
Making Social “Diseases” : A Pun or a Poisoned Word?

SOONHEE FRAYSSE-KIM

ABSTRACT

The Korean noun *byong* (disease)* has been usually used as the head in endocentric compounds (e.g. *pibu-byong*: skin disease) in lexicalized medical terms. On the other hand, one can easily observe in today's Korean society, a wild usage of figurative illness terms neologized with the word *byong* (disease), diagnosing rashly a certain social aspect, attitude, idea, etc. as an “illness”. Some of those diagnosis seem to be relevant like ‘hurry hurry disease’, metaphorizing a characteristic of Korean society where everybody is in a hurry. Nevertheless, an expression such as ‘princess disease’ turns out to be a gender discriminative thus politically incorrect word. Based upon principles of cognitive linguistics, language pragmatics and critical metaphor analysis, this paper investigates the actual phenomenon of “linguistic diagnosis” to show how every social “anomaly” can be identified by its proper disease name and how this linguistic practice can function as an easy means of social stigmatization in Korean Society. The study brings up another example of ‘language serving social inequality’. Taking corpus linguistic metaphor study as a methodological framework, the study was carried out on the basis of a corpus (a part of National Corpus of Korean Language) of 7,500,000 words, web search results and newspaper articles published during 2010.

Key words: Korean society, social diseases, pun

INTRODUCTION

The DISEASE metaphors (metaphorical expressions related to health and illness) are based on one of the most fundamental conceptual dichotomies in human values: health, life and good versus sickness, death and bad. It appears to be universal that the DISEASE metaphors are applied to the depiction of social problems often with an ideological purpose in order to maintain the socio-political status quo. On the other hand, in Korean texts a good number of figurative illnesses have been purposely compounded with the word ‘disease’ and are widely used metaphorically, conceptualizing a certain social aspect as an illness. Some of those “diagnoses” seem to be relevant, like ‘hurry-hurry disease’, metaphorizing a characteristic of Korean society where everybody is in a hurry. Nevertheless, frequent usage of an expression such as ‘princess disease’ aiming at criticizing a proud woman of any kind, suggests that women are still vulnerable to social criticism in modern Korean society.

The methodological framework of this paper is corpus linguistic metaphor study (Deignan, 2005). Using a large computerized corpus of naturally occurring citations of the words, I have paid attention to fre-

quently occurring typical language patterns. As Alice Deignan pointed out, in the case of metaphor studies, these patterns may imply conventionalized metaphors that might often go unnoticed in everyday life. The corpus used in this study is of 7.5 million words, a part of National Corpus of Korean Language which is open to public on the website*.

In the following sections, at first I explore the existing studies on DISEASE metaphors, then I trace the conventional imagery related to the Korean noun *byong* (disease) and investigate the formation and usage of some metaphorical expressions related to diseases.

CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR OF DISEASE METAPHORS

In the cognitive linguistic view (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), a metaphor is a cognitive vehicle that takes form in and by physical experiences. Through metaphorical concepts we can gain an understanding of abstract/intangible notions. At the same time our thoughts and actions are molded by this metaphorical conceptual system. In this theoretical framework the following conceptual metaphors are realized and they are showing what we understand and experience: GOOD IS UP; BAD IS DOWN and also HEALTH AND LIFE ARE UP and SICKNESS AND DEATH ARE DOWN. These metaphorical concepts, by extension, yield the ‘related concepts’ (Kövecses, 2010, p. 113) HEALTH IS GOOD; SICKNESS IS BAD.

If SICKNESS IS BAD is a conceptual representation of primarily a physical state, in the DISEASE metaphors, a shift of sense occurs where physical sickness becomes a moral matter. In many DISEASE metaphors, the disease is given a ‘moralistic’ meaning (Sontag, 2002, p. 59) with evaluative characteristics, and seen as ‘an enemy to be defeated’ (Todoli, 2007, p. 53). Naturally enough, DISEASE metaphors are easily applied to convey a value judgment and moreover an ideological purpose (Fairclough, 1982).

DISEASE METAPHORS IN LANGUAGE USE

Sontag describes the way the ‘master illness’ becomes a metaphor and how the metaphorized disease is used to impose a ‘socially morally wrong’ feeling on the others. She says that in modern political discourse, the disease metaphors are often applied with a ‘punitive notion of disease’ so that the object would be seen as something to be punished. Such was a case when Hitler compared the Jews to ‘a racial tuberculosis among the nation’ (Sontag, *ibid*, pp. 57–81). Musolff observed that in the body-state metaphors in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, where the image of the state (*res publica*) is described as a human body, the body analogy was not used as a classificatory schema but as an argumentation warrant for maintaining the well-being of the commonwealth, in which body/illness metaphor can function as a warning (Musolff, 2009, p. 236). Even in a small scale social conflict such as a confrontation between residents and authorities for an urban plan, a body/social metaphor like ‘delicate urban surgery’ functions as ‘a powerful device’ for ‘masking reality’ in persuasion of public opinion for reshaping a city district (Todoli, 2007, p. 54). Fairclough (1982, p. 100) pointed out that ‘the ideological significance of disease metaphors is that they tend to take the dominant interest to be the interest of society’ and that the existent state of society is referred to as a ‘healthy’ situation. Therefore any movement of non-dominant interest is considered as a threat to the health of society. In the same vein, Chilton (1996, p. 145) describes how DISEASE metaphors were employed in the domain of international relations where West and East viewed (treated) each other as the ‘mentally sick’ or the ‘physically sick’ “other”, against the ‘healthy’ “us” during the Cold War era.

As we see, DISEASE metaphors function in political discourse in order to present a particular interpretation of a situation or event with an ideological purpose. This ideological character of DISEASE meta-

* National Corpus of Korean Language is available at <http://www.sejong.or.kr>

phors grows stronger with the inherent ideological nature of the metaphor: highlighting some aspects of the topic and hiding others (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 10). Lakoff and Johnson have demonstrated how the war metaphor used by American President Carter, at the moment of energy crisis highlighted the "hard energy path" focusing on how to get enough of fossil energy. This led to military defense, political conflict, economic hardship, environmental destruction, etc. while the "soft energy path" such as solar wind hydroelectric power development, which needs neither geopolitical conflict nor environmental destruction, has been hidden. Therefore, through the metaphors, is presented only a partial view on a given social or political situation. Moreover, through metaphors, people tend to get a quick understanding of a new idea as a whole without pondering, thus they often can get an over-simplified and distorted idea (Deignan, 2005, p. 23). The ideological effect of DISEASE metaphors based on simplification and hiding/highlighting features of metaphors would be maximized in the case of linguistic diagnosis phenomenon in Korea, where a figurative disease name itself can indicate a certain social feature as an illness.

THE CONVENTIONAL IMAGERY OF *BYONG* (DISEASE) IN THE KOREAN MIND

New words arise 'to plug lexical gaps, to give a label and a name to new concepts, new experiences, new objects' (Goatly, 1997, p. 92). They mostly appear by adapting existing lexemes either through a process of semantic change (e.g., a new use of an old word) or through various mechanisms of word formation (e.g., compounding). As a well known example, the word *web*, with the coming of the computer era, has worn another layer of meaning, yet its new meaning (connection between different computers across the world) can stand thanks to its existing meaning (spider-web), which serves as a source imagery of the word's new meaning (Deignan, 2005, p. 25). Or a compound, such as *sponge cake*, the coinage that took place by metaphorical image transfer (a cake looks like a sponge) (Goatly, 1997, p. 93). In both cases, the new meaning of the word is created by 'extension or transfer of the reference of an existing word-form' (Goatly, 1997, p. 149), which is one of the important functions of metaphors in creating new words. However in an endocentric compound like *sponge cake*, a head component (*cake*) contains the basic meaning of the whole compound, therefore the *cake* character restricts the whole meaning in the lexical unit of *sponge cake*. It should be pointed out that in the case of the Korean compounding [noun + *byong* (disease)] of metaphorical diseases, no matter what word comes in the noun's place, the derived forms are bound by the disease character, i.e. the conventional concept of *byong* (disease) functions as an automatic source for all topics introduced by nouns. For instance a metaphorical disease "gamble-disease" highlights, at once, gambling as a disease and a gambler as a sick person.

Now I shall introduce one of the conventional imagery of disease widely shared among the Korean linguistic community. The corpus data showed that among 685 occurrences of *byong*, the most frequent collocation form (10%) is *byong e geolida* (be caught by a disease: get ill). The Korean verb *geolida* has several dictionary meanings including "get ill". It is generally used in passive form, providing a common imagery in which a passive animate or inanimate subject is (more or less unluckily) caught by something (more or less unexpectedly), standing in the way, interrupting its movement (e.g., *gwmul e geolida*: caught by a fishingnet, *beop e geolida*: caught by the law).

What of interest is, as Table 1 shows, that among various verbs literally/metaphorically expressing the meaning of "getting ill", this figurative "be caught" expression is markedly more frequent than any other expression. I would say that the expression of "being caught by a disease" is originally metaphorical and now conventionalized and lexicalized. Therefore the idea of "being caught or entrapped by the disease" is one of salient or typical image schemas which are underlying the Korean mind in the interpretation of the experience of getting ill.

In compounds, *byong* is added almost like a suffix to yield a medical/metaphorical disease name. Apart

Table 1. Verbs to express “get ill”

Function of <i>byong</i>	subject				object	Agent
Verb	<i>nada</i>	<i>saingida</i>	<i>dwlda</i>	<i>chazaoda</i>	<i>eotta</i>	<i>geolida</i>
Frequency	18	14	15	5	17	67
Literal sense	occur, spring Disease occurs from inside (of one's body)		enter Disease enters (one's body) from the outside	visit Disease visits one	receive One received disease	be caught One is caught by disease

from medical terms like *simjang-byong* (heart disease), if one suffers lower-back pain, it is simply called a lower-back-*byong*. Even for a new disease like SARS, people tend to call it *sas-byong* (SARS disease). There are three basic types of compounds: (1) lexicalized medical terms (e.g., *num* (eye) *byong* (disease): eye related diseases), (2) non-lexicalized medical terms (e.g., *higi* (rareness) *byong*: a rare disease) (3) metaphorical illness. (e.g., *gongju* (princess) *byong*: princess disease). Among 97 compounds cited in the corpus, 40 are medical terms (26 types) and 57 (33 types) are metaphorical. It suggests that compounding with *byong* is more frequent in the domain of social diagnosis than medical usage.

Table 2 shows some vocabulary related to metaphorical diseases with an approximate summary of the symptoms and also the total number of hits (as of January 2011) of each word on Google and Yahoo in order to infer its popularity of usage. As Table 2 shows, the linguistic diagnoses have various targets (habit, attitude, behavior and idea) and a wide range of contexts (individual, group, society and era). The symptom can also be evaluated from “light” to “heavy” (e.g., “he shows light symptoms of Prince Disease”). Although these social diseases can be termed syndromes (*junhugun*), the corpus data shows an apparent separation in language use between *byong* (disease) and *junhugun* (syndrome), the latter, as far as the corpus data shows, being almost exclusively used in the medical sense. It means that for these metaphorical diseases, the metaphor theme is purposely focused on the quality of the disease: if a certain social behavior is called *soso-byong*, (1) this behavior is not seen as a mere social phenomenon, (2) public perception of the behavior is pre-conditioned by the negative evaluation of “disease”, (3) according to the logic of the SICKNESS IS BAD, this behavior is seen as (morally) wrong, (4) according to the conventional imagery of “caught/entrapped by disease”, the “patient”, an individual or a social group, is a prisoner by its own fault. By all means, the term predisposes to emphasize a social behavior as “problematic” and to produce oversimplified prejudice towards the behavior in question.

If we assume that the number of hits from a web search engine of a word mirrors the trendiness of that word, as Table 2 shows, “red disease” and “princess disease” are quite “fashionable” expressions in nowadays Korean society. As an ideologically divided country, anti-North Korea ideas, the so called “red complex” continues to be a very important social issue that is represented by the high number of hits. If “red disease” is dealing with political ideology, “princess disease” aims to criticize proud women of any sort. With its version for married women, “queen disease”, the expression has twice as many hits (thus more used) than its respective term for male “prince disease” (also it should be noticed that there is no “king disease”). The fact simply suggests that in Korean society women are more vulnerable to social criticism than men, to the extent that, as shows the following, even a very high positioned female politician is not spared this ‘linguistic oppression’ (Mey, 2001, p. 313).

Table 2. Some examples of metaphorical diseases

Name of disease	Symptom	number of hits
<i>gongju-byong</i> (princess disease)	Girl or non-married woman who acts as if she is a princess	1,165,000
<i>wangbi-byong</i> (queen disease)	Princess disease for married woman	140,300
<i>wanja-byong</i> (prince disease)	Boy who acts as if he is a prince	732,000
<i>ilryu-byong</i> (1 st class disease)	People who value only top class educational institutions	19,280
<i>hanguk-byong</i> (Korea disease)	Every kind of social aspect which might cause a negative effect on national development	126,300
<i>b'algaengi-byong</i> (red-disease)	People who show pro North Korea leanings	3,680,000
<i>hyondai-byong</i> (modern-disease)	Every kind of social phenomenon or (medical) disease caused by modern civilization	355,000

A CASE OF LINGUISTIC DIAGNOSIS: PRINCESS DISEASE

Usage of the expression *gongju-byong* is ubiquitous in daily life. One can read or hear it easily even through the media. Here are some examples.

A girl asks her boy friend “How do I look today?” The boyfriend says: “Oh! You are in severe *gongju-byong!*” (from a TV gag show)

“The patients of *gongju-byong*, are often, even in reality, mistakenly see themselves as a queen or a princess in a TV drama. The symptom becomes severe when it comes to famous women...” (from one of a journal team blogs).

“Getting *gongju-byong*? She published her picture in which she puts on makeup looking at her reflection in her smart phone” (from an entertainment article of a journal).

If we could say that in the above examples the term is used in direct or blunt way, in the following context the term is used in a rather skillful, if not cunning way.

An eminent columnist wrote a newspaper article criticizing the recent political activities of a female politician who was one of the leading presidential candidates then. The column is titled: “**Ms. Park, *gongju-ron***”

Ron means a theory or an argument or a view. This word is often used almost like a suffix (just like the case of *byong* (disease)), “*yeoseong-ron*” (women-theory: a view of women), “*eoneo-ron*” (language-theory: a theory on the language), etc.

Technically speaking, by the title *gongju-ron* the author suggests that he is exposing his view on Ms Park’s behavior or background, in which some princess-like particularities can be found (actually the woman is a daughter of a former charismatic president and she is taking up her father’s political torch). In spite of the expressional/phonological detour (*ron* instead of *byong*), the accessibility of the collocation of the more familiar expression *gongju-byong* is not reduced and allows a quick shift of imagery from “princess-

theory” to “princess-disease”, even before the reader reaches the text that implicitly demonstrates how Ms. Park indeed acts like a princess. The author’s intention might be on pointing out the wrong-doing of the candidate and suggesting an alternate line of conduct, but the title has such a strong effect that it itself already produced ‘the objects of knowledge’ of the discourse (Goatly, 2007, p. 26): the candidate may be an abnormal person, and is therefore inappropriate as a presidential figure.

The work of a columnist is to express his/her own political point of view, but if he/she tries to support his/her political view with the manipulation of a term that is only a trendy demagogic male-chauvinistic expression, one may argue that he/she potentially undermines his/her credibility.

CONCLUSION

In this study I have observed the phenomenon of linguistic diagnosis through metaphorical diseases in Korean texts. By the easy coinage with quasi suffixal usage of *byong* (disease), people tend to call, like a pun, any kind of “undesirable” social behavior/aspect or simply “other’s” opinions an illness. Easy coinage leads careless usage.

One of the consequences of this pragmatic simplicity is that the verbal violence is setting into daily conversational life and also it becomes very easy to propagate social division.

NOTE

* The Korean noun *byong* means an illness, a sickness, a disease. The strict sense of these three words should be different but in this study, I shall use these words without distinction.

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