a scale, rather than being categorical (Julich-Warpakowski, 2020), and metaphor researchers are working with 'potential' metaphoricity and not metaphor in any kind of absolute terms, an idea which is discussed at length by the MIP(VU) researchers. Researchers should therefore be led by their research aims when deciding whether to label something as a metaphor, a literal use of language, or both, depending on the context. If the aim of the research is to provide insights into people's lived experiences through the lens of metaphor, then a flexible, maximally inclusive approach to metaphor identification including potential metaphors is appropriate. There is room for agnosticism; potential metaphoricity functions as a lens just as well as clear, confirmed metaphor. If on the other hand, the aim of the research is to say something about metaphor as a linguistic phenomenon, then a tighter working definition of metaphor may well be necessary.


### 3.2 Creative uses of metaphor

As we saw above, focusing on the creative metaphors that people use to describe their intense emotional experiences can provide interesting insights into the more personal or idiosyncratic aspects of their experiences. However, the identification of creative metaphor presents further methodological challenges. Traditionally, the distinction between creative and conventional metaphor has been seen as being relatively unproblematic, and creative metaphor, unlike conventional metaphor, has been defined loosely as involving the bringing together of previously unrelated concepts. More recent work has identified two different kinds of creative metaphor, one of which involves creating a completely new mapping, whilst the other involves incorporating more detail into an existing mapping. For example, Pérez-Sobrino et al. (2021) draw a distinction between ‘creative exploitations of one-off source domains’ and ‘unusual realizations of wide-scope source domains’. However, as we will see below, this distinction is not without its problems, as there are no new juxtapositions that do not draw on an existing mapping at some level, and all creative uses of metaphor involve a degree of ‘language play’ (Cook, 2000). It is therefore perhaps more appropriate to talk in terms of ‘creative uses of metaphor’ than ‘creative metaphor’ per se.

Here we outline the main ways in which metaphor was used creatively in our studies:

a) The (apparent) introduction of a new metaphorical comparison, drawing together previously unrelated elements

In a small number of cases, the metaphors appeared to be bringing together two previously unrelated elements. However, as we will see below, on closer analysis, they nearly always drew on an established relationship on some level. For instance, in

example (6) below, a support worker from a stillbirth charity relates the experience of  guilt to a) a physical injury or condition – in this case, one that is worsening, and b) an earthquake.

(6) the guilt from bereaved mothers is so inflamed I think there's parental guilt but maternal guilt is like off the Richter Scale [DBB-WP2-T17]

In analysing this example, it is useful to ask what constitutes 'previously unrelated elements'. How new does a connection have to be, and how far removed from an existing conventional mapping does something have to be for it to be considered creative? It is common to speak of emotions as if they were physical experiences; we can talk about *heartache*, for example, or words that *wound* or leave *scars*. It could be argued that the use of the word 'inflamed' here is drawing on that same overarching conceptual metaphor, but choosing less conventional lexis makes the image more striking.

Similarly, there could be a case for arguing that likening guilt to an earthquake, the severity of which can be measured using the Richter Scale, constitutes a creative comparison, drawing together two ideas which are not normally related. However, while GUILT and EARTHQUAKES are not usually metaphorically linked, we do encounter other emotional states likened to natural phenomena. Sadness can come in *waves*, for example, and anger can *erupt*. The results of emotions can be *earth-shattering* and leave *shockwaves* in someone's life, so perhaps there is more of a conventional basis for linking emotional experiences with earthquakes than is apparent at first sight, even if the specifics of the comparison itself are less conventional.

Given the complexities inherent in defining the extent to which a comparison is sufficiently ‘unconventional’ to deem it creative, it may be more useful to explore ways in which metaphorical creativity can proceed from comparisons which may in themselves be highly conventional. These will now be discussed.

### b) Altering the valence of a metaphor

Altering a metaphor’s valence involves using a metaphor that is conventionally positive to describe a negative experience, or vice versa. For example, several participants who had experienced pregnancy loss talked about becoming members of ‘a club’ they hadn’t signed up for and never wanted to be in. The literal experience of being part of a club is usually considered to be a positive one.

### c) Introducing more detail into a conventional metaphorical comparison, or extending it in a novel way.

Creative use of metaphor may involve drawing on a conventional metaphorical connection, but introducing more detail or creatively extending it, employing an extended metaphorical scenario (Musolff, 2016). In Example (7) below, for instance, a bereaved parent talks about the experience of grief following the loss of her pregnancy.

- (7) It would be kind of on a raft somewhere in an ocean. You can see a bit of land in the distance and you’re trying to- you know it’s there, you’ll get there but you’ve just got to cross this huge wide vast bit of open emptiness. Just to kind of get onto solid ground again, and that’s what you need to try. That’s what I’m aiming to get to - solid ground. Back on there. It’s a bit wobbly in places but it’s firm underfoot. It’s

having to cross that - it's a void you've got to try and cross just to get somewhere steady again. [DBB-WP4-T21-FA]

Within this example, we see references to the conventional metaphorical comparison of LIFE IS A JOURNEY, and related linguistic instantiations such as being 'on solid ground'. The ideas referred to here are therefore conventional. Even her description of being 'on a raft somewhere in an ocean' relates to more conventionally expressed ideas of being 'all at sea'. The fact that all these ideas occur together in a dense metaphorical scenario, with the addition of more detail, makes for an innovative and impactful description even though this is based on a conventional comparison.

d) Using a conventional metaphorical expression/idiom in a new context where it is not usually used, or to talk about something that it is not usually used to talk about

Conventional metaphorical comparisons often give rise to conventional linguistic metaphorical expressions. However, the use of such idiomatic expressions in unusual contexts may also constitute creative use of metaphor. For example, one participant referred to 'being on the naughty step for [her] entire pregnancy'. The metaphor of 'being on the naughty step' would conventionally connote ideas of guilt, shame, or being in trouble – entailments that stem from the idea of removing a naughty child from a situation and having them sit quietly on their own for a period of time until they had calmed down, often on the bottom step of a flight of stairs which would then come to be referred to as 'the naughty step'. The participant uses it differently here, to convey how she was closely monitored following a previous pregnancy loss.

e) Using a ‘twice true’ metaphor

Twice true metaphors (Camp, 2008) are metaphors which work on two levels; in addition to having a metaphorical meaning, they also have a literal meaning that is relevant to the context of what they are being used to describe. The examples in Section 2.1 above, where participants expressed an ‘emptiness’ that was both physical and emotional, are good representations of this.

f) Combining metaphor with metonymy in a novel way

Again, we can use the example of physical and literal ‘emptiness’ to exemplify this concept.

- (8) We’re all sort of left like with this emptiness inside of us, which is very physical as well as emotional [WP4-T9-M-8]

We made the point above that the ‘emptiness’ here is metaphorical, describing the participant’s emotional reactions through the use of a container metaphor. However, we also noted that the ‘emptiness’ was also non-metaphorical, as it was used to denote the physical result of the pregnancy loss itself. Here, we see a WHOLE FOR PART metonymy at work, where the whole person is described as ‘empty’, but the physical ‘emptiness’ refers only to the uterus.

As we can see from the examples discussed in this section, creative uses of metaphor involve a complex interplay of conceptual and linguistic creativity. The creativity can involve an extension, manipulation or recontextualization of either a conceptual

metaphor or a linguistic metaphor, or it may involve a combination of the two.

Completely novel comparisons are rare or even non-existent.

#### **4. Beyond metaphor in language**

Thus far, we have focused on the identification of metaphor (and creative metaphor) in language, but metaphor is not simply a linguistic phenomenon. It can be found in a wide range of forms of communication, including gesture, images and music (Forceville & Urios-Aparisi, 2009; Pérez-Sobrino & Julich, 2014), which reflects the fact that it is a property of our conceptual system rather than of language *per se*. Metaphor can also be physically *enacted*. For example, one might light a candle in order to symbolise hope in dark times. When linguistic metaphor interacts with enacted metaphor, there could be scope for claiming that a person is *experiencing* something as something else, and in extreme cases, they may even *believe* it to be something else. The fact that metaphor can work in these different interacting ways further complicates endeavours to identify instances of metaphor in general, and creative metaphor in particular. Here we explore this issue in more detail.

##### **4.1 ‘I experience it as something else’**

Metaphors can be physically enacted, and physical actions can be imbued with metaphorical meanings (Gibbs, 2019). Such physical manifestations of metaphor often involve a conflation of metaphorical and literal meaning. We can see an example of this in Example (9) below, from a mother who was describing how she felt when she had lost her child:



- (9) We just wanted to hide. Literally had this sense of, ‘I wanna get in a cave, I don’t wanna see the world, I don’t wanna engage with anybody or anything’. I can’t function with the world being normal. I nearly always wore contact lenses, I rarely wore glasses but [then] I wore glasses on purpose so that I could just take them off half the time, cos I just wanted everything to go away. [TCT-T04]

The parent begins by saying that she literally wanted to get In a cave and hide herself away so that she did not have to ‘see’ the world. She then comments that she stopped wearing contact lenses and started to wear glasses instead so that she would be able to take them off and not be able to see. What, if anything, would we mark as metaphorical here? On the surface of it, everything in this paragraph appears to be literal, but there is an element of metaphorical meaning-making running through the entire quote. The ‘seeing’ (or, indeed the ‘not seeing’) refers to more than the literal experience of seeing; it is metaphorically extended to refer to the idea of ‘engaging’ with the world. The slippery nature of metaphors involving the idea of ‘seeing’ is discussed in MacArthur et al. (2015). In their discussion of the UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING metaphor in academic one-to-one consultations, they found a range of uses of the word ‘see’ that involved literal, metonymic and metaphorical meanings, and in many cases they found it very difficult to distinguish between the three levels of meaning. We have a similar phenomenon here. There is a metonymic CAUSE FOR EFFECT relationship between the idea of not being able to see something and not having to engage with it, which gives rise to the metaphor of SEEING IS ENGAGING so the action of taking off her glasses can be seen as a metaphorical act that is also literal and metonymically-motivated. It therefore works on all three levels at once.

We see in this example a strong case of metaphoric enactment. This mother is acting out her metaphorical thinking in a physical way: she is removing her glasses so that she literally cannot see but the action of removing her glasses also has a metaphorical meaning. When metaphors are enacted in this way, the boundaries between literal, metonymic and metaphorical meaning become even more blurred and difficult to decipher. Enacted metaphor involves simultaneous activation of literal, metonymic and metaphorical meaning but the extent to which any or all of these meanings are activated depends heavily on the context and on the viewpoint of the person experiencing the metaphor.

Another issue here for the analyst is whether or not this metaphor can be described as ‘creative’. It can certainly be considered an innovative response to a situation but ultimately, it draws on a very conventional metaphor. In terms of the creative metaphor uses outlined above, this is an enacted form of a ‘twice true’ metaphor in that it is working on the literal level as well as on a metaphorical level. We do not know, however, whether her behaviour in this case was intentionally ‘creative’; it may have been more of a coping mechanism that she was using to deal with a very traumatic event. However, intentionality is not a prerequisite for creativity, and her behaviour meets the widely accepted criteria for ‘everyday creativity’ identified by Barron (1969): *originality* and *meaningfulness*. The parent here makes it clear that the behaviour is both original for her, and meaningful. While other observers may not consider this behaviour as particularly creative, creativity need not be considered ‘new’ by a large group of people; ‘A creative outcome may be new on a global scale, or to a particular reference group, or to a domain or area of endeavor, or simply to one's own personal experience [img alt="yellow speech bubble icon" data-bbox="145 855 185 875] it depends on one's purpose’ (Richards, 2007). This behaviour could also be


considered a case of what Richards (2007) refers to as ‘resilient creative coping’, where individuals employ such ‘creative’ behaviour to help them deal with immediate personal difficulties.

Some of the enacted metaphor that we encountered in our research formed part of an extended scenario or narrative. For example, in our projects where we interviewed parents who had experienced pregnancy loss or the loss of a child, we found that it was relatively common for parents to speak of their children as if they were still alive:

(10) She’s buried with my dad [...] I didn’t want her to be on her own [WP4-T29-S-8]

This parent’s wish suggests that for her, the child is still alive on some level and in need of ‘parenting’ in a way that implies some sort of continuing bond between them (see, for example, Klass and Steffen, 2017). Again, we could ask if there is a metaphor here. The parent knows the child is not alive, but the incongruity between her knowledge and her actions could be taken as metaphorical. If we interpret this behaviour as metaphorical, the basis of comparison could be interpreted as being between the domains of ‘life’ and ‘death’, where aspects of ‘living’ are mapped onto ‘death’. On the other hand, the action could be interpreted as metonymic in that the baby’s body stands for the baby itself, or that the act of burying her with family members is a metonymic representation of a more general desire to ensure her welfare. While less overtly creative than the previous example, this behaviour contains an element of creativity in that it is combining metaphor and metonymy in a novel way.

A further level of abstraction is added when a parent talks about a deceased older child as if they were still a young child. We can see an example of this in the following extract:

- (11) [The funeral director] made it easier than it would have been and they asked us what we wanted him dressed in [  We didn't know, then they said 'do you want to put him to bed?' and I said 'what do you mean?' and she said 'do you want to put him to bed, do you want to dress him in his pyjamas?' and we were like, yes, we want to dress him in his pyjamas[...] So he had pyjamas, fluffy slippers and one of his cuddly toys. [TCT-T05]

In this example, a mother is referring to her deceased son who was in fact seventeen when he died. Were he alive, it may be inappropriate to put him to bed wearing fluffy slippers, accompanied by one of his cuddly toys. This mother appears to be expressing her need to protect her son through enacted metaphorical behaviour, i.e. behaviour that draws on metaphorical thinking. This behaviour may appear unconventional, and we argue elsewhere (Turner et al., 2022c) that funeral directors may sometimes need to support and facilitate such behaviour when working with parents whose child has died.

There were also instances of behaviour that combined metaphor and metonymy in new ways, but the presence of metaphor was much more overt. For example, we can consider a decision made by a parent who had experienced a miscarriage. When asked whether she had any ways of remembering her baby, she replied that she has a tattoo of a snowdrop (a small, white flower that blooms in winter), and explained the reason for this:

(12) ...because when we went to the peace garden it was in January and there was this incredible field of snowdrops right next to where the angel statue was where we lit our candle and they are so delicate and so tiny, a bit like the baby and but crucially it was the depth of winter and they were still alive. [...] and for me that was a symbol of hope. That was a symbol of the delicate life we'd lost but also the fact that there is still 'light in the dark' kind of symbolism [...] and that image just sat with me for a long time and then I decided to get a tattoo of a snowdrop [WP4-T24-M-11]

In this example, we see interrelating metaphorical connections being made between the snowdrops, the baby, light, and hope, which draw attention to the delicacy and ephemerality of both the baby and the snowdrops. While the metaphorical connections in this extract are striking in themselves, they also inspire the symbolic action of getting a tattoo of a snowdrop. As well as drawing on metaphorical connections between the baby and the snowdrop, this choice can also be considered metonymic, with the snowdrop providing access to the whole domain of hope and optimism in the face of loss. There is also the additional contrast between the ephemeral nature of the snowdrops and the baby, and the more permanent nature of the tattoo. Elsewhere (e.g. Littlemore and Turner, 2019), we also note that the act of getting a tattoo may represent an embodied metaphorical/metonymic response to the loss, in which a bereaved parent takes back into their body a symbol of what has been lost from it, in a permanent way.

This example highlights the important role played by interacting elements within the broader context, e.g. environment, activities, and time, in shaping people's tendencies to finding metaphorical meaning in their surroundings and to engage in associated

metaphorical behaviour. When she saw the snowdrops, this mother was already engaged in behaviour that can be considered conventionally symbolic, i.e. the act of lighting a candle at a memorial garden. Because of this, she may have been primed to find metaphorical meaning in her physical environment, reflecting the broader human tendency to ‘seek out experience in the natural world precisely for the metaphorical meanings these bodily actions afford’ (Gibbs, 2020). Even though snowdrops are conventionally associated with death and bereavement (as evidenced by the fact that there was a field of snowdrops there in the first place) they become even more salient for her.

Thus, we can see that in many cases metaphorical thinking involves experiencing something as if it were something else, and that when this happens it is sometimes difficult to identify the degree of metaphoricity, and the extent to which the metaphor can be defined as ‘creative’. When people seek ways to deal with their grief or to express the continuing bonds that they have with their child, they use everyday activities to help them do this, and these activities acquire additional symbolic meanings. This can provide opportunities for building creative resilience in the face of grief.

## 4.2 ‘I believe it is something else’

Some forms of metaphor use go beyond the ideas of talking about, or experiencing something as if it were something else. In some cases, people may believe that something ‘actually is’ something else. This brings a further complicating factor to the challenge of metaphor identification, as it demonstrates how individual experience and belief systems have an impact on an utterance’s metaphoricity. In these cases, the idea

that metaphor is ‘in the eye of the beholder’ becomes even more pertinent; whether an utterance is perceived as metaphorical will depend on the existence of a shared belief system between speaker and analyst.

Religious discourse is particularly rich in examples of these ‘ambiguous’ metaphors. In our small project investigating gestures used in conversations about religious belief, two participants had very different conceptions of ‘God’, as shown in the extracts below.

- (13) Participant: [...] now it was God interacting directly with each person [...] this was God in-dwelling people in a real way [...]

Interviewer: So you believe that the Holy Spirit is inside you?

Participant: Yep, yep.

In this extract, ‘God’ is considered to be an entity that can literally ‘enter’ individuals and interact with them. We can contrast this with the following extract, from another participant:

- (14) Participant: I think how one conceptualises God is always difficult really, and a lot of the language actually reduces God to a person or, possibly three persons. I found I was always thinking, I don’t agree with that [...] But it is actually quite difficult to try and avoid a sense of, well how then do you see him? You can’t get out of your head completely the old man with a beard sat on a cloud-

Interviewer: It’s a persistent metaphor.

Participant: It's a persistent metaphor, but it is simply a metaphor. [...] I believe in the resurrection in some way, but as a physical thing I'm really not at all sure.

Here, the participant sees God as a more nebulous, abstract concept, and her final comment about the resurrection also demonstrates the potential for the metaphoricity of particular terms to be contested. Not only may such discourse present a challenge in terms of metaphor identification, it may also raise questions about the identification of metaphorical creativity. If an individual expresses views of e.g. God that an analyst deems unusual or unconventional, there may be scope to claim that they are using metaphor creatively – or it may be the case that the individual is sharing their lived experiences, which may be very 'real', 'literal', and 'conventional' to them. Like decisions as to the metaphoricity of an item, assessments of creativity will also be largely determined by our own views of what is being discussed.

These varying levels of 'literalness' in an individual's belief system can lead them to undertake actions that correspond to these understandings. These actions are often related to strongly embodied metaphors, such as MORALITY IS CLEANLINESS. The Christian tradition of baptism, in which one 'descends into a pool of water and emerges from the other side spiritually cleaned, committed, and "made new"' (Bell, 1997, p. 36), is based on this metaphor, and the physical act of descending into water constitutes a symbolic 'washing clean' from sin. However, in some extreme cases, the understanding of such ritual practices is less symbolic, and more literal.

This kind of 'literal' understanding of metaphor can also be found in extreme forms of religious belief that lead to harmful practices. Two strongly embodied metaphors that can be found in Christianity and other faiths are: FASTING IS PURIFICATION, and EVIL IS



AN ENTITY THAT NEEDS TO BE EXPELLED (see Clarke et al., 2022). It is relatively easy to see how metaphors such as these, if taken literally by those with extreme religious views, might lead to harmful, damaging practices predicated on a belief that the literal truth of the comparison means that physical actions can affect real change; evil can be ‘literally’ expelled through purging, for example, or an individual can be ‘literally’ purified through fasting.

We can see examples of this in accounts of the beliefs that underpin some forms of child abuse linked to faith and belief. We are talking here about sets of beliefs that involve ‘possession’ by ‘evil spirits’ and the need to ‘expunge’ the child of these evil spirits. The practice of branding a child a ‘witch’ and forcing them to endure a series of often painful and emotionally distressing exorcisms, is widespread among certain communities that have strong spiritual belief systems (Oakley et al., 2017). What can be interpreted as metaphorical thinking is involved both in the practice of branding a child a ‘witch’ and in the abuse that ensues. Consider, for example, the following extract from an account by Awura Adjoo<sup>2</sup> who was accused as a child of being a ‘witch’ and as a result endured extensive physical and emotional abuse at the hands of her stepmother:

That evening, on his way home from work, my father passed my stepmother’s house [redacted] and they showed him the vomit which was in the bucket and also the recording of me throwing up. Then, in my native language, my stepmother said that *this was the witchcraft I was vomiting out*. I looked at her in disbelief. I was ill and here she was finding a link between my vomiting and being a witch, which she believed I was. (Tedam & Adjoo, 2017).

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<sup>2</sup> Awura Adjoo is a pseudonym used to protect the identity of the author.

Here, she reports how her stepmother interpreted her physical (non-metaphorical) act of vomiting as the expulsion of evil spirits. The stepmother here was adding an extra layer of meaning to her step daughter's behaviour; for the analyst this extra layer would appear to be metaphorical, but for her, it was most definitely literal.

This is not an isolated example. Many of the practices associated with the abuse itself also involve potential metaphor. The largest systematic review to date of child abuse cases in the UK where there was some link to witchcraft accusations was conducted by Stobart (2006). She carried out a detailed examination of the 47 children identified as victims of such abuse since 2000. In Figure 1 we see common practices associated with child abuse linked to faith and belief, and their associated motivations, as identified by Stobart:

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

All of these practices involve using a personification of evil to justify particular physical behaviours. Again, this poses challenges for the analyst, who is likely to see the personification as a metaphor and the associated behaviours as consequently symbolic, while the perpetrator is likely to see such things as literal.

In analysing metaphor, therefore, the analyst should be aware of the fact that metaphoricity can vary among individuals according to a range of factors, including personal belief systems. What may be considered a metaphor by one may be seen as literal by another, and whether a single individual experiences an utterance or action as metaphorical or literal may also vary according to the beliefs of their communities, their own psychological make-up, their age, or the presence of mental illness. It is therefore

important to be sensitive to these factors, considering the possibility that what is metaphorical for one may not be for another, and identifying the vantage point from where the utterance should be interpreted.

**5. Conclusion: Towards an ecological approach to coding: Considerations to be taken into account when identifying and classifying metaphor in accounts of intense emotional experiences**

In this paper, we have seen that the different ways in which people use metaphor when talking about intense emotional experiences present a considerable challenge to analysts seeking to identify and classify metaphors in language or behaviour. When working with this kind of data, it can be difficult to develop a coding scheme that accurately reflects an individual's experiences and how they communicate about these. One needs to find a balance between rigour, flexibility and ecological validity. In this concluding section, we sum up the main considerations which we believe to be necessary when deciding how and what to code different kinds of figurative expression in these contexts.




*Talking, experiencing or believing?*

We have seen that people's experiences of metaphoricity can operate at different levels. When they employ metaphor, they may, in some cases, simply be talking about something as if it were something else. In other cases, they may actually be experiencing it as if it were something else, and in other cases they may actually believe that it *is* something else. We have seen that these three levels of experience feed into each other and are often difficult to disentangle. This has implications for whether we code something as metaphorical.

## *Consider your own viewpoint: Metaphorical for whom?*

Following on from the previous point, we have also seen that whether or not a piece of communication is viewed as a metaphor can vary according to who is involved. What may be seen as metaphor by one person may not be viewed as such by another. In such cases, it is important to decide whose viewpoint is to be adopted, or at the least to be aware of one's own bias as an analyst.


## *Is it metaphorical, metonymic, literal, or all three?*

We have seen that in some cases it is possible for an utterance or an instance of behaviour to be metaphorical, metonymic and literal, all at the same time. Potentially metaphorical utterances or behaviours  may function on different levels of metaphoricity according to the vantage point of the viewer or according to the context within which  they are used (see Barnden, 2010). Alternatively, an utterance or behaviour  may be being used intentionally to work on these different levels, with the individual experiencing the event on all three levels at once. An ecologically valid approach to coding needs to allow for all of these possibilities.

## *Creative for whom?*

Similar issues arise when considering whether or not a metaphor should be labelled 'creative'. As we have seen, metaphors can exhibit different levels of creativity and the extent to which they are seen as such is context- and viewer-dependent. One could consider, for example, what happens when a conventional metaphor takes on new meaning or is re-defined or re-evaluated for the person using it. Similarly, if someone expresses so-called 'unconventional' views of God, they may be using metaphor creatively, or they may be sharing their 'literal', lived experiences. How we define

creative metaphor will therefore depend on our own views. Metaphorical creativity, like metaphor itself, is thus very much in the eye of the beholder.

All of the above considerations underline how a binary classification scheme ('Is it a metaphor? Yes/No,' 'Is it creative? Yes/No') is unlikely to be appropriate when analysing data such as ours. To ask these questions is to risk reducing the experiences of those involved to something  they are not. Such a binary classification scheme does not reflect the complexity of the experiences under consideration, and could also be considered a way for the analyst to impose their own views, which have come through their own lived experiences, and which will be very different to those of the participants.

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