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**The Cancer Card: Metaphor, intimacy and humor  
in online interactions about the experience of cancer**  
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*Abstract*

Employing a dynamic system approach, this chapter investigates the use of one particular metaphor—the ‘cancer card’—on an online forum dedicated to cancer. Far from being a common Card Game metaphor with a stable source-target mapping, the metaphor is collaboratively developed (i.e. used, re-used, adapted) to express the idea that patients can use their illness to their advantage in a variety of situations, while also reflecting a broader tendency to employ humor as a strategy for coping with adversity. An analysis of all 106 instances of ‘(cancer) card(s)’ on one of the threads of the forum shows that, though related to English expressions like ‘play the [...] card’ and to conventional conceptual metaphors like LIFE IS A GAME, its use is specific to the interactions among the members of this online community. Our analysis of the ‘cancer card’ as a group-specific *metaphoreme* (Cameron & Deignan 2006) emphasizes that multiple interacting factors must be considered to account for such rich and complex phenomena as the use of metaphors in online interactions.

*Key words*

dynamic systems, metaphoreme, humor, online interactions, cancer

## 1. Introduction

Consider the following extract, from a UK-based online forum for people with cancer:<sup>2</sup>

- (1) I am sorry, but I do have to report a Failed cancer card incident: (HoneyBee, date="2011-08-22 22:43:00")

The writer goes on to relate a conversation with her brother in which she tried to use her cancer as an excuse to get him to make her a cup of coffee, but without success. Even without further contextualization, it is likely to be clear that the noun ‘card’ is used metaphorically to refer to the writer’s attempt to get her own way by mentioning that she has cancer. The use and interpretation of this metaphor can be explained in part with reference to conventional conceptual and linguistic metaphors, such as LIFE IS PLAYING A GAME (Ching 1993) and the metaphorical idiom ‘play the [...] card’, where X tends to be a noun referring to a sensitive characteristic such as ‘race’ or ‘gender’, i.e. something that people do not want to be seen to be insensitive about. However, these explanations do not fully account for the idiosyncratic way in which the metaphorical expression ‘card’ is used in the extract, and for the humorous effects to which it contributes. Additional explanations are necessary, involving a number of other factors, such as the nature of the particular online forum thread in which the utterance occurred, the relationships among the contributors to that thread, the status of this particular

writer within the group of contributors, and previous uses of ‘(cancer) card’ by that writer and other contributors to the thread.

In this chapter we analyze this dynamic use and development of the ‘(cancer) card’ metaphor on one particular online forum thread and reflect on why contributors might use this metaphor in the ways that they do. The thread is hosted within the open community forum of a UK-based cancer charity and is entitled ‘For those with a warped sense of humour WARNING- no punches pulled here’ (henceforth ‘Warped’). The thread, in the 13 months of contributions we downloaded (2011-12), includes over half a million words and 106 occurrences of ‘(cancer) card’. We show how the creative and humorous ways in which this metaphor is collaboratively developed by contributors to the thread can only be adequately explained in terms of the interaction of multiple factors, from conventional conceptual metaphors that may be shared by all speakers of English to the local interpersonal goals of individual contributors interacting on the particular forum on a particular day about a particular topic. We propose that this interaction of factors in metaphor use is best accounted for within the dynamic systems approach proposed by Gibbs, Cameron and Deignan (e.g. Cameron & Deignan 2006; Gibbs 2017; Gibbs & Cameron 2008). From this theoretical perspective, the use of the ‘(cancer) card’ metaphor in our data can broadly be captured by the notion of *metaphoreme*, defined as “a bundle of stabilized but flexible word-meaning links that incorporate particular affective and pragmatic values with particular lexico-grammatical forms and cultural preferences, and seem to work as emergent attractors in the dynamics of speech community talk” (Gibbs & Cameron 2008: 73).

Metaphoremes may be observed at the level of a whole speech community (e.g. the metaphorical use of the noun ‘baggage’ in English), or at the level of specific discourse communities (e.g. the use of ‘lollipop trees’ to describe a particular way of drawing trees in a primary school class) (cf. Cameron & Deignan 2006; Deignan et al. 2013). In this chapter we suggest that the notion of metaphoreme is particularly useful when accounting for the latter phenomenon.

## **2. The dynamics of communication, metaphor and humor**

Human communication is a highly complex and coordinated enterprise. Acknowledgements of its complexity underlie the increasing number of studies that try to combine analysis of multiple modalities and those that minimally take into consideration, but increasingly also start from, various aspects of context broadly defined, including physical, cognitive, affective, interpersonal, institutional, socio-cultural and historical factors. All of these different aspects of context are seamlessly coordinated not just by an individual speaker, but also between different interlocutors (Dale 2015).

The dynamic systems approach aims to account for how this coordination happens (e.g. Gibbs & Van Orden 2012), emphasizing that the whole complexity of communication cannot be accounted for by considering a single factor on its own, or even the combination of a small subset of factors (cf. *ibid.*). Although this approach is still in its infancy in terms of operationalization especially at the discourse level (Dale 2015), dynamic systems are also being evoked to understand variation, patterns and relationships in smaller units or sub-components of discourse, such as the ways in which metaphor use develops and adapts in communication (e.g. Cameron et al. 2010; Gibbs & Cameron 2008).

Gibbs and Cameron (*ibid.*) propose a variety of factors (bodily, cognitive, linguistic, social, cultural) that may influence “metaphor performance” in interaction, i.e. affect how

people employ certain words and phrases metaphorically. Among these are: (i) “enduring metaphorical concepts”, including conventional conceptual metaphors; (ii) “previously understood metaphorical utterances”, i.e. what has been said or written before; (iii) “body movements and gesture”; (iv) “gender and occupation”—which may be generalizable to ‘who we are in the world’; (v) the negotiation of intimacy and social distance between interlocutors; (vi) “conventional talk in specific socio-cultural groups”, or “discourse communities” (Deignan et al. 2013); (vii) “specific language and culture”. Gibbs (2017) also mentions a variety of discourse-level goals, including (i) taking into account previous non-metaphorical utterances, (ii) coordinating with others in the moment, (iii) mitigating incompatibility between expectations and what occurred, and (iv) potentially (re-)establishing some equilibrium with others in context. However, the point of this approach to metaphor (and indeed to communication more broadly), at least for now, is not to list all the possible factors that influence its use, but to recognize and begin to take account of the fact that metaphor use is always and continually shaped by a potentially infinite number of factors.

As a result, the dynamic systems approach is able to integrate into a coherent whole multiple theoretical views of metaphor, including cognitive approaches with discourse-based approaches (*ibid.*). Conceptual metaphor, for example, can be recognized as one influencer (or “basin of attraction”) of metaphor use in a given interaction, alongside previous instances of a metaphor in the same interaction and other uses of the same expression within the relevant discourse community. Furthermore, it is acknowledged that in addition to the “downwards force” of conceptual metaphors and cultural norms, metaphor use is also influenced by “upwards” forces from the individuals involved and their goals in particular interactions, in a process of “reciprocal causality” (Gibbs & Cameron 2008). In the case of Warped, the main goal of the interactions is implied in the title of the thread and outlined in the first post: coping ‘by being irreverent and silly and able to laugh at all the bad stuff’. Individual contributors explicitly orient to this purpose and the humorous frame (Coates 2007; Kotthoff 2006) in their posts (ex 2, 3). We will show that the goal of coping by means of humor is one of the key upwards forces affecting the use of the ‘(cancer) card’ metaphor.

- (2) so I hope i've passed the warped test and can join you haha. (Sue2, date="2011-09-16 11:20:00")
- (3) don't say we didn't warn you about the warped humour. (HoneyBee, date="2011-08-01 09:06:00")

We take a broad view of humor as mental and verbal play “involving a lighthearted, non-serious attitude toward ideas and events” (Martin 2007: 1). However, our data more specifically displays examples of “conversational” humor, where humor is “relevantly interwoven into conversations” (Dynel 2011b: 4). The concept applies equally even when conversations are asynchronous and computer-mediated (Dynel 2011a), but a key element is that the humor is always co-constructed by participants reacting to each other (Coates 2007).

While research specifically on metaphor and humor is sparse (Dynel 2009), most scholars who do investigate both phenomena point out that humor and metaphor have several things in common. Firstly, they both combine two disparate ideas or concepts to create meanings and effects, such as new understanding or laughter, at least in the case of humor based on incongruity (e.g. Attardo 1994; Ritchie 2013). Secondly, both are seen as multifunctional and are attributed overlapping social and discourse functions, particularly in relation to group cohesion and intimacy. Conversational humor, for example, as a collaborative enterprise, is seen as both signaling and contributing to group bonding (Dynel 2011a), solidarity and intimacy through the ‘play frame’ (Coates 2007; Hampes 1992; see also

Jefferson et al. 1987). Metaphor use can also have these effects. Goatly (1997), for example, includes intimacy as one of the main functions of metaphor. A number of studies have indeed found that metaphor use in conversation is perceived as signaling closeness or intimacy between the interlocutors (Bowes & Katz 2015; Horton 2007), especially when the metaphors are creative (Horton 2013). Additionally, metaphoremes also help to delineate and thereby bind discourse communities.

Specifically in the context of illness, humor has another important function. It is recognized as facilitating tension release, making it easier to conduct difficult or embarrassing conversations and to cope with adversity or serious illness (Chapple & Ziebland 2004; Demjén 2016; Heath & Blonder 2003). The uses of '(cancer) card' on Warped are manifestations of the humor that contributes to this coping function.

Besides the overlap between the phenomena of humor and metaphor described above, another similarity between them is the way in which they occur in discourse and interaction: both can be seen as developing dynamically. In discussing conversational humor, Norrick (2003: 1338) talks about "the flexibility and protean character of conversational joking [...] joke punchlines turn into wisecracks, witty repartees grow into anecdotes, anecdotes develop into jokes, and so on" (see also Coates 2007). The dynamic systems view of communication makes much the same point about metaphor.

While in this chapter we cannot claim to account for all or even most of the bodily, cognitive, linguistic, social, and cultural forces influencing the use of '(cancer) card', we can acknowledge the vast array of possible factors, and focus specifically on the interactions between conceptual, interpersonal, intertextual, topical and discourse-goal factors. In this way, we attempt to map systematically how stability and variation in the use of '(cancer) card' emerge from and shape the topic of Warped, the roles and relationships of the particular individuals involved, the sequencing of posts, and contributors' desire to stay true to the humorous mission of the thread. In particular, we will structure our analysis around one key transition point in the thread, a so-called "perturbation" (Gibbs & Cameron 2008), and discuss how '(cancer) card' is used humorously before and after this point.

### 3. The Data

Warped was one of the longest threads on the host forum: Spanning thirteen months from the years 2011-12, the thread exhibits 106 occurrences of '(cancer) card' in a total of 530,055 words. It consists of 2,544 posts by 68 different individuals, and 90 percent of the content is contributed by people who describe themselves as having cancer (vs. people who care for someone with cancer).

Research on online interactions among people with different medical conditions has shown how online fora such as the one of which Warped is part provide valuable spaces in which people share information, validate one another's illness experience, support one another, form strong bonds of intimacy and companionship, and empower oneself and others (e.g. Allen et al. 2016; Prestin & Chou 2014). However, in contrast with other threads on the forum and patient fora more generally, the primary function of Warped is not the exchange of information and experiences on the disease and treatment options (see Armstrong et al. 2012). Instead, it provides a designated space for verbal play as a way of coping with cancer, as outlined in its first post:

- (4) we need a place to say what we need to say without worrying about offending people so you have been warned!!!! This is for those of us who cope by being irreverent and silly and able to laugh at all the bad stuff. (HoneyBee, date="2011-07-24 13:38:00")

The contributors to Warped posted with relative regularity, touching on everyday topics like their pets, Jehovah's witnesses at the door, gardening, needing to buy new clothes, their jobs and annoying colleagues, getting drunk, etc. They also discuss aspects of their lives related to their illness: things that 'used to' be different, how people react to their cancer, physical consequences of cancer and cancer treatment. All of this is done in line with the humorous tone of the thread.

The contributors to Warped can be described as a 'discourse community'—a group of people "who have texts and practices in common" (Barton 2007: 75)—not least because of the clear mission of the thread which sets it apart from the rest of the forum. Deignan et al. (2013) show that the members of specific discourse communities may share, among other things, particular ways of using figurative language. From a dynamic-systems perspective, the interactions on Warped can be seen as a self-organizing system which evolves over multiple time scales as a result of complex interactions between internal and external forces. What Gibbs and Cameron (2008) call "metaphor performance" emerges as part of these interactions.

'(Cancer) card' is one of several humorous metaphors and in-jokes shared by the contributors to this thread. In what follows we discuss the dynamic ways in which the '(cancer) card' metaphor is used by cancer patients on Warped. We look at its flexible use as both a metaphorical phrase and concept, potentially drawing from other source domains/scenarios than CARD GAMES, and occurring within different types of lexico-grammatical structures. We show its development into a context-specific metaphoreme that is shared by the thread contributors and is specific to them, and also examine a number of interesting cases of semi-literalization and how these relate to the metaphorical uses. Throughout the discussion, we also reflect on why contributors might be doing what they are doing.

We suggest that a satisfactory account of these patterns requires a consideration of a variety of interacting factors and hence the combination of insights from cognitive and discourse approaches to metaphor.

#### 4. Analysis: '(cancer) card' on the Warped thread

Contributors on Warped often joke about the (sometimes hypothetical) benefits of having cancer, as in the following two references to possible alternative uses of colostomy bags (that are sometimes required as a result of treatment for colorectal cancer):

- (5) If baggy had farted lots then HoneyBee would have shot across the pool... jet propulsion! (Smelly, date="2011-11-09 20:49:00")
- (6) I am having the windy bean and lentil stew for lunch tomorrow at school... I am getting nervous that even invincible pants won't be able to hold that lot in when it finally blows! Could get messy. Maybe I can strategically aim [the colostomy bag] ha ha (HoneyBee, date="2011-10-09 20:34:00")

There is 'incongruity' here between the discomfort and embarrassment associated with colostomy bags and the imaginary exploitation of gas accumulated in the bag for antisocial purposes and to amuse oneself. This, along with the breaking of social taboos through references to breaking wind, results in humor. These examples involve "an alternative

interpretation of the stressor" (Heath & Blonder 2003: 99), a strategy that stroke survivors with lasting disabilities have also been found to adopt. The re-appraisal of the negative potentially allows people with serious illnesses to empower themselves by means of the language and attitude they decide to adopt for negative aspects of their lives that they have little or no control over. The '(cancer) card' metaphor is a way of 'looking on the bright side' of cancer and using it to one's advantage.

The Warped thread contains 106 instances in which 'card' is used to indicate a strategic reference to having cancer as a way to obtain some kind of special treatment, from being excused from unwelcome tasks at work to jumping a queue while coming out of a stadium. From a chronological point of view, however, a particular post by a contributor we will call HoneyBee marks a transition point in the use of this expression that we need to take into account in our analysis. This post, which occurs early on in the history of the thread, was entirely devoted to the 'cancer card' itself, and, as we argue below, caused a change in the way in which '(cancer) card' is subsequently used by contributors to the thread. From a dynamic systems perspective, this post caused a *perturbation* in the system that resulted in new patterns of stability and variation, both with respect to the first part of Warped and to metaphorical uses of 'card' in English generally.

#### 4.1. Idiosyncratic use of a general metaphoreme: '(cancer) card' in the first part of Warped

The Warped thread starts on 24<sup>th</sup> July 2011. The 'transition' post was uploaded in the evening of 19<sup>th</sup> August 2011. Overall, the posts that precede this point amount to a total of approximately 25,000 words, i.e. 5 per cent of the whole half-a-million-word thread. This first part of the thread contains 13 metaphorical uses of '(cancer) card', 12 of which are by the same contributor, HoneyBee. HoneyBee has an instrumental role on Warped: she started the thread and was the most prolific contributor throughout its existence. Her leading role is acknowledged when someone refers to the group as 'HoneyBee clan' and she is responsible for initiating a number of in-jokes (see Demjén, 2016), along with the '(cancer) card'. (7) to (9) provide three examples by HoneyBee, in chronological order:

- (7) what's funny is someone just rang and asked me to do some stuff from this meeting today and email it round and I said I was too tired to do it tonight (cancer card used up for today now) when actually what I wanted to do was write this.... (HoneyBee, date="2011-07-24 14:46:00")
- (8) he [her husband] 'doesn't do gardening' so its me or it doesn't get done.. cancer card doesn't work with him I'm afraid.... (HoneyBee, date="2011-07-24 15:50:00")
- (9) Trolley service [on a train] got off half way up and the next trolley didn't come on (no one turned up he said....) gasp, pant, dying of thirst, no sandwiches etc.... nearly thought of playing the *cancer card*, but resisted....and they found someone by Newcastle, so card reserved for brother making me coffee later... (HoneyBee, date="2011-08-13 21:37:00")

These uses of '(cancer) card' can in principle be seen as a specific application to cancer of the general metaphorical idiom 'play the [...] card', which could in turn be described as a language-wide metaphoreme involving a Card Game scenario. In this idiom, the idea of playing a particular card to win a card game is used to capture the use of a reference to a socially and culturally sensitive topic in order to gain some advantage in the social interaction. More broadly, this idiom can be seen as consistent with a conventional conceptual metaphor such as LIFE IS PLAYING A GAME (Ching 1993), within which winning in a game corresponds to different kinds of success in life.

The first use of 'cancer card' in example (9) is indeed clearly marked as a Card Game metaphor through the use of the verb 'play'. The other uses, however, occur as parts of different expressions, which have more specific implications. 'Used up for today' in (7) and reserved for 'brother making me coffee later' in (9) **Error! Reference source not found.** suggest that HoneyBee only has one cancer card available each day, perhaps due to a sense of self-restraint on the part of the person, who feels it is only acceptable to use her cancer as an excuse once a day. From the point of view of the source Card Game scenario, this is potentially compatible with the cancer card as a single 'joker' in a round of play, which needs to be reserved for the most appropriate point. In example (8), the claim that the cancer card 'doesn't work' with HoneyBee's husband reflects the influence of the literal topic over the source scenario of Card Games. In card games, the rules are fixed and apply regardless of who is involved. In contrast, in the target domain of living with cancer, different people react differently to the person's references to her illness as a reason why she should not have to do something she does not want to do.

All three examples are also light-hearted and humorous. This is partly signaled by the language used around the metaphors, e.g. 'funny' in (7) and the hyperbolic 'gasp, pant, dying of thirst, no sandwiches, etc.' in (9), and partly a result of the kinds of relatively trivial situations in which HoneyBee uses (or considers using) the cancer card to get special treatment that is not strictly necessary from people who are not ill: a job she would prefer not to do in (7), household chores such as gardening in (8), and having someone provide refreshments or a coffee for her in (9).

In the first part of Warped, the '(cancer) card' metaphor is also extended to include the possibility of 'trumping'. HoneyBee introduced this idea in response to someone who says that one more person in her family has cancer:

- (10) You are going to have to have some trump system for *your cancer cards...* shoudln't terminal trump remission?? (HoneyBee, date="2011-07-25 10:43:00")

Here the contrast is not between people with cancer and healthy people, but between people who are more or less seriously ill with cancer. This is captured metaphorically by the idea of a 'trump system' (still consistent with the generic Card Game metaphor) in which people who are more seriously ill have cards of higher value than people who are less seriously ill. The 'trump' version of the metaphor is re-used by HoneyBee on several occasions, and is then adopted a few weeks later by a contributor we will call Smelly, in response to a post where HoneyBee says that she would like to have all Warped members join her family at a party in Sweden:

- (11) ....but if we all came over there would be too many of us playing the cancer card.....and then would the fact that I had 4 relapses, lost some hearing, went loopy, peed a rainbow, stem cell transplant, filled in poo charts for days, had radiotherapy and was hospitalised with suspected swine flu trump all of you??? (Smelly, date="2011-08-19 14:55:00")

In spite of the light-heartedness of expressions such as 'peed a rainbow', here the humor is arguably closer to 'gallows humor', as it involves degrees of seriousness of a life-threatening illness. This seems to subvert the conventional Card Game metaphor, where having cards of a higher value is always positive. Indeed, HoneyBee's reply to Smelly a few hours later re-uses the trump-system metaphor in an uncharacteristically somber way:

- (12) Actually, I'm not looking forward to seeing us lot trying to outdo each other on the cancer card trump system... that's one game I would happily lose, (HoneyBee, date="2011-08-19 18:43:00")

The preference for 'losing' the metaphorical 'game' is due to what is required for 'winning' in the specific target domain, i.e. being more seriously ill than anyone else.

Overall, in this first section of the Warped thread the '(cancer) card' metaphor is used flexibly and creatively, mostly by one particular individual, to refer humorously to a range of ways in which she tries to use her cancer to her advantage in everyday situations. These specific uses of the metaphor are broadly consistent with the conventional metaphorical idiom 'play the [...] card', but also differ from conventional uses of this idiom: they are not just humorous, but also reflect in various ways the specific situation of being ill with cancer, such as feeling that cancer should not be mentioned too often, and accounting for situations in which more than one person has cancer. Smelly's adoption of HoneyBee's 'trump card' version of the metaphor, and HoneyBee's own use in an immediate response, also suggest that the metaphor is beginning to become a shared resource for defusing with humor some very serious situations (e.g. several people with cancer in one family or coming together). This potential of the metaphor is clearly realized after HoneyBee devotes a whole post to the cancer card.

#### 4.2. A perturbation in the system: the 'Cancer Card services' post

We now come to the point in the thread where the '(cancer) card' is focused on and developed in several novel ways, causing a perturbation in the Warped dynamic system. In the post from which example (12) is taken, HoneyBee jokingly comments on Smelly's earlier reference to media reports that the psychoactive drug ecstasy might help treat cancers such as her own:

- (13) As for the ecstacy, have you thought of entering a trial for preventing it coming back? You could try that one in court... well, you see m'lord, I was on this website for loonies and they suggested that I took drugs and... OH...

I've got cancer... here's my card.... run away.... (HoneyBee, still 19 August 2011 6:43pm)

Here HoneyBee outlines a hypothetical scenario in which Smelly is being tried in court for using illicit drugs. In this scenario, the 'card' is a literal object which Smelly can exhibit to prove that she has cancer, and thus to justify her illegal behavior before 'running away'. This imaginary card is therefore not a playing card. Rather, the hypothetical context and the expression 'Here's my card' suggest something like a business card, a membership card or a medical note. Later on the same day (19<sup>th</sup> August 2011), HoneyBee posts a new contribution that is entirely devoted to the idea of cards that make explicit references to cancer, and that can be used by patients or their relatives in a variety of situations:

- (14) I was going to do this with illustrations, but no photoshop etc here and too much gin, so sorry- you will just have to imagine them xxxx  
Feeling Tired? Fed Up? Listless? Hairless?  
Or just can't be bothered...  
You need the Cancer Card!  
HoneyBee Cancer Card services for all your cancer card needs....  
In our IGC range (I've got cancer)  
or  
ICFSWC range (I'm caring for someone with cancer)

We have a wide range of cards to suit most occasions....

Please note: All Cancer Cards are prefixed by either of the above IGC or ICFSWC please state clearly which type you require on the order form.

So for example the BMST card would read... I've got cancer, buy me shiny things or I am caring for someone with cancer, buy me shiny things.

Our featured cards this week are the ones for those days when let's face it, when you just need a bit of a perk from this cancer lark....

The GOODWILL card- Get Out OF Doing What I Loath Lots

The WISH card- What I Say Happens

The BMST- Buy Me Shiny Things

The HNC- Housework? No Chance

The IHTW- I Have To Win

The IGWIW- I Get What I Want

The INC- I'm Not Cooking

And the multi purpose- DDTM card- don't do that to me.

This next card comes in handy packs of 3 and is particularly useful if your car breaks down, or you just need something doing for you...

The FISH card- Free Instant Sympathy Here

Or why not try one of our themed ranges?

The Toilet humour range proving popular this month with those that want a bit of understanding for those hiding under the duvet days or pre check up days...

POO- person out of order

PUBES- Person Under Bl\*\*\*dy Enormous Stress

SH\*T- Sympathy Here Instantly Thank you

Our new Medical themed cards are also proving popular with a certain clientele

GP- Gin Please

GMC- Give Me Cake/Chips/cocktails (delete as appropriate)

NHS- No Housework Stupid!

And2 for those exasperating moments...

The STAYGAS card- Say That Again- You'll Get A Slap

And HoneyBee's personal favourite...which is on special offer of buy one get one free this week...the ever popular...

The IMLWBDKTMTWYHTCIDMHI card

(I Might Look Well, But Please Don't Keep telling Me That With Your Head Tilted Cos It Does My Head In!)

All available to buy at [honeybeecancercards.com](http://honeybeecancercards.com)

Please note: Credit Terms not available

We are always on the look out for new ranges so any suggestions please forward for inclusion in our autumn brochure coming soon.

HoneyBee x

[Click here to find out more \(HoneyBee, date="2011-08-19 23:25:00"\)](#)

Although we cannot go into detail here, this post parodies the genre of (online) advertisements (e.g. 'to suit most occasions', 'featured cards') and makes explicit references to humor ('Toilet humour range'). More importantly, it sets up an imaginary online shop which sells cards that people with cancer (or carers of people with cancer) can use to get special treatment in situations that include avoiding domestic chores ('I'm Not Cooking'), being given presents ('Buy Me Shiny Things') and generally getting one's own way ('What I Say Happens'). As in some previous posts by HoneyBee, there is humorous potential in the contrast between these mundane and sometimes frivolous requests and the seriousness of cancer. The use of

lengthy acronyms for the various demands is also humorous, especially when the acronyms form words referring to taboo entities in the ‘Toilet humour range’ (‘PUBES’).

As mentioned earlier, what HoneyBee does in this post can be described within a dynamic systems approach as a perturbation in the system formed by the group of people that interact on the Warped thread. On the one hand, there is some degree of continuity with previous metaphorical uses of ‘cancer card’ on the thread and with the conventional metaphorical idiom ‘play the [...] card’, as the cards described in this post (at least up to ‘FISH’) are all used to exploit a difficult, sensitive issue for the person’s advantage. This continuity also includes the fact that HoneyBee had already started to exploit other literal meanings of ‘card’, and had mostly used the notion of the ‘cancer card’ humorously, as is consistent with the nature of the thread as a whole.

On the other hand, the invention of an online shop selling imaginary cards with humorous cancer-related acronyms clearly marks a dramatic change in what ‘(cancer) card’ potentially means on the Warped thread. Apart from the fact that they are mostly intended to be used to get special treatment, these cards have little in common with the playing cards of the idiom ‘play the [...] card’. First, the expression ‘Cancer Card Services for all your cancer card needs’ is reminiscent of advertisement for other types of cards, such as credit cards or business cards. Second, the variety of cancer-related messages that can be printed on the cards is reminiscent of greeting cards, or, again, business cards. Third, as the post progresses, there is increasing variety in what the cards can be used for. While most can still be used to get some kind of special treatment, others can be used to explain patients’ own behavior (‘POO: person out of order’) or deter unwanted behaviors in others (‘STAYGAS: Say That Again-You’ll Get A Slap’). In other words, HoneyBee creates a new concept by combining different literal and metaphorical associations of ‘card’ with the literal experience of dealing with cancer, against the background of previous uses of ‘(cancer) card’ on the Warped thread and its general humorous slant.<sup>3</sup> By means of this post, HoneyBee also strengthens her own identity as one of the main contributors to the thread, and one of the leaders in creating and developing different lines of humor on the thread.

After this post, the meanings and uses of ‘cancer card’ change on the Warped thread, not just for HoneyBee but for other contributors too, as we show in the next section. In other words, the perturbation that example 14 creates in the dynamic system shifts the way in which ‘(cancer) card’ works and results in what is best described as a context-specific metaphoreme that is only shared by members of the Warped discourse community.

#### 4.3. A group-specific metaphoreme: the ‘cancer card’ in the rest of Warped

Apart from HoneyBee, seven contributors use the ‘(cancer) card’ metaphor in the rest of Warped (for a total of 79 instances). These uses exhibit some degree of variation, and both reflect and develop the version of the ‘cancer card’ introduced in the previous section. The ways in which the notion of the cancer card is adopted and developed by other contributors confirms HoneyBee’s leading role on the thread but also shows how other members of the Warped community perform their own identities, both as ‘followers’ in HoneyBee’s humorous footsteps and as creators of (metaphorical) humor in their own right.

##### *Literalization*

The first ‘phase’ in the rest of Warped corresponds to the 10 days immediately following HoneyBee’s ‘Cancer Card services’ post, up to 29<sup>th</sup> August 2011. This phase includes 70 posts

overall and involves an intense focus on the new 'cards' as literal entities in imaginary scenarios.

Smelly responds to the 'Cancer Card Services' post on the following day: she explicitly points out the humorous aspect of the cards by describing them as 'so funny' and declares that she cannot think of any better ones. Another contributor, however, joins in and invents a set of cards around the theme of sex. He justifies the theme with reference to his own maleness and expresses the wish not to be 'banned':

- (15) Viagra card? Vital internal action gone right arye  
Impotent Impossible, might point or try, entry not tonight  
Limp Card Lost Interest My Pet  
Tidy Card Think its dead Yet  
pissed Card Penis is so sore, erectile dysfunction  
Big balls card Body is good but all lust last seconds !! (Tom, date="2011-08-21 16:06:00")

Here the humor results from the use of inventive acronyms to make reference to the taboo topic of male sexual dysfunction. However, what Tom describes here, is arguably one of the most uncomfortable and embarrassing side effects of the illness and treatment, and although humor results from the reference to taboo subjects, it simultaneously facilitates the mention of these embarrassing consequences of treatment in the first place (see Demjén 2016). An important feature of humor generally is precisely that it allows us "to explore things which are difficult or taboo" (Coates 2007: 32) .

In the following days, HoneyBee encourages anyone on the thread to contribute their own ideas for cards, but also responds to similar invitations from other contributors by inventing new cards herself, and imagining new situations in which they can be used. One of these situations is travelling abroad with the cards in place of a passport:

- (16) take the I get my own way card to the airport and sod the passport- you need a holiday. They are not going to refuse you with the cards now are they? (HoneyBee, date="2011-08-21 08:43:00")

This idea is collaboratively developed by HoneyBee and Smelly, who tell a series of stories in which a member of the group shows up at an airport with one or more cancer cards, which they use to get away with taking forbidden items in their luggage. In this phase of the interaction, the cards continue to be primarily literal entities in fantasy scenarios, or in fantasy versions of real scenarios. Within this phase, the notion of the cancer card is literalized in other ways too. Smelly talks about cancer patients in England having a 'cancer card for life' in reference to a new policy whereby these patients are entitled to free prescriptions for the rest of their lives. Here the 'cancer card' could be seen as semi-literal if it refers to the document that proves that someone has indeed had a cancer diagnosis. HoneyBee, on the other hand, imagines a situation in which she and others actually turn her idea into a concrete object:

- (17) Maybe we should do a book of the cancer cards and we could all contribute to it... we could do tear out pages maybe so you could actually use them? (HoneyBee, date="2011-08-22 19:21:00")

Even during this phase, however, the '(cancer) card' can still be exploited as a metaphorical concept. Our opening example ('Failed cancer card incident') is by HoneyBee herself and dates from three days after the 'Cancer Card services' post. Moreover, ten days after that post, HoneyBee reasserts the metaphoricality of the card (ex 19) in response to a contributor who

seems to be constrained by a literal interpretation when talking about a self-indulgent shopping spree:

- (18) I should have had one of your cards with me HoneyBee. (Sarah, date="2011-08-29 18:13:00")
- (19) Anyway, hoorah Sarah for buying shiny things... you are allowed you've got the card remember? (HoneyBee, date="2011-08-29 19:37:00")

In (18), the writer regrets not having one of HoneyBee's cards to justify her purchases. This suggests that she is treating the cards as literal, if imaginary, entities. The use of 'the card' in HoneyBee's response is metaphorical, however: she reminds Christine that, as a cancer sufferer, she always has the 'card', i.e. she can always use the illness to justify pampering herself.

*The development '(cancer) card' as a discourse community-specific metaphoreme*

After the first 10 days of frequent and mostly imaginary-cum-literal uses, the '(cancer) card' once again starts to be regularly used and developed as a metaphor by several contributors to the Warped thread. This arguably results in the emergence of a group-specific development of the general 'play the [...] card' metaphoreme.

The invention of new acronyms for cancer cards peters out on the Warped thread within about two weeks of the 'Cancer Card services' post. However, the idea of cards with acronyms is still available and gets used as a metaphor, as in this extract from November 2011:

- (20) Although I played the cancer card AIFTISSFTAE\* at the beginning of the meeting, no worthwhile opportunity came for a strop, so sorry Valerie, I've let you down.  
\*Although I've finished treatment I still suffering from the after effects! (Lakedweller, date="2011-11-03 14:21:00")

More generally, the contributors to the thread also continue to use the '(cancer) card' metaphor, without references to acronyms, but nonetheless in ways that are distinctive to the group and that reflect a new balance of stability and variation following the perturbation caused by the 'Cancer Card Services' post. While the expression 'play the cancer card' is regularly used, there are other patterns that vary from this structure and that reflect a new shared concept among group members. One type of variation involves the noun phrase itself where 'card' is the head noun. In some instances the indefinite article ('a') is used with the singular noun 'card' (ex 21-23). In other cases, the noun 'cards' is used in the plural (ex 24, 25):

- (21) I threw a strop and played a cancer card today and came home early... impressed? (HoneyBee, date="2011-11-01 20:18:00")
- (22) [NB: in response to (21)] You have such a busy schedule, i'm glad you played a card and opted out of the meeting. (Sue2, date="2012-01-12 20:42:00")
- (23) Whilst walking out of the stadium I got my brain cells working and thought about playing a cancer card, and so as I walked down to the train station I started to make my way toward the disabled entrance. (Sam, date="2012-08-05 12:01:00")
- (24) I will also play the cancer cards if needed to get out of stuff (HoneyBee, date="2012-01-01 20:12:00")
- (25) will keep the [naughty] step warm ... I am sure you will be paying it a visit as spending time with normals is a sure way of bringing out the worst so enjoy play the cards and try not to behave (Pretzel, date="2012-01-02 08:46:00")

Both the singular indefinite and the plural use of 'card' rely on the idea that the contributors to the thread have multiple cards to play as a result of their cancer, rather than a single 'cancer card'. This is both a reflection and a development of the acronym cards first proposed by HoneyBee. The status of the cards as common ground among contributors is also evident in uses where 'card' occurs in the singular or plural without a determiner, as in: 'So played cancer card!' (Lakedweller, date="2012-01-29 15:12:00"), and 'I have to go and play cancer cards' (HoneyBee, date="2012-01-03 21:44:00"). In contrast, the 100-million-word British National Corpus contains no instances of play the cards (with a plural noun) and only five instances of 'play a [...] card'. However, none of the five instances of the latter expression involve a reference to a sensitive topic (e.g. 'Yet fate was to play a strange card').

In addition, the noun '(cancer) card' is also used by several contributors in structures that do not involve the verb 'play', e.g. 'Failed cancer card incident' in (1). These uses vary in the extent to which they suggest Card Games scenarios, with a few cases potentially evoking different scenarios:

- (26) First, may i hold up my cancer card, the one for being too sesitive. I thought i had offended when infact i hadn't and now i feel silly, silly, silly. (Sue2, date="2011-10-12 20:58:00")

Here the writer uses 'hold up my cancer card' to introduce an acknowledgment of having over-reacted to something, which now makes her 'feel silly'. The use of 'hold up' is reminiscent of idiomatic expressions like 'hold up the white flag' and 'hold up my hand', where the flag and the hand stand metonymically or metaphorically for an admission of defeat or responsibility for a mistake. In this example, therefore, the metaphorical card seems to function both as an acknowledgment of guilt and as an excuse for making the mistake in the first place, due to having cancer. The former meaning is consistent with the scenarios suggested by the idioms. The latter meaning is consistent with some of the previous uses of '(cancer) card' on the Warped thread (cf. our earlier comments on cards such as 'POO – Person out of order', providing an excuse for otherwise inappropriate/unacceptable behaviors). In addition, the gloss for the card in (26) ('the one for being too sesitive [sic]') alludes to the availability of many different (cancer) cards from which one can pick the one that is suitable to a particular occasion. This meaning originates from HoneyBee's 'Cancer Card services' post. In (27), a thread contributor uses another structure involving the verb 'hold' in a post addressed at HoneyBee:

- (27) it's about time you threw a strop, you need to remind people you hold a cancer card because the way you go babbling on nineteen to the dozen ti's easy for them to forget (Lakedweller, date="2011-11-02 00:02:00").

The reminder that HoneyBee 'hold[s] a cancer card' may suggest both a playing card and a different type of card, such as a membership card that entitles someone to benefits due to their age or other characteristic.<sup>4</sup>

All these examples also show the multiple functions that the cancer card performs on the Warped thread, including not just creating humor (e.g. in the queue-jumping scenario of (23)), but also expressing mutual support (e.g. 'I'm glad you played a card' in the second part of (22)**Error! Reference source not found.**) and—through humor—strengthening intimacy and group cohesion, as in the reference to healthy people as 'normals' in the scenario in which (cancer) cards are played in (25).

Overall, after a brief literalization phase immediately following HoneyBee's 'Cancer Card services' post, the '(cancer) card' develops into a group-specific metaphoreme with distinctive

lexico-grammatical forms and particular affective and pragmatic values. In formal terms, the most distinctive structures involve the indefinite singular uses, the plural uses, and the occurrence of '(cancer) card' without the verb 'play' and within a range of structures that do not (or not only) suggest a Card Game scenario. In terms of affective and pragmatic values, '(cancer) card' is used humorously to recount and justify the many different ways in which having cancer can be exploited to the person's advantage, not just by getting special treatment, but also by excusing potentially unacceptable behaviors. This arguably helps to demystify a negative and often overwhelming experience, and to empower the individual both in their daily life and in how they conceive of themselves and of their illness: if having cancer can be joked about and even presented as beneficial to the self, its status as a frightening life-threatening illness is reduced. In other words, "if something is ridiculous then it cannot be serious or threatening" (McCreaddie & Wiggins 2008: 589).

At a group level, the joint ownership and development of a humorous metaphoreme both reflects and enhances intimacy, complicity and mutual relationships. Contributors to Warped do not just share an in-joke and in-group metaphor that they have co-created and that only they can fully understand and exploit; they also use the notion of the '(cancer) card' to encourage one another to be kind to themselves and assertive with others, and to congratulate one another when they report having acted in these ways. And finally, the fact that the '(cancer) card' is mostly used humorously is consistent with the play frame of the Warped thread and contributes to maintaining the distinctiveness of the thread and the community of contributors.

## 5. Conclusions

We hope that our analysis of the use of '(cancer) card' by people with cancer contributing to an online forum thread has clearly shown the need to take multiple interacting factors into account in order to do full justice to the rich and complex ways in which metaphors can be used in discourse, and particularly in online interactions among tightly knit discourse communities such as the contributors to our forum thread. We have suggested that a dynamic systems approach is ideally suited to account for how a range of different factors are involved in metaphor use, as it makes it possible to bring together insights from different theoretical and analytical perspectives.

The notion of the 'metaphoreme' has proved to be particularly appropriate to describe both stability and variation in the bundle of connections between the different linguistic structures in which '(cancer) card' occurs and the affective, pragmatic and interactional functions that these structures perform in the interactions among members on the Warped thread. More specifically, while there is value in describing general semi-fixed expressions such as 'play the [...] card' as language-wide metaphoremes, we would argue that the notion of metaphoreme comes into its own when dealing with uses of metaphor that are specific to particular contexts and discourse communities, such as the contributors to Warped. This specificity generates additional associations between forms, meanings and functions that cannot be properly accounted for in terms of realizations of static conceptual mappings or in terms of general usage patterns of metaphorical idioms.

The analytical breadth and depth that a dynamic systems approach allows also has the advantage of making it easier for metaphor scholars to address issues that are relevant to researchers and practitioners from other fields. In our case, this applies not just to scholars interested in the interaction between metaphor and humor, but also to the different kinds of

researchers and professionals who are interested in online communities, and particularly online communities involving people with serious and/or long-term illnesses.

There is increasing evidence that it is important to understand the functions that such online interactions and communities perform in the lives of people with a variety of illnesses (e.g. Allen et al. 2016). Our analysis has shown how people with a life-threatening illness such as cancer can exploit the easy accessibility and relative anonymity of an online forum thread to co-create and develop a humorous metaphor in ways that can both contribute to their individual well-being and strengthen their sense of community.

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## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> Original spellings and punctuation are retained throughout when quoting from our data. The nicknames, electronic ‘handles’, and other identifiers of forum contributors have been changed. In each case, we provide the precise date and time of posting, as these are relevant to our analysis.

<sup>3</sup> In Fauconnier and Turner’s (2002) terms, this new concept could be described as the emergent structure of a blend resulting from the merging of different card-related and cancer-related input spaces.

<sup>4</sup> Both HoneyBee and Smelly also re-use the notion of a ‘trump card’ in humorous reflections on how cancer relates to other types of illnesses as a reason to get special treatment.