Chapter 1

Analogy and Metaphor in Ancient Medicine and the Ancient Egyptian Conceptualisation of Heat in the Body*

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This chapter develops a conceptual framework for approaching special, technical uses of language found in ancient medical texts. As an alternative to the unwieldy intuitive distinction between so-called ‘literal’ and ‘figurative’ language, medical use of terminology derived from other domains of experience is better approached as a question of intersection between axes of lexical centrality and ontological commitment. The advantages of this framework are then exemplified by an analysis of the roles of heat in ancient Egyptian healing texts, demonstrating how a more nuanced understanding of ancient conceptions can be achieved by paying attention to uses of language derived from different experiential domains.

1 Introduction

Textual sources for ancient medicine often employ technical language and terminology derived from other domains of life. This characteristic can be difficult to articulate precisely. On the one hand, it is clearly related to the literary phenomenon of metaphor, in that ordinary meanings are extended according to certain principles to result in technical uses of words. On the other hand,

* A previous version of this paper was given as a guest lecture at the University of Liverpool in March 2014. It has benefitted greatly from the subsequent discussion, both on that occasion and at the Chicago symposium, where especially the various concepts of metaphor and their usability in studying ancient medicine were discussed in detail. My aim here has been to incorporate the gist of the various viewpoints in order to hopefully arrive at a concept of metaphor which is both nuanced and useful for the particular purpose of exploring conceptualisations of the body in ancient medicine, without losing the basically practical aims of the exercise. I am very grateful to Camilla Di Biase-Dyson for stimulating discussions of a draft of the paper, and to the anonymous reviewer for a number of useful suggestions.
the decision to label technical language as ‘metaphorical’ can carry a number of problematic connotations, such as implying that the ancients did not hold their descriptions to be literally true, which stands in contradiction to the evidence in many cases.

The present chapter begins by developing a conceptual framework suitable for studying the phenomena of metaphor and analogy in ancient medicine, drawing on influential paradigms from cognitive linguistics, phenomenology and the history of medicine. The notion of ‘metaphor’ deserves particular attention, on the one hand, because of the great promise of conceptual metaphor theory for studying ancient medicine, and on the other, because such broad definitions of metaphor are not always compatible with other scholarly work that rely on a more traditional concept of metaphor. The question of the applicability of a theory of metaphors to ancient conceptions of the body has also been raised in other traditions independently of the notion of conceptual metaphor, and some of the insights from such works will be presented as well, in order to arrive at a conceptual framework suitable for analysing and interpreting ancient medical texts.

Following this theoretical exposition, the chapter will move on to a case study dealing with the phenomenon of heat in the body in ancient Egyptian medical texts. Based on how linguistic expressions of this phenomenon draw upon primary lexical meanings of the terminology employed, I will articulate the outline of an underlying causal model by which heat moves around within the human body according to certain principles, and in turn gives rise to observable (especially digestive) problems. In this manner, bodily heat in ancient Egyptian texts provides a perfect illustration of the way attention to the use of ‘technical’ language can be coupled with a practicable conceptual framework to yield new insights into the workings of ancient anatomical and physiological models.

2 Analogy and Metaphor in Ancient Medicine

Ancient medicine tends to describe the human body and its processes and functions in terms derived from other domains of experience, which immediately raises questions of what is literal, what is metaphorical, and what is analogical. In part, these questions touch on issues of empiricism and how texts present their descriptions. It is also clear, however, that much depends on how we define the terms ‘literal,’ ‘metaphoric,’ and ‘analogical,’ which inevitably raises broader questions on the philosophy of language.