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Conceptual metaphors in *House M.D.*

Metafory konceptualne w serialu Dr House

The aim of the present paper is to analyse the conceptual metaphors in the language of medicine in the American television medical drama *House M.D.*

Słowa kluczowe: metafora konceptualna, medycyna, zdrowie, choroba
Key words: conceptual metaphor, medicine, health, disease

1. Introduction

The language of medicine is rife with metaphors. Whether we speak about health, disease, treatment or human body, we use a number of conceptual metaphors as proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1999). As they claim, “the most important thing to understand about conceptual metaphors is that they are used to reason with” (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 65). It is also acknowledged by specialists in medical profession who agree that the metaphors we use in our everyday language influence not just the we speak about health, illness and medicine in general, but also influence “our attitudes, moral beliefs, and actions relating to the physician-patient relationship and to the medicine generally” (Warren 1991: 39). For example, by using the metaphor MEDICINE IS WAR, we talk about doctors who fight with illness using their treatments as weapons, while patients are usually passive victims whose immune systems act as defence lines and who die if the enemy is not defeated (Hillmer 2007). In general, the metaphors that are commonly used in English to talk about medicine – or rather the so-called western approach to medicine – underline the view that the BODY IS A MACHINE consisting of many parts, which can break but can also be fixed or replaced, (Johnson 1987), that MEDICINE IS WAR, and that sometimes MEDICINE IS A DETECTIVE STORY where doctors-detectives solve cases and

look for the suspects which cause ailments (Hodgkin 1985). What is more, we often talk about diseases as if they were objects with an independent existence rather than processes (Hodgkin 1985, Mintz 1992, Rosenberg 2002).

Johnson discusses an alternative view of the human body observed in the research of Hans Selye on stress (1956, 1974). Since Selye treated stress as a general response of the whole organism to an external stressor, it does not just influence one body part – it influences the whole system. Thus, the *BODY IS A HOMEOSTATIC ORGANISM* metaphor emerges, under which every bodily response serves some general function, in the case of stress it would be a general adaptive response to any stressor, as “a self-generated way of maintaining balance within the organism” (Johnson 1987:132), which leads on to another metaphor *THE BODY IS A PURPOSEFUL ORGANISM*. Medical specialists notice that this and other alternative metaphors are present in other approaches to medicine, for example in the so-called complimentary medicine (Pritzker 2003, Stibbe 1998). However, even representatives of the western approach posit that alternative metaphors of medicine, health and illness would be beneficial for the whole medical world (Fuks 2009, Hodgkin 1985, Mintz 1992, Warren 1991).

The aim of the present paper is to analyse the conceptual metaphors in the language of medicine in the American television medical drama *House M.D.*, shown on the Fox network since 2004. So far six full seasons were produced (110 episodes), season seven is currently on air. On the one hand *House M.D.* is a typical representative of a medical drama, with a team of diagnosticians solving difficult and unusual cases, with some focus on the doctors' private lives; on the other, what makes it special and different from other shows of this kind is the main character, doctor Gregory House, played by Hugh Laurie. While medical drama doctors are usually presented as caring, altruistic and empathic, House is cynical, sarcastic and does not seem to care about his patients, and he attempts to avoid personal contact with most of them at all costs. On the other hand, House will go to any lengths to discover what is wrong with still another patient – for him, making a diagnosis is a fascinating challenge, an intellectual riddle, and the more difficult the case, the better. He will sacrifice his time, effort, relationships and sometimes even his health and life to solve the case – that is, to make the right diagnosis and, if possible, to cure the patient. That is why House is often compared to Sherlock Holmes (Abrams 2008, Matamas 2007).

The article will attempt to address the following problem: what metaphors of medicine, health and illness appear in *House M.D.*? Does the language used by the series doctors reveal conventional ways of conceptualizing medicine, or are there any unusual conceptualizations? We will focus on the conceptual metaphors in the first three seasons of *House M.D.* whose scripts (66 in total) were analysed for the needs of the present paper. The names of the main characters, House and his assistants – Cameron, Chase and Foreman, his friend, Wilson,

oncologist, and Cuddy, hospital administrator of the fictional Princeton-Plainsboro Teaching Hospital, where they all work, will be mentioned together with the quotes from the script.

2. Conceptual metaphors in *House M.D.*

The first metaphor the article will focus on is THE BODY IS A MACHINE metaphor, which, according to Johnson, has “a massive experiential structuring that involved values, interests, goals, practices and theorizing” (Johnson 1987: 130). Under the metaphor the body-machine consists of many parts serving various purposes, which can function well, malfunction or break down completely, and which can or cannot be fixed and restored to full order.

There are numerous instances of the BODY IS A MACHINE metaphor in *House M.D.* The brain functions as a control centre, which regulates other parts of the body (1, 2); one of its internal components is wiring (3, 4).

- (1) House: Respiration rate falls, and **the brain interprets** this as the body dying, so **it sends a pulse** to wake it up.
- (2) Foreman: Nothing good, **the brain’s losing control** of the body. **Can’t order** the eyes to focus, **regulate sleep** patterns or control muscle movements.
- (3) Chase: **The brain’s like a big jumble of wires**. MS strips them of the insulation.
- (4) House: In a CIPA patient. Obviously things are a little different in her upstairs **wiring**.

The body or different body parts may malfunction, break down and as a result stop functioning. In the medical language that is referred to as shutting down (5–10). It may also happen that a patient has a genetic problem (11, 12); thus, if we treat a person’s body as a machine produced in a factory, it is a result of the faulty manufacturing.

- (5) House: Our **bodies break down**, sometimes when we’re 90, sometimes before we’re even born, but it always happens.
- (6) Foreman: A lot of people don’t have **three organ systems shutting down!**
- (7) Foreman: Her **brain is shutting down** because of intercranial pressure.
- (8) Cameron: Emma’s jaundiced. Her **liver’s shutting down**.
- (9) Cuddy: You were right. You were all right. Now the mom’s **lungs are shutting down**.
- (10) House: So first she strokes, now her **kidneys are shutting down**. Why?
- (11) Wilson: What’s the theory here? **Faulty manufacturing? Everything’s falling apart**.
- (12) House: Our **kid’s immune-system has a factory defect**. It’s genetic.

A doctor works with a patient like a mechanic works on a machine; they may be able to repair the machine by fixing the faulty part(s) (13–15). In one of the episodes “fixing” applies to a fetus which is ill and is causing problems to its mother (16).

- (13) House: Her kidneys **are almost irreparable**.
- (14) Cuddy: The umbilical cord won't be cut. During surgery **your body will basically serve as the baby's heart-lung machine. We find what's wrong and we fix it.**
- (15) Chase: The good news is **Emma's heart is fixed**. The bad news is it's not her underlying problem. Her **kidneys are still failing**.
- (16) House: A few things can happen to a **fetus in distress** (...) The good news is, we **fix the fetus**, mom gets better.

Machines need energy to function well; when something is wrong, a new or changed source of energy may be needed. When a patient is ill, they need to be given medicines in order to begin to feel better, so they need to be started (17–18).

- (17) House: Yeah, got it. **Start her on steroids.**
- (18) Foreman: **I started him on** steroids and ancinthroid.

There are a few instances where doctors refer to specific kinds of machines, for example a computer, a bike and a fridge. Just like a computer can be rebooted, a patient can be shut down and restarted (19) or literally brought back to life and normal functioning (21). It can also function better when it is under care of a medical specialist, like a crappy bike under the care of a mechanic (20).

- (19) Wilson: The plan is basically to... **reboot your daughter. Like a computer. We shut her down** and restart her.
- (20) House: What if her heart is like **my bike? Runs like crap** when I'm by myself, but **take it to the mechanic and it runs great?**
- (21) House: She's a fridge with the power out. We start poking around inside, the vegetable goes bad.

A similar metaphor, which compares a human body to a well-functioning mechanical system, is THE BODY IS A FACTORY metaphor, where the body produces some substances, for example red cells (22–23).

- (22) Cameron: **The bone marrow will just go back to over producing blood cells**, she'll keep having strokes and we'll have to keep bleeding her, forever.
- (23) Foreman: Lack of oxygen **forces the body to over produce** red cells.

Another very productive metaphor treats medicine as war, or rather, treats diseases as warfare. In *House M.D.* we do not encounter instances of patients fighting with disease, which is typical of metaphors in medicine (Fuks 2009, Hodgkin 1985, Warren 1991), but that may be due to the case of doctors talking to doctors about what happens inside their patients' bodies rather than doctors talking to the patients. Hence the sides in the war are the viruses, bacteria and other diseases, and the patient's immune system; the disease attacks, strikes or hits the patient, and their immune system defends the whole body by attacking the enemy and fighting it off (24–32).

- (24) House: **The immune system wakes up and attacks the worm** and everything starts to swell, and that is very bad for the brain.
- (25) Wilson: **It attacked** other cells: your brain first, then your liver, kidneys... even the nerves that control your eyelids. That's called Lambert-Eaton syndrome, it told us the tumour was in the lungs.
- (26) House: It's peripheral. **Guillain-Barre syndrome attacks there**, not the brain.
- (27) Foreman: An infectious agent's molecular structure can resemble the spinal cord's. **When the immune system attacks the infection, it ends up attacking the spinal cords** as well.
- (28) House: His new HIV meds kicked his system out of a sound sleep. When it doesn't find an active infection, starts **attacking** the harmless remnants of **old infections**.
- (29) Wilson: The body recognized that infection, increase the white count and **send in the troops to start fighting and the initial infection would get caught in the cross-fire**.
- (30) Foreman: It doesn't matter. The radiation was the worst thing we could have done. We destroyed **the part of your body that was fighting it off**.
- (31) Cameron: MRSA is a bacteria that often infects hospital patients, the burns on your chest and arm exposed raw flesh that made **you a wide open target**.
- (32) Chase: Right, two incredibly rare diseases just happening **to strike** at once.

However, it may also happen that the body defence system (and its products antibodies) starts attacking itself, that is parts of its own body, which lies at the core of autoimmune diseases (33–40). In example (40) House also talks about antibiotics killing bacteria, which is a common way of talking about using medication.

- (33) FOREMAN: JRA is an autoimmune disease. **Her body is attacking itself**, causing inflammation in the joints, eyes and her heart.
- (34) Cameron: It's got to be autoimmune, something lymphoidic. **White blood cells are attacking her own body**.
- (35) House: Tumour. If she has cancer anywhere in her body, she could also have paraneoplastic syndrome which could be causing **antibodies to attack her brain**.

- (36) Cameron: Auto-immune diseases. His **body's own defences are attacking him**.
- (37) Rowan: What if his body worked so hard attacking the anthrax that it **started attacking** itself?
- (38) Cameron: There are molecular similarities between brain cells and tumour cells. Paraneoplastic Syndrome **causes the body's own antibodies to get thrown off track. They end up attacking the brain instead of the tumour.**
- (39) Chase: **Antibodies could be attacking** the nerve. Multifocal motoneuropathy.
- (40) House: The **antibiotics hit** the nerve strands, they **kill** the leprosy bacteria. (...) And as fascinating as our bodies are, they're also stupid. They produce antibodies to beat dead bacteria. And these aren't the polite antibodies, they're the **ones that won't sit still, kick** during naptimes. They **attack** his neural and fat cells, cause some inflammation and all the rest of his symptoms.

As House is often compared to Sherlock Holmes (Abrams 2008, Matamas 2007), it is not surprising that the series reveals numerous instances of a doctor being like a detective who solves cases, thus we deal with the MEDICINE IS A DETECTIVE STORY metaphor.

Every patient and their problem thus become a case to solve. In the process of differential diagnosis a group of doctors try to discover what has caused a patient's bad condition, just like a detective (or Holmes and Watson) tries to discover who has committed a crime, hence, potential sources of ill health are referred to as suspects (41–43). Symptoms that a patient displays become clues to the potential source of the bad condition (44).

- (41) HOUSE: Round **up the usual suspects**. Amyloidosis, sarcoidosis, hemochromatosis... Heck, go wild, do all the osis's.
- (42) House: The question is why. **Likely suspects?** Chase: Parathyroid adenoma. Cameron: Kidney problems.
- (43) House: Differential diagnosis, people: if it's not a tumour what are the **suspects?**
- (44) House: Chronic fatigue, sore throats, rashes, putrid discharge of the mouth, multiple abscesses in the brain, hearing loss and last but not least lower limb paralysis. He's certainly given us **plenty of clues**.

Diseases are compared to criminals, who have motives to commit a crime (45), may take time to wait to commit it (48), and finally to attack with a weapon and can then be caught in the act (47,49–50). Cameron is right to suggest that diseases do not have motives, so the metaphor is questioned here (Kövecses 2002). However, the other mappings reveal that a disease may not display symp-

toms at once (48, 49), but sometimes it is possible to see evidence of it developing (46, 47, 49). Moreover, it may happen that the bad condition of a patient is caused by two independent factors, like two medications, as in (50), which House calls “a crime syndicate”. However, sometimes it may happen that a symptom apparently points to a disease, but it is not connected with it at all, just like an innocent bystander who may be suspected of committing a crime (51).

- (45) Cameron: Diseases **don't have motives**.
 (46) Wilson: What if the tubular sclerosis is **guilty? It had the gun in its hand**.
 (47) House: All potentially treatable. Question is which. We need to **catch the little bastards in the act**. What's the largest organ?
 (48) House: Yah. It's much more likely that **whatever it is was cleverly waiting and hiding** until you guys were done testing.
 (49) House: Now, here's the thing about Acute **Intermittent Porphyria. It'll jump you in a dark alley, beat the crap out of you, leave you bleeding. But it leaves gloves, so no fingerprints**. Doesn't show up in blood tests, urine tests, nothing. Unless you **catch it red handed in the middle of an attack**.
 (50) House: Nothing explains everything. What if it's **a crime syndicate?** Let's say Ritalin and the fertility meds plotted a caper.
 (51) Wilson: It causes everything else. What if the fever is **the innocent bystander?**

Another similar metaphor is revealed in the example below (52), where solving a case is treated like solving a jigsaw puzzle, where every symptom is a puzzle piece.

- (52) House: **New puzzle piece**, always good news. What's the bad news?
 Foreman: **We've got 2 puzzle pieces from 2 different puzzles**.
 Foreman: What if there really are **two puzzles?**
 Cameron: You think she **had 2 unrelated rare conditions** in one week?

Another metaphor, not usually mentioned among common metaphors of medicine, treats a doctor like an explorer, who looks for a disease in the body of a patient, which is the unexplored land. This is not surprising, as an explorer's job is quite similar to that of a detective. Hence, the metaphor is a variant of the JOURNEY metaphor, where MEDICINE IS A VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY.

- (53) Emma: You put all your patients through this many tests or just the important ones?
 House: We wanted to explore **all the possibilities**.
 (54) Cuddy: It's not a surprising coincidence. Pregnant women can develop liver problems. If this is the case, we can actually do something here. Don't you guys think that's **worth exploring?**

- (55) Chase: If it were really a person and we had no other options, we'd do an **exploratory surgery**. Cut into his chest and have a look around.
- (56) Cuddy: In other words, she could be perfectly healthy but you're curious about someone who can't feel pain because you always feel pain so you want to **go exploring**.

As it was mentioned before, diseases are often treated as objects with an independent existence, which patients have.

- (57) House: If she has cancer anywhere in her body, she could also have paraneoplastic syndrome.
- (58) Chase: I think it'd help to know what she has before we start digging into her brain.

However, in *House M.D.* diseases are not treated just like objects with an independent existence; most of the time they are treated like animals or people. Even when doctors speak about bacteria or viruses, they speak about them as if they were a more developed form on the Great Chain of Being (Lakoff and Turner 1989): thus diseases and microbes of all kinds can be hunted, they eat brain cells, they run out of food, they sit at some place in the human body, and they travel inside the body (59–65).

- (59) House: Get up! We're going **hunting**.
- (60) House: (...) now it's back, and the spirochetes that cause syphilis are **eating away at your brain cells**.
- (61) Cuddy: Your hand is dying. The bacteria are **eating it**. When they **run out of food** there, they **go** somewhere else.
- (62) House: Will the guardian convince the disease to hold off **eating her brain** until we can get the legalities worked out?
- (63) House: Instead of Dan having a fever and a rash the virus travels to his **brain and hides** like a time bomb.
- (64) Foreman: In rare cases the fungi **travel up** the blood stream and into the brain causing a lesion or inflammation.
- (65) House: Pheochromocytoma sits on top of the adrenal gland, randomly **spits out** oodles of the stuff.

The language of *House M.D.* reveals even more interesting cases where diseases are treated as people, hence we deal with the personification DISEASES ARE PEOPLE. However, these personalised diseases indulge in very specific kinds of behaviour. When they attack a part of the body, they feast on it, have lunch, dessert, or a party.

- (66) House: Little bacteria cauliflowers clinging to his bowels. Except something they can't hold on. **They go swimming in his bloodstream.** Thursday, one breaks off, goes to his right hand. Black fingers, gangrene. Friday's child heads for the kidneys. We all know what Saturday's are all about. **Party with the left hand.** Also explains the fever.
- (67) House: Or a **bacteria lunching on his heart.** Or cardiac myopathy or some other very bad thing. He needs an EKG.
- (68) Chase: Get a sample of his CSF before the little **bugs that are now feasting on his brain move on to dessert.**

Personalised diseases display typical human behaviours, like shopping (69), moving in and getting married (70), building walls (71), having piercings (72), living in hospitable homes (74), but also typical human feelings, like anger (72) and love (74). All these expressions reveal what the doctors in *House M.D.* think about the diseases: sometimes bugs or tumors can grow in our bodies for a long time without giving any symptoms of the disease they cause, thus can be compared to people who live in a comfortable home and lead a "normal life" (69, 70, 73, 74). Due to our unreasonable behaviour we can help diseases develop, for example by taking too many antibiotics we become less immune to bugs which can then become even more aggressive or "angry" (72). A worm in our body can develop in a cyst-like closed structure, with a distinct membrane, as if it was surrounded by walls (71).

- (69) House: Those masses in your chest are not tumours. They're parasitic cysts from a bug called equinococosis. Touch a dead fox, they jump aboard, **they can hunker down for decades - growing, spawning, shopping, putting on play.**
- (70) House: Exactly. Creates a perfect world for fungus... **Moves in, gets married...**
- (71) House: **The worm builds a wall,** uses secretions to shut down the body's immune response and control fluid flow.
- (72) House: This is our fault. Doctors over-prescribing antibiotics. (...) **we bred these super bugs. They're our babies. Now they're all grown up and they've got body piercings and a lot of anger.**
- (73) House: **Worms love** thigh muscle.
- (74) Cameron: Could be auto immune, Sjogren's decreases salivary flow creates a **hospitable home for bacteria.**

Diseases are also referred to as different types of people depending on what kind of features or behaviour of the disease is being focused on; hence, bacteria are tourists travelling in the digestive system (75), bad characters which escape from one part of the body to another and colonizing the wounds there (76), and

a tumour is a bad guy with brains, an intelligent creature with a mind of its own, sending an army of terrorists, that is cells which are growing in some part of the body without giving any symptoms (77).

- (75) House: Bu you were taking antacids for your acid reflux, so that turns your digestive tract into a **pleasant scenic river for all those bacterial tourists.**
- (76) House: She had it and it passed. Those things **travel in packs. Most of them probably hiding out in her gallbladder. (...) We cut into her belly, bad boys escape. They swarm over, colonize the wounds** and- Kaplow!- vesicular rash.
- (77) House: Ok **the tumor is Al Qaeda. Big bad guy with brains.** We went in and wiped it out but it **had already sent out a splinter cell; a small team of low level terrorists quietly living** in some suburb of buffalo, **waiting to kill us all.**

Considering the MEDICINE IS A DETECTIVE STORY and MEDICINE IS WAR metaphors, it can be observed that diseases are personified there as well, they are either suspects or criminals, or soldiers fighting with our immune system and with doctors. Another example of personification can be observed in (78–79), where the possible causes of patients' bad condition are referred to as candidates, as if they were applying for the job, which, in fact, is true to a certain extent, as it is the job of a virus, bacteria or tumour to cause the disease.

- (78) Chase: Most **likely candidate** for throwing a clot is infection or cancer.
- (79) House: Nothing on the scan. I think it's her nerves messing with the temperature control. Amyloid, sarcoid, **there's a lot of candidates.** I want a biopsy.

3. Summary

The metaphorical language of medicine is supposed to make the notions of health, illness and treatment more tangible, more concrete, more comprehensible to laymen. What causes diseases and how they are treated is clear to doctors but it does not have to be so clear to their patients. However, it cannot be forgotten that all the examples in the present paper come from a television show, which has to be made comprehensible to viewers; even if it does use a lot of medical terminology, it has to be presented to the viewers in an attractive and imaginative way, otherwise they might be discouraged from watching something they are not able to follow. As it is, the series attracts massive audiences wherever it is shown (so far in 66 countries, including Poland).

Another important fact which needs to be mentioned is the fact that the vast majority of the metaphorical language is produced by House, who often has to

explain his way of thinking and solving problems to the other characters of the show. The way he speaks is particularly rich in colourful and picturesque descriptions and explanations. The examples selected for the needs of the present paper have been analysed as conceptual metaphors as proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1999), although Fauconnier and Turner suggest (Fauconnier and Turner 2008) that in fact all conceptual metaphors have to be analysed as mental constructions involving many spaces and many mappings, that is as blends (Fauconnier and Turner 1996, 1998, 2002). The main interest of the present paper was not to analyse the conceptual networks in detail, but rather have a more general view on the nature of commonly used, conventionalised metaphors in medicine. Blends in *House M.D.* are the subject of our further research (Cichmińska and Topolewska, forthcoming).

To sum up, as it can be noticed from the analysis of the examples, doctors in *House M.D.* use a variety of conceptual metaphors to talk about the human body, disease, diagnosis and treatment. The most prominent of those are the BODY IS A MACHINE, DISEASE IS AN OBJECT/PERSON, MEDICINE IS WAR and MEDICINE IS A DETECTIVE STORY metaphors, which are quite common in the language of medicine. Some metaphorical expressions used in the show are imaginative and not as conventionalised as others, for example treating disease as intelligent human beings, Al Qaeda or a crime syndicate, but they still represent the metaphors deeply entrenched in English.

It must also be noticed that no examples of the BODY IS A HOMEOSTATIC ORGANISM metaphor were found during the analysis of the series scripts. This would prove the point made by the medical specialists mentioned above (cf. Introduction) that in the western approach to medicine the dominant metaphor is the BODY IS A MACHINE and also MEDICINE IS WAR. However, it must also be noticed that the main character of *House M.D.* is a diagnostician, a doctor who is a genius at uncovering the nature of the ill health of a patient, rather than a general practitioner or a nurse. It must seem obvious that House and his team of assistants will focus on the symptoms, the diagnosis and the appropriate treatment rather than everyday well-being of a patient, especially considering the fact that diagnosis has always played a very important role in medicine (Rosenberg 2002). On the other hand, this particular focus means that where the doctor-soldier tries to defeat the enemy, disease, the “reified disease becomes the object of the physician’s attention (...) the most important effect of this framing of medicine is the eradication of the patient’s voice from the narrative of illness” (Fuks 2009,1). Hence it seems that *House M.D.*, as entertaining, attractive, or even educational as it may be, is not a good source of alternative metaphors of medicine which representatives of the medical profession are calling for (Fuks 2009, Hodgkin 1992, Mintz 1992, Pritzker 2003, Warren 1991).

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Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest analiza metafor konceptualnych w amerykańskim serialu telewizyjnym *Dr House*. Artykuł zajmuje się dwoma zagadnieniami: po pierwsze, jakie metafory medycyny, zdrowia, choroby i leczenia są obecne w języku używanym przez lekarzy serialu, i po drugie, do jakiego stopnia metafory te są powszechnie używane w języku medycyny i w języku angielskim w ogóle.