

Sharing grief through metaphors and neologisms: A study on French narratives of perinatal loss

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Losing a baby during or right after pregnancy is a deeply stigmatised experience in Western societies, even though it is sadly more common than one might expect, with an average of about 5 stillbirths for every 1000 births in most European countries.

How can one explain the grief and pain one goes through after perinatal loss to someone who has never lived a similar experience, someone who lacks "experiential knowledge" (Borkman 1976)? Metaphor analysis proves to be a useful tool to understand the mental state and thought process of an individual who goes through a traumatic and emotional experience (Semino *et al.* 2018). Not only do metaphors serve to bridge possible communicative gaps by enabling bereaved parents to share their experience of loss while getting around the taboo and stigma that society puts on perinatal death, metaphors also provide insight into how individuals conceptualise and come to terms with their grief (Littlemore *et al.* 2019).

From a lexical perspective, the culture of denial around perinatal grief (Markin & Zilcha-Mano 2018) translates into the lack of a specific term to designate either bereaved parents or their lost babies (as opposed, e.g., *widow(er)* or *orphan*). In this view, neologisms are, or can be, a powerful means of creating and voicing new concepts by giving them a linguistic label (reification).

This paper presents the methodological framework and the preliminary results of an ongoing research project that analyzes these two aspects of the discourse of perinatal loss. First, we look at the metaphors used by French speaking bereaved parents by investigating a corpus of testimonies in which parents describe their experience. Special relevance is given to the voice of fathers so as to identify the way(s) in which their experiences resemble and/or differ from those of mothers in terms of the metaphors used. Secondly, we will consider the role of neologisms pertaining to perinatal loss, inspired by the existence of such a neologism in (Belgian) Dutch *sterrenkind* lit. 'star child' (officially recognised in 2015) to designate the still born baby. This neologism has recently been productively extended (via clipping of the first element *sterren-*) to new compounds in Belgian Dutch (e.g., *sterrenouder* 'star parent', *sterrensister* 'star sister', *sterrenboom* 'star tree' (as commemoration)). One of the questions that we will consider is to what extent such neologisms not only help break the taboo, but also give substance to the experience as real and thus make it more widely recognised in society. This addresses the "concept-forming power" of words (Leech 1981, see also Schmid 2008), also known as *hypostatization*, which, in this context, may succeed in reducing the "epistemic injustice" that Fricker (2007) talks about: the absence of a word implies the absence of a unified concept, which makes it extremely difficult for this meaning to enter into, or get accepted in, the larger community.

The impact of the use of metaphor and of hypostatization (the latter through the use of neologisms) will be measured through careful analysis of people's testimonies via interviews and questionnaires.

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