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## METAPHORICAL CONCEPTUALISATION OF AGING FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF MEDICAL HUMANITIES

*The multifaceted nature of aging has drawn increasing attention from researchers working from interdisciplinary perspectives, including gerontology, sociology, psychology, cultural studies, and the medical humanities. However, language-specific approaches remain relatively underexplored, despite their strong potential to provide unique insights into how old age is conceptualized, evaluated, and communicated across different cultures and linguistic frameworks. Addressing this gap, the present paper examines the conceptualization of old age through the lens of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, which serves as the methodological foundation of the study. Within this theoretical framework, the research focuses on metaphorical patterns related to later life in the discourse of the medical humanities, highlighting both institutionalised representations of aging and the subjective, individual experience of growing older. Drawing on qualitative metaphor analysis, the study seeks to uncover the underlying conceptual structures that influence the perceptions of old age, shaped by culturally established knowledge patterns, associative connections, and socially shared interpretative frames. The findings reveal that authors in the analysed data sources employ a diverse range of metaphors in order to capture the complex and multidimensional nature of old age. Nevertheless, the most salient examples involve violence-related metaphorical patterns, portraying aging as a “battle,” “fight,” “prison,” “problem,” or “danger;” loss-oriented conceptualizations, emphasizing the multiple losses frequently associated with later life, and journey-related metaphors, framing aging as a “journey” or as “movement through space.” Such metaphorical framings frequently construct later life through the narratives of struggle, vulnerability, decline, transition, and change, while simultaneously reflecting broader cultural attitudes toward aging and older adults. Further research will contribute to a deeper understanding of aging and examining the full scope of its metaphorical conceptualizations in various social, historical, and cultural contexts.*

**Key words:** *old age, aging, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, conceptual metaphor, conceptualization.*

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## МЕТАФОРИЧНА КОНЦЕПТУАЛІЗАЦІЯ СТАРОСТІ КРИЗЬ ПРИЗМУ МЕДИЧНИХ ГУМАНІТАРНИХ СТУДІЙ

*Багатогранна природа старіння дедалі більше привертає увагу дослідників, які працюють у межах між-дисциплінарних підходів, зокрема геронтології, соціології, психології, культурології та медичних гуманітарних студій. Водночас мовно-специфічні підходи залишаються недостатньо розробленими, попри їхній значний потенціал для надання унікальних уявлень про те, як старість концептуалізується, оцінюється та комунікується в різних культурах і мовних системах. З метою заповнення цієї прогалини у статті розглядається концептуалізація старості через призму теорії концептуальної метафори, яка слугує методологічним підґрунтям дослідження. У межах цього підходу основна увага зосереджується на метафоричних моделях, пов'язаних із старістю, у дискурсі медичних гуманітарних студій. Дослідження висвітлює як інституціоналізовані репрезентації старіння, так і суб'єктивний, індивідуальний досвід дорослішання та старіння. Метою роботи є дослідження концептуальних структур, що впливають на сприйняття старості, сформованих культурно закріпленими моделями знання, асоціативними зв'язками та соціальними інтерпретаційними рамками. Результати дослідження демонструють, що автори джерел ілюстраційного матеріалу використовують широкий спектр метафор для відображення складної та багатовимірної природи старості. Водночас найбільш виразними є метафоричні моделі, пов'язані з насиллям, які репрезентують старіння як «битву», «боротьбу», «в'язницю», «проблему» чи «небезпеку»; концептуалізації втрати, що підкреслюють численні втрати, які часто супроводжують літніх людей;*

*а також метафори, що описують старіння як подорож, наприклад «життєвий шлях» або «рух у просторі». Такі метафоричні фрейми нерідко конструюють старість через наративи боротьби, вразливості, занепаду, переходу та змін, водночас відображаючи ширші культурні установки щодо старіння та людей похилого віку. Подальші дослідження сприятимуть глибшому розумінню старіння та охопленню повного спектра його метафоричних концептуалізацій у різних соціальних, історичних і культурних контекстах.*

**Ключові слова:** старість, старіння, теорія концептуальної метафори, концептуальна метафора, концептуалізація.

**Problem statement.** Despite the increasing interest in age-related issues, language-specific approaches to old age are said to be overlooked, creating invisible barriers between linguistics and related academic fields (Gerstenberg, Lindholm, 2019). Recent decades have demonstrated the importance of fostering collaboration across various disciplines and increasing the prominence of age-related topics in the field of linguistics. There is a growing emphasis on the “call for the comprehensive inclusion of older adults in the [...] research agenda” (Pichler et al., 2018: 2), highlighting the importance of adopting new methodologies and focusing on older people. This approach offers valuable insights into research on older populations, particularly from an interdisciplinary perspective.

The complex nature of aging, viewed as both a process and an outcome, has attracted significant interest from researchers with an interdisciplinary approach (Barusch, 2013; Bowie, 2010; Wohlmann, 2024). The term “aging research” serves as a unifying concept, fostering collaboration among experts from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Katz, 2014: 17). With the focus on the complexity of age and aging as well as the significant heterogeneity within the older population, researchers confirmed that aging is not a uniform experience. Gerontology traditionally approaches old age by using various indices that distinguish between biological, psychological, social, and functional aspects (Birren, Renner, 1977: 4–5). These factors clearly emphasize that aging should not be measured purely chronologically. To fully understand how old age is conceptualized, it is essential to take these various factors into account when studying or discussing the aging process.

While much of research on aging highlights universal themes related to aging, there is a gap in understanding how language and culture conceptualize and represent old age. This perspective is particularly significant because language plays a pivotal role in both shaping and reflecting societal attitudes toward aging, influencing how the elderly are perceived and treated across different linguo-cultures.

In cognitive studies, the way old age is expressed in language can reveal much about a society’s values, beliefs, and attitudes toward aging. Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 5) assume that metaphors serve as

tools for creating and disseminating interpretations of social reality. Their primary focus is that human thought relies on cognitive models shaped by conceptual metaphors. They argue that various metaphors highlight different facets of specific cognitive models. Previous cognitive linguistics research on metaphorical conceptualizations of life has identified culture as a significant factor that influences the selection of the source domain (SD) (Benczes, SÁgvári, 2018). Moreover, some studies conclude that manipulating how people currently think about a SD can affect how they reason or feel about a target domain (e.g., Thibodeau, Boroditsky, 2011).

**Literature review.** It is commonly agreed that shaping our understanding of the world, conceptual metaphors are frequently used to address significant social issues, including crises, political matters, and diseases (Nerghes et al., 2015; Semino et al., 2018). Previous research has demonstrated that using different metaphors can influence people’s opinions, decision making, emotions and perceptions of threats (de Saint Preux et al., 2021: 37–47). In metaphor analyses, this is often seen as “ideology manipulation”, because the use of metaphors not only affects people’s beliefs, and experiences of events, but can also shape their subsequent actions (Liu, Tay, 2023: 2).

Many abstract concepts, like ideas, emotions, diseases, or notions of time, are not clearly defined in human experience and must be understood through more concrete concepts that we encounter (de Saint Preux et al., 2021). Hidalgo-Downing and O’Dowd (2023: 234) claim that the use of metaphors serves as an effective communicative and creative strategy utilizing familiar domains of experience to help interpret and understand complex or abstract concepts.

Hommerberg et al. (2020) argue that metaphors serve as tools for understanding and describing abstract phenomena by connecting them to more tangible concepts. In cognitive linguistics, metaphor is traditionally viewed not merely as a stylistic or rhetorical tool, but as a cognitive mechanism that helps us conceptualize the world. As outlined by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) in their CMT, abstract concepts can only be understood or made sense of by drawing on more concrete concepts, leading to the formation of conceptual metaphors. Accordingly, conceptual met-

aphors structure our conceptual systems, leading us to think and act metaphorically. Similarly, Kövecses (2018: 127) explains that we perceive certain concepts metaphorically, and since our conceptual system influences how we interact with the world, we often act in metaphorical ways.

The term “domain” is always associated with CMT and has a relatively complex knowledge structure, related to unified aspects of experience (Pham, Trinh, 2024: 2088). Langacker (1987: 147) defines domains as “cognitive entities such as mental experiences, representational spaces, ideas, or conceptual complexes.” According to Kövecses (2002), the target domain (TD), more abstract, refers to the conceptual domain that is understood through the usage of the source domain (SD), which typically consists of concrete, tangible things that can be physically sensed or interacted with. This process of mapping sensory, concrete experiences onto abstract, intangible concepts is central to the mechanism of conceptual metaphors.

Lakoff and Johnson’s notion of conceptual “domains” owes much to Fillmore’s concept of “frames” in semantics (1975), which was a major influence in cognitive linguistics. Many studies within this line of research explicitly adopt the notion of “framing” to explain how choices of metaphors may relate to people’s views and opinions on particular issues in certain contexts. However, when the concept of a frame is contrasted with that of a domain, it is used to represent a more specific sub-domain structure (Semino et al., 2018: 628). As Sullivan (2013) claims, single domain can encompass multiple frames. The focus here is on framing as a process through which language both reflects and enables different ways of understanding and reasoning about the world (Semino et al., 2018, pp. 628–629). Different framings, in turn, give rise to different metaphors, which emerge from variations in experience and perspective (Semino et al., 2018, pp. 625–626).

Additionally, Kövecses (2011: 26–27) assumes that bringing together the two domains into a conceptual metaphor often involves experiences derived from our interactions with the physical world and our embodied experiences. Since all humans share common sensorimotor experiences, such as perception, movement, and physical interaction with their environment, these experiences form the foundation for the conceptual metaphors that are universal across cultures. However, people from various cultures might associate the same concept with different things, and each culture can have distinct ideas that serve as either source or target domains in metaphors. Thus, a language-specific approach to the study of old age is essential for uncovering the nuanced ways in

which aging is perceived and evaluated in society. It also offers valuable insights into the intersection of language and culture in shaping experiences of aging, as well as into how societies discuss, construct, and respond to later life.

**The aim of the paper.** Accordingly, this study offers a qualitative analysis that highlights the complexity of culturally embedded conceptual structures, shaped by established knowledge frameworks as well as a range of associative connections. By examining linguistic material from Medical Humanities research, the paper explores the metaphorical conceptualization of old age, drawing on Conceptual Metaphor Theory as its theoretical foundation. The study adopts the differentiation made by Lakoff and Johnson between structural, orientational and ontological metaphors.

The analysis presented is a case study, focusing specifically on the use of conceptual metaphors of old age in the corpus of randomly selected research papers in the field of Medical Humanities. This field employs interdisciplinary research to examine health and illness experiences, often emphasizing subjective or invisible aspects. The corpus comprises papers from the online open-access academic journals (*Aging. Clinical and Experimental Research* (2022) 34(6), *BMC Medical Education* (2024) 24, *Communication Studies* (2019) 71 (1), *Journal of Aging Studies* (2022) 60, *Aging and Health Research* (2024) 4 (3), *Translational Psychiatry* (2022)12), focusing on key words such as “old age,” “aging,” “older people/population,” and related concepts. The manually selected excerpts from the corpus were analysed to document instances where words or phrases related to old age, aging, or the elderly were used metaphorically. This research employs the “metaphor identification procedure” (MIP), a systematic and reliable approach to identifying metaphorically used words in discourse. The approach involves distinguishing between a word’s contextual meaning and its basic meaning. This method is particularly valuable as it focuses on studying metaphorical language in its natural settings, referred to as “metaphor in the wild”, to explore how such metaphors function across different communicative contexts (Pragglejaz Group, 2007: 1). This provides richer insights into their frequency and practical usage.

**Results and Discussion.** In our analysis, we identified metaphorical patterns that can be classified as instances of the commonly recognized OLD AGE IS WAR/BATTLE metaphor. Following Lakoff and Johnson (1980), these expressions are typically interpreted as realizations of conceptual metaphors, with WAR, BATTLE OR STRUGGLE serving as the SDs. This general level metaphor can be represented in specific versions: AGING IS STRUGGLE, BEING OLD IS CONFRON-

TATION, AGING IS BRUTAL, BEING OLD IS LOSING INDEPENDENCE, OLD AGE IS AN ENTITY THAT KILLS, and can account for a variety of linguistic expressions. Words and expressions with vague or general meanings, such as *struggle*, *confrontation*, *lose independence*, *increasing dependence*, *to be tied up* were among the most frequently used battle-related terms. In contrast, explicitly war-related expressions like *enemy*, *war*, or *combat* were less common. These expressions are illustrated in the following excerpts: (1) *“potential struggles of older people”*; (2) *“[...] to be tied up, first feet, then hands, and finally your mind”*; (3) *“[...] situations where older adults are confronted with an unavoidable stressor [...]”*; (4) *“Anti-Aging Strategies”*; (5) *“What kills them is old age”*; (6) *“Old age scares me”*; (7) *“I am worried that I will lose my independence when I am old”*; (8) *“I am losing my physical independence as I get older”*. The word “struggle” appears in the data to describe the aging experience in example (1), while example (3) represents aging as unavoidable confrontation, similar to facing an aggressor. Examples (4) and (5) imply brutal physical aggression or the necessity to oppose it and fight against it to preserve health.

Such conceptual metaphors represent different sets of mappings. Firstly, ENGAGING IN THE BATTLE frames aging as an active process of a continuous effort to cope with the difficulties that accompany aging, it is realised with the collocations such as *be confronted with*, *struggle*, *take action*, *build resilience*. The metaphorical mapping OUTCOME OF THE BATTLE shifts the focus to the consequences of the battle, usually negative – *losing independence*, *being tied up* as seen in examples (2), (7) and (8). Within this framing, old age symbolizes defeat and the inability to confront life’s challenges, positioning the elderly as fighters. Collectively, these metaphors construct a dual perspective on aging: on one hand, the struggle to preserve vitality and personal agency; on the other, the inevitable progression toward decline and dependency. Moreover, examples (5) and (6) represent personification, in which old age is framed as an OPPONENT, ADVERSARY, or ENEMY who kills the population. Accordingly, old age is attributed with human-like qualities, embodying a hostile force that “kills” and is “scary”. Such framings emphasize the antagonistic relationship between individuals and the aging process, portraying old age as an external, threatening entity to be confronted or battled against.

Another violence-related metaphorical conceptualization BEING OLD IS DISASTROUS, BEING OLD IS RISKY portrays aging as full of challenges and problems. This conceptualization arises from the primary metaphor DIFFICULTIES ARE OPPONENTS (see e.g., Grady, 1997),

which links challenges and obstacles to confrontations with aggressors. These dangers are perceived as problems to be prevented, and their associated risks should be mitigated: e.g., (12) *“[...]the importance of antioxidants in the delaying of aging and prevention of diseases associated with aging [...]”*; (13) *“This review revealed that GB could be considered in the therapeutic and preventative methods for aging-associated conditions and the aging process.”*; (14) *“Older adults seeking community-based services, such as those offered at Sage, experience challenges accessing health and social services, and are at greater frailty risk.”*; (15) *“As people age the risk of dementia increases.”*

The examples above demonstrate the explicit use of risk-related vocabulary such as nouns *risk* or *challenge*, collocations *to prevent or delay aging*, *control aging*, *decrease risks of aging*, *to be at a risk*, *deteriorate with aging*, *preventative methods*, etc. Thus, the physical decline associated with aging is often conceptualised as a looming threat, emphasizing the risk of age-related diseases, including dementia. These metaphors portray aging as something that attacks the body or mind, requiring preventative care.

It is also quite common to encounter metaphorical expressions that draw from the domain of BURDEN. This conceptualization of old age explicitly frames the challenges of aging by metaphorically likening it to carrying a “heavy burden.” Such expressions emphasize the metaphorical weight of aging, illustrating the framing BEING OLD IS BEING A BURDEN, when older individuals are perceived as enduring the pressures associated with aging.

However, not only is old age metaphorically understood as a burden, but the elderly themselves are often conceptualized as a burden, due to retirement or health-related costs. The metaphorical conceptualization OLDER PEOPLE ARE A BURDEN reflects a societal perspective where older individuals are viewed not only as experiencing the challenges of aging but also as those who require an excessive amount of financial support and consume more healthcare services, which, in their turn, might strain national budgets, or medical infrastructure: e.g., (16) *“And when I think about this perhaps being my condition in older age, I don’t hope so, but yes, it would indeed be a big burden”*. This conceptualization usually derives from the culture which values productive segments of population and perceives the elderly as non-productive or non-contributors. As Stephen Katz writes, “the aging population [...] is projected as a monstrous entity set upon destroying welfare states and generational futures” (2014: 18): e.g., (17) *“[...] how older adults will burden the economy through increasing over-re-*

liance on health care systems, understood in terms of financial cost.”

Additionally, a number of excerpts in the corpus provide the conceptualisation of OLD AGE IS A LOSS METAPHOR, which is based on the similarity of losing some material possession. The domain of LOSS conveys the idea that the elderly lose various aspects of life, such as social connections (*loss of social contacts*), health (*age related loss of muscle mass and function; loss of functional health and mobility*), or even agency (*increasing dependency on others for help with everyday activities*). Individuals may experience a decline in these areas, depending on their level of involvement with society, family, or their own physical state, that is represented in the context with the words such as *the loss, to lose, (in)dependence, inclusion, exclusion, loneliness*: e.g., (18) “I see old age mainly as a time of loss.”

Another example highlights the consistent framing of the aging experience as akin to being imprisoned. In this conceptualization, older adults are positioned as prisoners, particularly in relation to physical limitations that constrain their freedom. Further examples illustrate a more elaborate instantiation of the metaphor OLD AGE IS A PRISON, where physical symptoms associated with aging are depicted as restricting personal freedom, isolating the individual, or limiting their ability to engage in everyday activities: e.g., (19) “This is not only physical, but I feel psychologically shackled by this heavy weight.”; (20) “Thirdly, negative outcomes are associated with social isolation of frail older people [...]”.

Furthermore, aging is often conceptualised as a JOURNEY. At the general level, this metaphor can be interpreted as a specific realisation of the conventional conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY that explains its motivation when aging is seen as travelling in time through the life cycles. The framing of aging experience as a journey is evident in the corpus data both in conventional expressions and in more elaborate metaphorical constructions. For example, in the following excerpts, the dynamic process of growing old is portrayed as *climbing a mountain, finishing at the peak*, all of which belong to the JOURNEY domain: e.g., (21) “old age” is perceived as a distant reality”; (22) “Being old is like climbing a mountain; there are unforeseen dangers, but you finish at the peak”; (23) “I realized how careful you have to be when reaching old age.”

The phrase “to reach old age” is among the most frequently used collocations that conceptualize old age as a destination, framing life as a journey with a defined endpoint, thereby providing the conceptual mapping OLD AGE IS DESTINATION. Examples (22) and (23) illustrate the source of this mapping, emphasizing

that caution is required while aging. Just as travelers must navigate obstacles to reach their destination safely, individuals are conceptualized as needing careful management to cope with the challenges and risks associated with later life. The specific implications of this framing vary according to the speaker: younger individuals tend to perceive old age as a distant endpoint, instantiated in the JOURNEY metaphor OLD AGE IS DISTANT, which captures the temporal and psychological distance they associate with growing old.

The metaphor illustrated in example (24) constructs the experience of aging in relation to diverse personal circumstances and social positions. Consequently, reaching old age is framed as arriving at a specific point, where certain “destinations” may become inaccessible or denied, highlighting issues of societal exclusion and the limitations imposed on older adults: e.g., (24) “Shifts in city culture meant a growing number of social and recreational areas surrounding the downtown area, and for many participants, the experiences of being older and unhoused meant rejection from those places.”

Additionally, the MOVEMENT domain is instantiated through the words such as “delay,” “slow,” or other references to the rate of aging. These terms suggest that the progression of aging can be slowed or accelerated, reinforcing the metaphor AGING AS A JOURNEY, in which the pace of the journey depends on individual circumstances and contextual factors: e.g., (25) *Different strategies have been suggested for healthy aging and for delaying or slowing aging*.

Quite similar considerations can be applied to metaphorical models that realise the aging scenario as a spatial movement or change of location. The conceptual metaphor AGING IS CHANGE OF LOCATION derives from the general level conceptual metaphor CHANGE OF STATE IS CHANGE OF LOCATION. The collocations used to instantiate this metaphor frequently feature verbs of movement, e.g., *move into one’s seventies, go into advanced age*, as well as derived nouns, e.g., *the transition into retirement and old age*. These expressions emphasize the dynamic and continuous nature of the aging process. As explained in Gerber et al. (2013: 96), metaphors of JOURNEY are closely linked to the metaphorical representation of dying. Death is conceptualized as the final destination in the journey of life. The source material demonstrates references to the DEATH domain, when younger adults explain their perceptions and understandings of old age: e.g., (26) “the fact that the more I age, I am just one step closer to death scares me [sic] a lot”; (27) “it is a bit depressing because one is getting closer to death.” The expressions *close to death, get closer to death, one step closer to death* metaphorically position old

age as a point near the final destination, emphasizing its proximity to the end of life's journey.

The ontological metaphor OLD AGE IS A PHYSICAL OBJECT is further elaborated as OLD AGE IS A FRAGILE OBJECT. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 25), perceiving events, ideas, and similar phenomena as entities or substances stems from human interaction with tangible objects. Such metaphors are among the most fundamental tools for making sense of human experience. The physical fragility that often accompanies old age can be seen as a "disastrous" reality. Frailty, slower reflexes, and decreased bone density can make older adults more susceptible to falls, accidents, and long-term injuries. Thus, old age is metaphorically conceptualized as a fragile object that requires careful handling: e.g., (28) "*Identification and assessment of frailty is a key feature of care for older adults living in the community.*"

Moreover, our analysis of the corpus data also revealed a number of metaphorical expressions with DECLINE as a SD, involving the realization of the metaphor OLD AGE IS MOVING DOWNWARD. This conceptual metaphor demonstrates the significance of spatial relations in perceiving abstract concepts; accordingly, ageing is framed as a downward movement or decline, which draws on Lakoff and Johnson's conceptual orientational metaphors LIFE IS UP, DEATH IS DOWN. This metaphorical construal compares aging to a process of deterioration, in which life is conceptualized as an upward trajectory from birth to middle age, followed by a downward motion that metaphorically represents death or the end of life: e.g., (29) "*Functional decline is common as people age, but the rate of individual decline varies.*"

The example above illustrates the complexity of metaphorical conceptualisation of old age, when mul-

iple source domains are combined to construct the negative experience of aging as declining process, in particular, MOVEMENT – with the idea of changing location or the rate of moving and DOWN – symbolizing movement downwards as the loss of vitality, energy, and health, reinforcing the association of aging with inevitable deterioration.

**Conclusions.** The paper provides insights into the metaphorical patterns associated with aging and old age. Our analysis reveals that authors in the selected data employ a wide range of metaphors to describe experiences of aging, including structural, orientational, and ontological metaphors. The use of metaphors varies considerably across source domains, reflecting different aspects of the aging experience. This suggests that there is no single dominant metaphor; rather, individuals draw on multiple metaphorical frameworks to articulate the complexity of their experiences, emotions, and perceptions. Nevertheless, the most prominent patterns include violence-related metaphors (portraying aging as a "battle," "fight," "prison," "problem," or "danger"), loss-related conceptualizations (emphasizing the series of losses that accompany old age), and journey-relat (representing aging as a "journey" or "movement in ed metaphors space").

While this study offers valuable insights into common metaphorical conceptualizations of old age, it does not capture the full range of potential metaphorical framings. Moreover, the conceptual metaphors examined here are primarily derived from institutional academic discourse within the Medical Humanities, which shapes societal perceptions of old age. Accordingly, further research is necessary to explore the broader spectrum of metaphorical representations, taking into account diverse social, historical, and cultural contexts.

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