Symposium
“Exploring the pitfalls and promises of metaphor use in communication with low-literate audiences”

Call for Abstracts
Deadline 4 July 2022, noon CEST

Metaphors abound in public communication. Politicians describe the corona pandemic as a marathon, journalists discuss global warming in terms of a greenhouse, and pension funds present our future pension in terms of a journey. Because metaphors allow us to describe difficult concepts in terms of more familiar things, they are considered a powerful tool for effective communication. However, guidelines for communication aimed towards low-literate people typically advise against the use of metaphor, because low-literate people may experience difficulties in interpreting metaphorical uses of words. To date, little research has been conducted on this topic, and it consequently remains an open question whether metaphors help or hinder effective communication with low-literate audiences.

The lack of research on the potentially paradoxical role of metaphor is remarkable, given current scientific and societal debates about comprehensible language. This calls for the establishment of an interdisciplinary research agenda that addresses fundamental and applied questions about the promises and pitfalls of metaphor use in communication with low-literate audiences. To give such a research agenda a flying start, we are hosting a two-day symposium on 8 and 9 September, 2022 in Nijmegen, the Netherlands.

The symposium brings together researchers from the fields of metaphor studies and literacy studies, as well as from adjacent disciplines such as communication studies, psychology, and health care. It will address questions such as “Which linguistic, conceptual and communicative characteristics of metaphor influence its effectiveness for lower- versus higher-literate audiences, and in which specific contexts and modalities?” “Which processes related to language production and comprehension influence the effectiveness of metaphors for lower- versus higher-literate people?” and “Which methods should we use to investigate the effect of metaphorical language on communication with low literates?”

A limited number of slots are available for early career researchers to present their research (ideas) on metaphor and functional literacy in a 10-minute
lightning presentation. With this Call for Abstracts, we invite PhD students and postdoctoral researchers to submit their work. Abstracts may cover theoretical as well as empirical research, as long as they connect to the symposium theme. Presenters whose abstract is accepted will be (partly) reimbursed for travel and subsistence.

Abstract guidelines
Please send your abstract to gudrun.reijnierse@ru.nl by 4 July, 2022, noon CEST at the latest.

Abstracts should be 300 words maximum, and should be written in English. They should contain a title and author name(s), position(s) and affiliation(s). Abstracts on empirical research should contain a research question or hypothesis, methods section, findings and conclusion. Abstracts on theoretical contributions should contain a brief introduction, a main argument, and a conclusion.

Feel free to contact the organizers at gudrun.reijnierse@ru.nl in case you have any questions about the symposium.