

Metaphor, Text and Context in CEOs' Letters

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Abstract

The mixed cognitive linguistics and discourse analysis proposed in this article seeks to reveal the essentially rhetorical nature of metaphor in the business discourse, over and beyond metaphor's undeniable cognitive and linguistic interface. The analysis unfolds throughout seven sample texts extracted from annual company reports, all epitomizing the recently developed genre of Chief Executive Officers' letters.

Keywords: *cognitive metaphor, rhetoric, discourse, CEO's letter*

Introduction

While many authors, at different points in time, have claimed with arguments that metaphors do have a role in our perception of reality [1], [10], [6], the ideological potential of all metaphors has been repeatedly acknowledged [8], but remains still under-researched. To bridge this easily noticeable gap, this paper sets out to investigate seven business discourse samples.

The close reading of the selected business discourse texts draws on Critical Metaphor Analysis as suggested by Charteris-Black [4]. This framework combines the strong premises of the contemporary Cognitive Metaphor Theory [10], [11] with Critical Discourse Analysis concerns [13].

The established terminology is adopted: conceptual metaphors involve a systematic mapping between the target and the source domain, linguistically visible in connections between the Topic and the Vehicle terms.

The identification of the linguistic metaphorical layer, which constitutes the potential activator of the conceptual mappings between the target concept domain and the source domain, is achieved through the adoption of a set of necessary conditions. Thus, metaphor is held to be identifiable in contexts where: reference to a Topic domain is made by a Vehicle term (or terms); there is potentially an incongruity between the domain of the Vehicle term and the Topic domain; it is possible for a receiver (in general, or a particular person), as a member of a particular discourse community, to find a coherent interpretation which makes sense of the incongruity in its discourse context, and which involves some transfer of meaning from the Vehicle domain. These linguistic criteria, taken over from Cameron [3, 118], are to be supplemented with a concern for the cognitive shaping delivered by such linguistically validated metaphorical constructions.

Outlining the target genre: CEOs' letters

Genre-based research has been forced to delve into the rapidly-changing world of contemporary genre moulds and practices. As Garzone puts it, "the last few years have seen a revival of interest in response to a radical evolution and diversification in discursive practices and generic conventions, both oral and written, triggered by sea changes in social organization and in the media used for communication" [7, 30].

The emergence of new genres occasions this discourse analytical inquiry into the rhetorical means of a set of typical sections of Annual Company Reports (ACRs), namely the Chief Executive Officers' (CEOs') letters. This genre has been already reported to rely on a highly rhetorical architecture [2], [9], [5]. It is a welcome addition to the dry, factual, numerically rich financial reports, being the main discourse product in this frame that has a publicity function. Signed by the company's CEO, it is designed to attract attention, to build and boost the investors' confidence, and validate monetary data and corporate strategies.

The seven texts of the CEOs' letters belonging to this small corpus (totalizing 8 627 words) are all juxtaposed against the context of a crucial historical event, which began in the fall of 2008 and continues to manifest itself worldwide – the current financial and economic crisis. The ACRs which they form an integral part of account either for the fiscal year 2008 (three texts) or 2009 (four texts). The corpus letters are authored by a management representative, the CEO, six texts having a single author, and one the joint authorship of a CEO designate and an acting CEO. The companies are all leading companies in their domain, and in this small corpus they illustrate diversified business, ranging from banking (ING Bank and National Australia Bank), to the production of fertilizer products (Potash Corp), scientific, engineering, and technology applications products and services (Science Applications International Corporation), global management consulting, technology services and outsourcing (Accenture), a global aviation group (Lufthansa), and supplying networking equipment and network management for the Internet (Cisco).

All of these letters are deployed to produce a certain understanding of this event and of its particular consequences onto the organization. The metaphors identified in the corpus are intended to deflect attention away from the responsible factors and direct it onto exterior, indomitable, uncontrollable forces, and at the same time insist on the companies' gratifying financial results.

CEO's letters: corpus analysis

With a view to the main thrust of the current paper, two most important foci of attention, metaphorically shaped through linguistic means, are worth pursuing in this cognitive linguistic examination. These are the ECONOMIC CRISIS, in full progress at the time when the CEOs' messages were launched, and the ORGANIZATION – with reference to the respective organization in each case.

- Perspectives on the ECONOMIC CRISIS

The economic CRISIS, seen through the CEOs' lenses, selects only a few of the multiple possibilities available in the business press. One of the strongly preferred root metaphors is THE CRISIS IS A NATURAL WEATHER PHENOMENON, emerges from the following excerpts (in which the Vehicle terms have been italicized):

- (1) "The latter half of 2008 brought unprecedented challenges to world financial markets, and no industry – even those as essential as fertilizer and food – *escaped untouched*."
- (2) "our industry was *affected* by the widespread loss of confidence in the global economy."
- (3) "a potentially *devastating* crisis that earned priority status earlier in the year"

- (4) "the crisis has understandably *damaged* trust in our industry";
- (5) "The *magnitude* of the crisis has left few companies untouched";
- (6) "This culminated in a *wave* of bank failures, solvency problems, government bailouts";
- (7) "The sharp market deterioration resulted in significant impairments and negative revaluations across most asset classes, *eroding* our profit in 2008, resulting in our first ever annual loss.";
- (8) "Good things can come from challenging situations. We are steering the business through these *turbulent* times [...]";
- (9) "In addition to *managing* our business well *through* the global economic downturn, in fiscal 2009 we took steps to position Accenture in important ways for the future by enhancing our core business and investing in new and emerging growth areas.";

As a weather phenomenon, the crisis becomes adjacent to discourse items that evoke extreme, dangerous (*to escape untouched, to affect*), destructive (*devastating, to damage*), force majeure events, such as earthquakes (*magnitude*), tsunamis (*wave*), landslides (*eroding*), hurricanes or violent storms (*turbulent, manage through*).

Through the lexical choice of *lull*, one CEO even suggests the mapping between the calm before and after the crisis and the calm before and after the storm:

- (10) "We will not push our products into markets when there is a *lull*, but we will be *prepared* as demand growth returns.";

The extreme natural weather phenomenon scenario is crisscrossed with an implication of aggression, which is also spelled out in THE CRISIS IS AN AGGRESSION correspondences:

- (11) "Furthermore, we are *confronting* the crisis head-on by preserving our capital base, reducing risk and bringing costs in line with the operating environment";
- (12) "We have achieved or even exceeded important targets despite *adverse conditions*, and are much better placed than our main competitors.";
- (13) "No one can predict how long the global economic crisis will last and what profound *hardship* it will yet *cause*.";
- (14) "We are countering the persistent weakness in demand for global airfreight, which began to *bite* in the final quarter of 2008, by reducing freighter capacities and by introducing short-time work."

The implicit lack of motivation and lack of human agency of the aggression characterize both the AGGRESSION and NATURAL WEATHER PHENOMENON samples. This leads to the subtle inculcation in the CEO's message of a lack of human responsibility and guilt regarding the advent of the financial and economic crisis. This shadowed implication risks to go unnoticed by the shareholders, who are indirectly invited to attend to the fortuity, fatality and hazardousness of the crisis. In this way, these two metaphors aim at enhancing the emotional involvement of the message recipients.

Another pattern that obliterates human agency is that of the fall. Movement metaphors are not scarce in the business and economics discourse, with a vested interest in explaining money matters by means of up and down movement. The associations metaphorically equated as GOOD IS UP and BAD IS DOWN (experientially grounded in body posture associations with life and health, and death and illness, respectively) are conceptually consistent with THE CRISIS IS A FALL. *Up* terms (e.g. *upturn*) are used for economic situations other than the crisis, while *down* terms (e.g. *declining, downward, freefall, downturn*) define the crisis itself:

- (15) "For several years ample liquidity and low interest rates fuelled an economic *upturn*.";

(16) “Positioning Cisco for future growth in a *declining* economic environment is one of those situations.”;

(17) “The result was a vicious circle of deleveraging, which created a strong, further *downward* pressure on equities, corporate bonds, real estate and private equity.”;

(18) “Despite robust grain demand and extremely low inventories relative to use, crop commodity prices were caught up in the *freefall*. Farmers, like other consumers, reacted by holding on to their capital and deferring fertilizer purchases.”;

(19) “History has taught us that you don't change long-term strategy based upon (what we hope will be) a relatively short-term economic *downturn*.”;

Movement is also comprised in the loss of balance scenario, whose suitability in explaining the crisis is rated high in CEOs’ letters. THE CRISIS IS A DISEQUILIBRIUM, and resisting the balancing forces (*hold one’s own well, remain safe and secure, stay firm, poised*) or redressing after the balancing movement (*stabilising*) are repeatedly asserted in metaphorical discourse:

(20) “Lufthansa *held its own very well* in 2008.”;

(21) “It is gratifying that all the business segments in the Lufthansa Group have *positioned* themselves well and *held their own* in the market.”;

(22) “Lufthansa Cargo has *stayed very firm* in an increasingly difficult market environment.”

(23) “However we end the year with a cautiously optimistic perspective and *poised* to realise the opportunities ahead.”;

(24) “Under the challenging economic conditions of the past year, I am pleased to report that NAB has *remained safe and secure*”;

(25) “The Passenger Transportation business segment has put in a *stable* performance and delivered good results.”;

(26) “In this first phase of recovery, *stabilising* the company and restoring credibility are key.”

To maintain or restore equilibrium an attribute of strength is required; this explains why fragility and strength are metaphorically played upon in the lexis of the CEOs’ messages. *Fragile* and *tenuous* are linked to the effects of the economic crisis:

(27) “In an economic environment where confidence levels within financial markets were still *fragile*, [...]”;

(28) “However, we believed that we needed to work differently in order to execute our strategy of moving into multiple market adjacencies during such a *tenuous* time in the global economy.”

The suddenness of the economic crisis is enforced via the mapping THE CRISIS IS AN EXPLOSION, but this is not among the CEOs’ top choices, probably because the metaphor has additional connotations of complete destruction and severe losses:

(29) “The *burst of the bubble* in real estate markets, especially in the United States, triggered a rapid decline in asset prices”;

(30) “Given the *tense* economic situation worldwide and the uncertainties on the financial markets [...]”

For similar reasons perhaps – diseases may turn out to be incurable or lethal – nor is THE CRISIS IS A DISEASE a frequent occurrence in this small corpus. Even if it is used, the linguistic traces of the metaphor suggest lack of severity (the generic term *to affect*) or are selected to offer a positive perspective (*to show signs of recovery*):

(31) “As we move further into fiscal 2010, the economy is starting to *show early signs of recovery* in certain industries and markets.”

One CEO chooses to evoke lack of immunity through stating the obvious (no company is immune to the crisis) and to avoid responsibility by emphasizing the implacable nature of the disease:

(32) "Worldwide economic turmoil *affected* countries, companies, and households. At Cisco, we were not *immune* to the challenges, nor were our customers."

On the whole, the crisis is presented as an uncontrollable movement generating confusion (*turmoil*), an aggressive self-asserting force (*dominated, devastating, earn priority, push out*), in statements that mix the metaphorical patterns, but preserve these implications:

(33) "This financial *turmoil dominated* people's attention, while concern about the global food supply – a potentially *devastating* crisis that *earned priority* status earlier in the year – was *pushed out* of the spotlight."

Exceptions to this trend do occur, and are meant to lighten the gloomy picture in the previously mentioned metaphors. Pragmatically analyzable as the Pollyanna effect, linguistic metaphors that underlie THE CRISIS IS AN OPPORTUNITY conceptual correspondence are not scarce:

(34) "Crises are always also *times of momentous decisions*.";

(35) "In what was clearly the *most challenging* global economic environment we ever faced, [...]";

(36) "This past year was clearly an extraordinary time for businesses around the world, a year of *incredible challenge and change*.";

(37) "I want to thank the 177,000 Accenture men and women around the world for their hard work and dedication throughout fiscal 2009, which enabled us to navigate a *challenging* environment"

- Perspectives on the COMPANY

Since the crisis is often metaphorically represented as a sudden aggression from the exterior, the company is depicted in a number of ways that highlight positive attributes and reactions in a hostile environment.

A few major directions may be discerned among the host of metaphorical templates: firstly, the company is often referred to as a living organism, specific personification being especially primed; secondly, a new ontological status is given to the target concept – the company – by opting for vehicle or construction source domains; thirdly, the dynamics of the target concept is also remembered in metaphorical encoding. However, CEOs manifest a strong tendency towards mixing metaphors by syntactically and conceptually joining Vehicle terms.

The concretization of the company, an abstract system, prevails in metaphors that equate this system to a living organism (A COMPANY IS A LIVING ORGANISM). This strategy is rhetorically effective due to its potential to direct the readers' natural emotional involvement and sympathy to living (preferably human) beings, rather than to inanimate entities. The concept of *growth*, and its lexical correlates (*to grow, growth, growing*) become almost excessively used in the corpus (altogether 44 concordances):

(38) "To prepare for this *growth*, we continue to build our potash capacity.";

(39) "We remain convinced that air traffic will continue to *grow* over the medium and long term."

Sometimes the CEOs' addresses escape the intense conventionalization of the trite *growth* metaphor and novel linguistic specimens are used:

(40) “Listening to customers to help solve their most challenging problems will always be part of *our DNA*.”

The discourse aim exerts its influence on the choice of the personification metaphors” phrasing; if companies are humans, then they have hearts, the culturally-specific repository of emotions:

(41) “Their efforts to demonstrate to customers every day that we take our responsibility to them very seriously are at the *heart* of this company.”

Apart from the discourse aim, the choice of the specific portions of personification mappings is influenced by the discourse frame; the context of the crisis metaphors is synchronized with a perception of companies as patients in need of adequate treatment (thus retorting to the aggression or the disease scenarios), or as fit and strong persons (echoing the aggression or the extreme phenomena scenarios):

(42) “significant implications for everyone, including fundamentally *healthy* companies.”;

(43) “International market expectations of capital levels had changed practically overnight, also against the backdrop of capital *injections* into financial institutions by the US and UK governments.”;

(44) “We have led the industry in addressing issues of interest rate transparency, fee fairness and financial services for the vulnerable in our community, and this puts us *in good shape* as markets *recover*.”;

(45) “Australia Banking delivered a *strong* performance”

Strength and vigour also act as the target points in A COMPANY IS A SOLDIER instantiations. The reaction to an aggression is expressed in the military metaphors of strategies (26 occurrences of *strategy, strategic, strategically*), discipline (*alignment*) and political decisions (*alliance, partner*):

(46) “As we have in the past, we will bring on this capacity when it is needed, remaining true to our long-held *strategy* of matching production to market demand.”;

(47) “Our *strategic* orientation is paying off: we focus on developing our core business, the airlines, and in the current environment benefit from the Group’s business segments at the same time.”;

(48) “Lufthansa is well prepared – *strategically*, financially and operationally.”;

(49) “To ensure that Accenture is properly *aligned* to capture growth opportunities, we made important organizational changes”;

(50) “the formation of an *alliance* with Goldman Sachs”;

(51) “With its strong presence in Africa, Brussels Airlines is a valuable *partner* for us”

Strength of will is yet another expansion of the retort in the aggression scenario. Combined with personification, this metaphor yields A COMPANY IS A WILLFUL HUMAN BEING. Reasonableness and promptness are not divorced from suggestions of strong volition acts in:

(52) “We will not push our products into markets when there is a *lull*, but we will be *prepared* as demand growth returns. We expect a new surge to begin during the second half of 2009 – and we will be *ready* to capitalize on the opportunity.”;

(53) “we are *confronting* the crisis *head-on*”;

(54) “We *forged* ahead by reallocating over \$1 billion in resources into market adjacencies in an effort to fuel growth over the long term. From an operational standpoint, we *pursued* a relentless focus on organizational efficiency and expense management to enable these investments.”;

(55) “We *moved quickly and decisively* at the beginning of 2009 to align our business with the most compelling market opportunities.”;

(56) “In fiscal 2009 we *took steps* to position Accenture in important ways for the future by enhancing our core business and investing in new and emerging growth areas.”

Metaphor is a rhetorical tool that is used not only to convince the readership about the strength, readiness and zeal of the company run by the CEO, but also a means of attaining consensus of views based on relationship correspondences. A COMPANY IS A FRIEND, A COMPANY IS A SERVANT, with their striking affective appeal, illustrate this in:

(57) "Our customers *entrust* us with their deposits and savings, expecting ING to carefully manage their money and invest it in a sensible way.;

(58) "These principles are the basis upon which customer confidence, and consequently, investor *confidence in* ING is built.;"

(59) "Not only will this allow us to *serve* the needs of our customers and communities for generations to come, it will enhance our ability to *reward* you for providing the capital needed to fulfill the noble cause of food production."

The closeness of friends is metaphorically alluded to and enhanced by the repetition of *close* phrases:

(60) "We pride ourselves on always *being close to* our customers.;"

(61) "In fiscal 2009, we made it a priority to *become even closer* in order to understand their challenges, their pain, and their opportunities. This was the time to emphasize the relevancy of our product and solution capabilities, and *to stand with* our customers to face the uncertain economic future together.;"

(62) "Throughout the year, we *stayed close* to our clients, adapting to their changing needs in areas such as cost management, operational improvement and customer retention."

Still within personification strategies, A COMPANY IS AN ACTOR is a deeply entrenched pattern in the business discourse, which is not avoided in CEOs' letters:

(63) "As pleased as we are with our 2008 *performance*, we believe it only hints at what we can achieve.;"

(64) "Bank of New Zealand (BNZ) continued to *perform well*";

(65) "We want to continue to *impress* with our quality and performance."

In their letters, the CEOs create repeated opportunities to assert that A COMPANY IS A TRAVELLING ENTITY/ A VEHICLE. This elicits a dense semantic domain, that of journeys and vehicles, where position and advancement are emphasized in various ways (against the crisis background, against the competition, against the customers and their expectations, etc.):

(66) "We believe our potash advantage *separates* us from other companies in our industry, and we will use this in the *pursuit* of greater returns for our shareholders.;"

(67) "We look forward to *continuing on a path* of strong financial performance and greater returns for our shareholders.;"

(68) "Despite the volatile market, it is this *course* of action that has helped ensure we remain rated as one of the safest banks in the world.;"

(69) "We are *steering* the business through these turbulent times, focusing on today's priorities with the discipline that these exceptional times require.;"

(70) "I believe that there is no better company to *navigate* the complexity and uncertainty of the federal government changes than your company.;"

(71) "We will look at our business with fresh eyes to apply further focus and build a coherent set of strong businesses, and seek new ways of doing business so we can *come through* this crisis stronger and smarter.;"

(72) "I'm proud of what we achieved in fiscal 2009—and even more excited about the opportunities that *lie ahead*.;"

- (73) “In our core business, we revitalized our offerings and *made great strides* in reducing our delivery costs.”;
- (74) “When all *obstacles* have been successfully cleared, both airlines will provide us with the chance to connect the Belgian and Austrian markets better with the Lufthansa network.”;
- (75) “Please *accompany* us as we *move forward*. Stay with us!”;
- (76) “Capturing these opportunities requires that Cisco *move with speed*, internal alignment, and thought leadership.”;
- (77) “Even so, we have still managed to *increase the distance* between ourselves and our competitors on the stock market in 2008.”;
- (78) “We have also delivered a number of growth initiatives that are a core part of our strategy and these will *position* us for the future.”

Connecting to the all-pervasive insistence on the company’s strength and stability, objectification is additionally accomplished via A COMPANY IS A CONSTRUCTION passages:

- (79) “Accordingly, we *base* our business decisions on maximizing value – not quarter by quarter, but over an extended period of time. This includes *building strong* and *lasting* relationships with all our stakeholders, as we understand how we *nourish* each other's growth.”;
- (80) “In this first phase of recovery, *stabilising* the company and restoring credibility are key.”;
- (81) “Lufthansa made a number of key decisions concerning the consolidation process in 2008.”;
- (82) “The share price reflects neither the sound *foundations* of the entire Group and its stable earnings development, nor our potential for the future.”;
- (83) “our freight company has *set itself up well* for the future by *building on* its strategic partnerships.”;
- (84) “In 1969, our founder, Dr. J. Robert Beyster, set out to *build* a company by tackling tough problems for the nation with a talented, entrepreneurial work force, and a dedication to ethics and integrity.”

What Morgan characterizes as a flux and transformation metaphor [12, 241-290], A COMPANY IS A PROCESSUAL ENTITY, enjoys only rare linguistic occurrences:

- (85) “Michel has *given* a lot to ING as CEO, *transforming* ING into a more focused organisation.”
- (86) “We developed our approach for *transforming* the company.”

Last but not least, a secondary order metaphor (A COMPANY IS A CULTURE) is a privilege for CEOs to introduce the rewarding topic of corporate *values, commitment, responsibility, ethics*:

- (87) “Our corporate training also instills in our people our six core *values*”;
- (88) “We demonstrated our *commitment* to this late in 2008 [...]”;
- (89) “Our business principles, the backbone of our approach to corporate *responsibility*, give us guidance on our responsibilities towards our customers as well as on such matters as the environment and human rights.”;
- (90) “the steadfast *commitment* of our employees to our enduring core *values* has never been more important. There have been a number of constants in our 40-year history, but at the top of the list is our *commitment to ethics* and customer mission.”

Faced with an unprecedented financial and economic crisis, CEOs prove to adapt their public addresses to the discourse variables, co-text and context. From Morgan’s list [12] of eight cornerstone metaphors for organizations (machine, organism, brains, culture, political system, psychic prison, flux and transformation, domination), only two are exploited to the maximum due to their inherent and context-dictated suitability (organism and culture), others offer peripheral access to the company’s identity (flux and transformation, domination), and

some others are ruled out as ill-fitting (machine, psychic prison). Patterns prone to emotional associations (personifications, objectifications) are strongly invited for their potential to trigger solidarity, understanding and confidence.

The rhetorical effectiveness of metaphor is demonstrated not only by a deft manipulation and endorsement of metaphorical patterns concerning the crisis and the company, but also by the unswerving commitment to metaphor mixing. Notice how, in just a short extract, a multitude of metaphors appear inextricably linked, and their cognitive, textual and rhetorical virtues are boosted:

(91) "I am confident we are *laying solid foundations* for our future. We have a *strong* and energised leadership team *in place*, an organisation *aligned to deliver*, and we are meeting our *responsibilities* to our shareholders and the broader community to *lift our performance* and our *reputation*." (THE COMPANY IS A CONSTRUCTION, A HEALTHY ORGANISM, A SOLDIER, A SERVANT, A CULTURE, AN ACTOR, A WILLFUL HUMAN BEING).

Conclusions

I have argued that the qualitative analysis of the metaphorical coding of information to be transmitted to existing and potential shareholders offers some insights into the prioritising and manipulation of major concepts such as the economic crisis, the company or the business environment. This analysis raises awareness concerning the CEO's letter within the Annual Company Report, which is revealed to be more complex than it has been thought. Along with other manipulative and rhetorical strategies, metaphor is revealed to be handled with care, so as to build desirable market or customer expectations, to obscure negative management performances, and to put forth an overall beneficial image of the organization.

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Metaforă, text și context în scrisorile directorului general către acționari

Rezumat

Analiza mixtă, atât a discursului, cât și cea de lingvistică cognitivă, propusă de acest articol urmărește să dezvăluie natura fundamental retorică a metaforei în discursul de afaceri, dincolo de incontestabila interfață cognitivă și lingvistică a metaforei. Analiza se ocupă de șapte texte extrase din rapoartele anuale, toate reprezentând un gen de dată recentă, cel al scrisorii directorului general.

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