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Metaphors in Ancient Egyptian healing texts: Building blocks of scientific language [online]

Figurative language, including metaphor, metonymy and personification, are employed in medical literature even today to explain otherwise invisible, intangible or elusive functions of the human body, such as weakness, fever or inflammation. The necessity to explain the inexplicable also seems to have been felt by the scribes composing the healing texts of ancient Egypt: figurative language was employed to describe body parts, bodily functions as well as pathological conditions of the body. In this talk, procedures will be presented that can help researchers identify and describe metaphors in an analytical and replicable way (Di Biase-Dyson 2017). Following this, case studies from the healing texts will be presented to see how figurative language was being used and to consider whether figurative language contributed to what might have been a register of ‘scientific’ or ‘technical language’ in ancient Egyptian textual expression. In so doing, this research contributes to unresolved issues within studies of healing texts, contemplating whether the metaphorical language can be taken ‘literally’ (Ritner 2006) or as part of a figuratively inclined explanatory apparatus (Nyord 2017), and assessing the extent to which the language was simply a layperson’s language (Westendorf 1999) or whether that language was being developed within these texts as technical language (Pommerening 2016).

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