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## Conceptualizing emotional distress in Late Middle English medical texts

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper I propose an analysis of the Middle English vocabulary for emotional distress. I am especially interested in determining to what extent the vocabulary used in medical varieties of Middle English differentiated between somatic and psychological distress and, eventually, between different types of adverse mood states. My research is based on the analysis of the data extracted from the Middle English Medical Texts, which includes a wide selection of medical treatises from c. 1375 to c. 1500. Special attention is paid to the metaphorical expressions of emotional distress in Middle English specialized texts.

*Keywords:* Middle English, emotions, MEMT, medical texts, metaphors, ESP.



## 1. Introduction

Recent studies on Intercultural Psychiatry suggest that whereas in western cultures emotional distress is normally expressed in terms of abstract psychological or social features, non-western cultures (e.g. India, Indonesia, Iraq, Philippines, Nigeria) are more likely to use somatic symptoms in order to refer to the same type of feeling (Kleinman, 1982; Crozier & Alden, 2005). This claim is used by Leff (1988) in order to propose an evolutionary theory of the language of feeling, according to which the somatic and psychic expressions of emotional distress are considered to have been originally identical. As our medical knowledge develops, languages create specialized words for physical and mental distress and, consequently, the psychological vocabulary becomes highly differentiated and capable of expressing a wide variety of emotional states. This is due to the fact that relationships between individuals in traditional cultures are governed by rules and conventions, which produces a comparative lack of emphasis on personal choices and neglect of emotional states.

From a historical perspective, Leff (1988) assumes that early varieties of English were unable to distinguish between somatic and psychic aspects of moods. This basic distinction was introduced at a later historical moment, in which the words used to refer to different adverse emotional states were undifferentiated in meaning. According to Leff, only after the publication of Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) and Baxter's *A Christian Directory* (1673), the expression of emotional distress in English changed from the somatic to the psychological.

This paper aims at determining whether the vocabulary used in late Middle English (henceforth ME) medical texts distinguishes between psychological and physical aspects of negative emotions. Furthermore, it tries to determine to what extent late medical varieties of ME differentiated different types of emotional distress. The study of how metaphor and metonymy mediate our conceptualization of emotional states is not new; it has been extensively approached by Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT; Feshmire, 1994; Kövecses, 1986, 1988, 1990; Lakoff, 1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff & Kövecses, 1987). A central claim by CMT scholars is that human emotions are largely understood and expressed in metaphorical terms. Furthermore, metaphorical conceptualizations are described in these studies as universal, although most of the evidence supporting this claim is derived from Present-Day English varieties (especially from American English). The question remains as whether, and to what extent, the same claim could hold in other languages and linguistic varieties, present and past.

## **2. Data and methodology**

This research is based on the analysis of the data extracted from the Middle English Medical Texts (henceforth MEMT) corpus (Taavitsainen, Pahta & Mäkinen, 2005), which includes editions of medical treatises from c. 1375 to c. 1500 and an appendix of texts written c. 1330. In order to analyze the texts included in this corpus I have used Wordsmith Tools, although manual analyses have also been performed at times. The medical texts included in the MEMT corpus are classified into three broad categories, according to their tradition of writing, contents and audience: surgical texts, specialised texts, and remedies and *materia medica*.

This division was first suggested by Voigts (1982, 1984) and has subsequently become widely accepted. In the first category, surgical texts, we have 15 texts belonging to university tradition; some of them represent the highest academic level of writing, being derived from university texts. The second category, specialized texts, includes 24 texts representing the academic tradition and treatises dealing with natural philosophy and reproduction, specific illnesses or fields of specialization. The third category, remedies and *materia medica*,

contains a series of ME texts belonging to the remedybook tradition and includes recipes, charms and herbals.

Using the *Historical thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary* (hence HTOED), I have made a full list of all the words for emotional distress in usage between 1330 and 1500. Thereafter, I have searched and analyzed all their occurrences in the MEMT corpus.

### **3. Emotional distress in medical ME**

#### **3.1. Somatic vocabulary**

The HTOED (category 2.1.1.1) contains up to 49 different lexical entries with the general meaning “Mind, soul, spirit, heart”. Of these, 21 lexemes were used with this generic meaning exclusively in Old English, whereas 7 terms extended their usage into (and even beyond) the ME period: *ME womb, mood, ghost, heart, bosom, inner man and soul*. During the ME period, 8 new words entered this category: *ME sprete, mind, conscience, sprite, innwit, spirit, sprit and esperite*.

Some of the ME words listed above were normally used to designate parts of the body, such as the heart (*ME bert*), the womb (*ME womb*), the breast (*ME bosom*) and the stomach (*ME inner man*). In fact, OE and ME texts abound in examples of metaphorical extensions of these words for internal body-parts into a variety of mental realms, including feeling, emotion, volition and cognition (Harbus, 2004; Mize, 2006; Geeraerts & Gevaert, 2008).

However, the general tendency in our set of ME medical texts is for these words to be exclusively used in their literal sense. Only in the case of *ME bert* ‘heart’, we find that this word is metaphorically used in order to indicate different types of mental experience. In fact, the heart is frequently referred to by medieval medical authors as a repository of knowledge and emotion, as can be seen in the following examples:

- (01) Eftsones he turnyth to thoo eyen and prescript moist tunycles impressith a thyng knowen in his symilitude, wherof he bryngeþ to the brayne, and from the brayn vnto the hert leuyth notice and knowlache (de\_humana\_natura.rtf [27]: 2748).

- (02) Another also, to be mery in his hertte yt ys a gret remedye for helth of the body (canutus\_plague\_treatise.rtf [38]: 15618).

The metaphorical link between the mind (referred to by, among other words, ME *mind*, mood, brayn and spirit) and the heart in ME medical texts is also obvious from contemporary definitions of the heart, as in the following illustration from John Trevisa's translation of *Bartholomaeus Anglicus, On the Properties of Things*:

- (03) Among þe spiritual membres þe herte is chief; for he is principal welle of a best and foundement of kinde hete (trevisa\_on\_the\_properties\_of\_things\_1.rtf [3]: 5024).

ME *bert* is frequently combined in medical texts with a number of words that carry connotations of both mental and bodily hurt. This is the case of ME *sore* and its derivatives *sorrow* and *sorrowful*, all of which indicate both mental sorrow and physical pain (Díaz-Vera, 2009). In the following examples, the metaphorical reference to mental distress is obvious in (04), whereas in (05) the somatic phenomenon is less likely:

- (04) And aqua ardent doeth þe same yf any matiere purging malencoly be put þere-yn, and þat purgeth þe splene and lettith derke thoughtes. And a malencolie hert and a sorowful herte hit gladith (rupescissa\_remedies.rtf [65]: 14234).
- (05) For sore nauil and for sore herte, nym a newe pot and make abait of mariole at þe botteme (leechbook\_2.rtf [61]: 23526).

Similarly, the verbs ME *greve* 'to press heavily, burden' and ME *affrey* 'to disturb, make afraid' are used in reference to a sensation we would recognise either as emotional distress,<sup>1</sup> anxiety (as in [06]) or, much more frequently, as changes in the heart beat, i.e. bradycardia (as in [07]) and tachycardia (as in [08]).

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<sup>1</sup> A similar conceptualization has been described in a variety of languages. For example, Afghans describe depression "as if a strong hard hand was squeezing their hearts" (Kleinman, 1982, p. 133).

- (06) And for þe brayn of wymmen ys mor myghty þen hir hert, þer for þe smoke wyl not abyde in þe hede but smyteth downe in to þe hert and greueþe þe hert myche & makeþ it to close to gedur more þen it schuld do be kynde otherwhiles (sekenesse\_of\_wymmen\_3.rtf [23]: 1690).
- (07) And oþerwhiles it affrayeth þe hert so moche that it makith hem to fallen downe aswowe as though they hadden þe falling evel (sekenesse\_of\_wymmen\_3.rtf [23]: 1777).
- (08) And þen þey bringes forth childerne þat are mesylls, or elles þey hafe oþer foule sekenesse and long with haldynge of þis blode maketh wymmen othere whyles to fall yn to a dropsy, and sum tyme it causythe þe emoroides, sum tyme yt greuyth þe hert and maketh þem to hafe a cardyakull (sekenesse\_of\_wymmen\_2.rtf [22]: 601).

Late Medieval English medical books refer frequently to a condition known as *heuynes* ‘heaviness’, which affects both the mind (see example [09]) and the body (as in [10]) causing either emotional distress or physical torpor:

- (09) which gladnes of spiritte is cause of a continuaunce in helth like as heuynes of spiritte and sorow inducith sikenes (regimen\_sanitatis.rtf [47]: 2130).
- (10) And her y3eliddis cleuen togedir, and þei felen moche heuynes and greuauce in her y3en (gilbertus\_anglicus\_compendium.rtf [43]: 43873).

When this condition of heaviness affects the heart, ME *heuynes* may stand for a purely psychological state. Thus, in the following example from *The Wonderful Art of the Eye*, a vernacular translation of a text written by the 13th ophthalmologist Benvenutus Grassus (Elredge, 1998), we find the phrase *heuynes of herte* in a string of nouns making reference to different emotions (such as sorrow, joy and gladness):

- (11) And conueniently ys the place where the eye is sett clepid the well of the hed, for the habundance of watery humors and teris, the whych often yssu þer bycause sumtyme of sorow and heuynes of herte, sumtyme of ioye and gladnes (benvenutus\_grassus.rtf [32]: 1232).

‘Heaviness of the heart’ is thus considered a somatic condition, for which a wide variety of remedies are proposed. For example, in (12) John Arderne

recommends doctors to read tales to their patients in order to make their hearts ‘light’, i.e. to give them peace of mind:

- (12) as wele of the biblee as of other tragedie3; & any othir þingis of which it is no3t to charge while3 þat þey make or induce a li3t hert to þe pacient or þe sike man (arderne\_fistula.rtf [4]: 16179).

In the English version of the 10th century Arabic treatise *Secretum secretorum*, we find an alternative remedy, consisting in brushing on the patient’s body with sweet ointments:

- (13) And see that thou be annoynted with good and sweete smellyng oynementes, for in the swete sauoure takith the hert grete pleasure, lating the wite, that alle thinge that is swete sauouring is to the herte meite norisshinge and grete delite (secret\_of\_secretetes.rtf [45]: 8979).

As can be seen from these examples, the heart is seen as the locus of emotional distress, which is referred to in three different ways in our corpus, namely:

- EMOTIONAL DISTRESS IS SORENESS OF THE HEART.
- EMOTIONAL DISTRESS IS HEAVINESS OF THE HEART.
- EMOTIONAL DISTRESS IS BITTERNESS OF THE HEART.

I will now analyse the different way Medieval medical authors used abstract nouns in order to describe different types of emotional distress.

### 3.2. Abstract vocabulary

As stated in the previous paragraph, ME *sore* and its derivates were used by medieval authors to indicate both mental sorrow and physical pain. In the following extract from the English version of *De natura humana*, ME *sorowe* “sorrow” appears within a string of nouns signifying different emotional states of the mind.

- (14) Bi beastes, that is to say, sciences, a body vsed to lustis 9 thynges, to the brayne to hym enlarged, that is to say, dilectacioun, haate, joy, sorowe, hardynes, dreede, shame, wrath, woodnes, fforwhi bi sight, smellyng, feelyng, heryng, tastyng, lovith, or haatith, joyeth or sorowith, dar or dredith, shameth, wrathith or woodith (de\_humana\_natura.rtf [27]: 13942).

Similarly, in another English version of the same texts (known as *Regimen sanitatis*), emotional distress is referred to as sorrow and heaviness of the spirit.

- (15) SE that thi clothis be precious and ri3t feire to the eye, for beaute and preciousenes of þe clothis li3tenith and gladdith the spiritte of man, which gladnes of spiritte is cause of a continuaunce in helth like as heuyenes of spiritte and sorow inducith sikenes (regimen\_sanitatis.rtf [47]: 2130).

Other symptoms of mental distress, as described by the English friar Henry Daniel (end of the 14th century), are loss of brightness (ME *dymmynge*), loss of activity (ME *dullynge*) and movement downwards (as a consequence of loss of energy; ME *dysmaynge*). According to the author, these symptoms can affect not only the mind (ME *spyrȝ*), but also the whole patient's body:

- (16) Ryght sa it is be kynde hete & unkynd hete; also because of infeccion dymmynge & dullynge & dysmaynge in þe spyrytis, in þe hert, & in þe lyvere, & in þe arteriis, & in oþer partys of þe body (daniel\_liber\_uricrisiarum\_1.rtf [34]: 44031).

These symptoms clearly correspond with what Jackson (1986) describes as melancholia, a condition with which some forms of contemporary depression bear a family resemblance:

Throughout the medieval era the term melancholia referred to the traditional Galenic picture of a condition in which the sufferer was fearful, sad, misanthropic, suspicious, tired of life and often, but not always, afflicted with one of a number of circumscribed delusions (p. 74).

Medieval doctors were formed in their knowledge of melancholia by Galen, Avicenna and Constantinus Africanus (Jackson, 1986, pp. 46–54). Physicians

perceived many of the phenomena related to this type of emotional distress as symptoms of a disease caused by an excess of black bile (Daly, 2007, p. 44). This can be clearly seen from the following paragraph, from a vernacular translation of Guy de Chauliac's *Treatise on ulcers*:

- (17) Bot humours þat rennep & corrupteþ þe place ar wese in fistule<sup>3</sup> þan in a cauernose vlcere. Þat materie forsoþ, is fleumatice & melancolice, as seiþ William de Saliceto, in which adustioun bryngeþ-to sharpne<sup>3</sup> & venenosite (chauliac\_ulcers.rtf [10]: 48007).

ME *melancholie* (from Old French *melancolie* 'black bile') was borrowed during the first half of the 14th century.<sup>2</sup> Early references to this condition indicated as its most prominent symptoms sullenness and propensity to causeless and violent anger; however, references to mental gloom and sadness are much more frequent in later references. The use of this noun and its derivates is very frequent in our corpus, and applies not only to psychological disorders (as in [as in 18]), but also to physical conditions (as in [19]):

- (18) Who drynkeþ therof or smelleth, þe odour of it heleth hym of þe pose, oþer of melancoly of thoughty mynde, of swellyng of feere, of frenesy, and of many other siknesse (secrete\_of\_secretetes.rtf [44]: 48662).
- (19) Or þai bene sent & put out fro þe body as colre to þe chest of þe galle<sup>3</sup>, Melancolie to þe splene, fleume to þe iuncture<sup>3</sup>, þe watery superfluitee to þe reyne<sup>3</sup> & to þe uesic (chauliac\_anatomy.rtf [6]: 14629).

In sum, according to our analysis of the abstract vocabulary used in medieval medical texts to describe emotional distress, the following conceptualizations can be reconstructed:

- EMOTIONAL DISTRESS IS SORROW.
- EMOTIONAL DISTRESS IS DARKNESS.

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<sup>2</sup> According to the OED, the first occurrence of this word in ME dates back to Robert Mannyng of Brunne's *Handling Synne* (1303).

- EMOTIONAL DISTRESS IS SLOWNESS.
- EMOTIONAL DISTRESS IS FALLING DOWN.

The concepts of darkness, slowness and falling down can be subsumed under the conceptual metaphor depression is down. As Pritzker (2003, p. 25) puts it, “being down is frequently associated with sleep, or darkness, and when we are down, as in for sleep or rest, we are not moving”, depression is down relates directly to the widely observed SADNESS IS DOWN metaphor (Kövecses, 2000, pp. 25-26), which complements the metaphor to happiness is up (Kövecses, 2000, pp. 25-25). According to Yu (1998), this metaphor derives from the fact that, as human beings, we have upright bodies. Gibbs (1994) further elucidates this general concept in the following way:

During the first few months of life, being down is a natural state serving maturational purposes, but later in life, when we grow up, being down is associated with all aspects of babyhood, such as dependence, helplessness, and inferiority (p. 414).

#### **4. Conclusion**

As can be seen here, medieval medical writers conceptualized emotional distress in a wide variety of ways. Whereas in some cases these metaphorical conceptualizations are exclusively based on the physical symptoms of emotional distress (such as soreness, heaviness and bitterness of the heart), in some other cases the focus is placed on its psychological manifestations (including sorrow and darkness).

Furthermore, in the latter case we find that the same symptoms are described not only for the mind, but also for internal and external bodily organs. The distinction between the expression of emotional distress and physical distress is thus opaque, as the same terms are used for both realms. These terms provide arguments for collapsing the contemporary distinction between somatic changes and emotions, based on the dichotomized view of mind and body, subject and object. ME descriptions of emotional distress point towards the existence of a microcosm that mediates between the corporeal self and the body social,

representing the kind of holistic vocabulary that is wanting in modern varieties of English “for dealing with mind-body-society symbolic transactions” (Lee, 1998, p. 452).

The ‘holistic’ metaphors used in ME texts are also found in other ancient healing systems, as well as in Indian and Chinese medicines (Pritzker, 2003, p. 27). The transition towards a differentiated psychological vocabulary and expressions is described by Ots (1990) in terms of the growing importance of the Western concept of mind-body dichotomy, which privileges the superior mind over the inferior body. In his words, this dichotomy is to be directly related to the etymological meaning of the Modern English word for body:

Etymologically, body stems from the Old Saxon *bodig* (in current German *Bottich*) which means ‘vessel.’ The body is understood as a vessel for the mind. The terms somatization and embodiment both rely on a processual change and are thus directional and temporal: they understand the body as an object of the mind (p. 26).

The use of the term *body* is in fact exclusive to the English language within the whole Germanic family,<sup>3</sup> and its usage as opposed to the non-material nature of man was not generalised until the 13th century. In fact, OE *bodig* refers only to the trunk of the body, and only after the end of the Anglo-Saxon period this word started to be used to refer to the whole body and replaced its OE competitors (as *flæsc*, *flæschama*, *bād*, *bræw*, *lic*, *licama* and *selegesceot*, which disappeared completely from the English vocabulary). Following Ots (1990), we can argue that the generalization of THE BODY AS A CONTAINER metaphor and the consequent development of the body versus mind dichotomy favoured the progressive creation of a new series of specialized vocabulary for the expression of emotional distress in later ME. However, the use of such specialized terms as *melancholie* in late medieval medical texts shows the persistence of the union between the psychological vocabulary and the physical vocabulary.

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<sup>3</sup> According to the OED, a cognate *botab* existed in OHG and in MHG. However, the word has died out of German, its place being taken by *Leib* (originally ‘life’) which, differently to English *body*, makes reference to the union of the body and the mind.

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