

'Dirty Thoughts': Applying Cognitive Linguistics to Sexuality Education

In recent years, the field of cognitive linguistics has ventured out of the academy and into the applied settings of political discourse (Lakoff 2006; Lakoff et. al. 2004), language acquisition (Cook-Gumperz & Kyratzis 2001), and language pedagogy (Langacker 2001). This paper develops a further application for the field: political advocacy and public education. In this talk, we will use sexuality education as a case study to demonstrate how cognitive-linguistic methodologies can expand the lexicon of models available for understanding and communicating about specific contested political issues. Specifically, we show how entrenched models of concepts like VIRGINITY and DESIRE within the domain of SEXUALITY hinder full and productive understandings of sexuality and sexual development. We argue that the promotion of a pre-existing, less frequently attested model of sexuality can give salience to entailments that heighten social awareness and tolerance within this area.

The core data set for this work was compiled from natural language corpora and advocacy materials on sexuality education. Our corpus analysis confirms the existence of several metaphors that entail sexuality is separate from the self, such as DESIRE IS AN OPPONENT and DESIRE IS A CONTAMINANT, (e.g. *giving in to desire* and *dirty thoughts*). Results also revealed VIRGINITY IS A VALUABLE OBJECT that can be *guarded, protected, preserved, given away, and stolen*. These models and others identified have entailments that obscure the complex reality of sexuality. Sexuality isn't separable from the self: desire isn't an agent with its own goals and interests; sexuality doesn't "appear" and "disappear" at discrete moments of development; there is no actual resource lost at sexual debut.

A minority model—present in a small amount of English language data—emerged from analysis. In this model, SEXUALITY is partially understood through the concept of PERSONALITY. Evidence for this claim comes from a set of reasoning patterns we identified as well as specific language like *sexual characteristics*. We argue that increased salience of this minority model will reinforce entailments (e.g., complexity, development over time) that support advocates and educators seeking to promote healthier understandings of sexuality. The promotion of SEXUALITY as PERSONALITY relies on the hypothesis that one can strengthen a systematic cognitive correspondence between two domains by structuring language. To achieve this, we offer two strategies. The first is to use metaphors from discourse around personality when speaking about sexuality. This can be done by invoking metaphors such as PERSONALITY IS A MULTI-SIDED OBJECT and deliberately drawing from their source domains to discuss sexuality, as in: *human sexuality is multi-faceted, exploring different sides of her sexuality*. The second approach is the use of parallel constructions—taking language from the domain of personality and inserting it into descriptions of sexuality with phrases like *sexuality traits* and *sexual quirks*.

Finally, the research presented in this paper demonstrates growing opportunities for and in the field of cognitive linguistics. We will show that our methodology opens the door for collaboration between cognitive theorists and application-driven researchers by establishing mutually informative dialogue.

References

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