

## British Petroleum's corporate discourse involving climate change before and after the Deepwater Horizon oil spill: A cognitive linguistic account

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### **Abstract**

This article involves a qualitative study of climate change discourse by British Petroleum (BP) before and after the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico on April 20, 2010. The study aims at elucidating the impact of the spill upon BP's climate change discourse by means of identifying conceptual metaphors in BP's annual reports before and after the Deepwater Horizon spill. Data analysis reveals that BP's climate change discourse prior to and following the Deepwater Horizon spill is framed by the metaphors Citizen and Journey. These findings are further discussed in the article.

**Keywords:** corporate discourse, discourse of climate change, conceptual metaphor

### **1. Introduction**

Several multinational fossil fuels corporations, for example BP, Exxon, and Shell have experienced environmental and occupational safety incidents of significant proportions that negatively impacted upon their image (Uldam 2014). In particular, BP's corporate image is reported to be negatively affected by the oil spill at the Deepwater Horizon (DWH) well in the Gulf of Mexico on 20<sup>th</sup> April 2010 (Sammarco et al. 2013; Starbird et al. 2015). Previous research (Breeze 2012; Ladd 2012; Starbird et al. 2015) indicates that BP's corporate discourse has undergone substantial changes after the DWH. Following the DWH spill, BP's discourse emphasises the notions of corporate responsibility, environmental protection, and occupational safety (Hoffman & Jennings 2011). However, little is known about how BP frames its climate change discourse in the wake of the DWH incident.

The novelty of the research further presented in this article consists in a cognitive linguistic account of BP's climate change discourse before and after the DWH. The relevance of the present research is as follows: Given that the DWH is often referred to as a serious crisis in corporate management and public relations (Breeze 2012), it is highly topical to explore how BR reacted to framing the issue of climate change in its corporate discourse after the DWH. The relevant questions pertaining to such an

exploration would involve, for instance, i) Did BP react to the issue of climate change after the DWH spill?; ii) Did BP neglect the issue of climate change after the DWH spill or, on the contrary, did it focus upon that issue more deeply?, etc. In the present study, BP's annual reports (ARs) are analysed in a qualitative 'before and after' design to identify conceptual metaphors in BP's climate change discourse prior to and following the DWH spill. Hence, this article is structured as follows: First, a brief outline of the DWH background will be provided. Second, an overview of previous studies involving conceptual metaphors in corporate discourse will be given. Third, climate change-related issues in corporate ARs will be discussed. Fourth, a qualitative analysis of conceptual metaphors associated with BP's climate change discourse before and after the DWH incident will be described.

### *1.1 The DWH incident background*

The explosion of the DWH oil well in the Gulf of Mexico has resulted in the loss of BP workers' lives (Ladd 2012), and significant ecological damage to marine life in the Gulf of Mexico (Hoffman & Jennings 2011; Sammarco et al. 2013). The spill has impacted upon the psychology, health, personal economy and consumer trust of the inhabitants of coastal Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, and Florida in the USA (Hall, Kice & Choi 2012; Starbird et al. 2015). The DWH is referred to as the most substantial environmental disaster in US modern history (Ladd 2012; Sammarco et al. 2013), which is characterised by the previously unknown magnitude, duration of the oil release and crisis management techniques (Goldstein, Osofsky & Lichtveld 2011).

It needs to be emphasised that the DWH is regarded as a serious crisis in corporate management and corporate public relations (Breeze 2012). Following the DWH, BP experiences negative public reaction to the company's activities and seeks to address environmental and occupational safety issues in its ARs published after 2010 (Breeze 2012). However, BP does not provide a public-friendly narrative of the spill and its containment, framing it as self-justification by "delivering a message with a robotic, human-less feel." (Hall, Kice & Choi 2012: 3). Similarly, Cherry and Sneirson (2011) posit that the DWH represents a failure of BP's discourse to present itself as a socially and environmentally responsible corporation.

However, BP mitigates the spill resorting to 'stakeholder management' by ensuring support from the key players in the company and in the government sector (Abdelrehim, Maltby & Toms 2015). BP's post-DWH crisis management has

facilitated the corporation's image repair and allowed BP to adjust its crisis management discourse (Schmittel & Hull 2015). BP has continuously reported about its crisis management by means of 'official updates', which frame BP as a socially responsible corporation restoring the damage and compensating the victims of the spill (Choi 2012).

### *1.2 An overview of previous studies involving conceptual metaphors in corporate discourse*

In rhetoric, metaphor is understood as a "figure of speech in which a word or phrase is used to describe something it does not really denote" (McGlone 2007: 109). However, in cognitive linguistics, metaphor is viewed beyond the level of lexis and semantics (Lakoff & Johnson 1980), and is deemed to be a mode of conceptual representations (McGlone 2007). The cognitive paradigm posits that metaphors are reflective of underlying conceptual mappings between distinct conceptual domains of experience (Steen 2009). Conceptual cross-domain mappings are theorised to be associated with long-term memory and cognitive processes, such as reasoning, language, imagination, and other mental representations (*ibid.*). Consequently, it is posited that explicit utterances in discourse involve structures of hidden, not directly observable phenomena which are based upon conceptual metaphors (Musolff 2004).

Previous studies emphasise the role of metaphor in corporate discourse (Kapranov 2017; Kopnina 2014; Moon, Crane & Matten 2005; Morgan 1980). Discursive representations of corporate life by means of metaphors offer powerful insights into business organisations (Morgan 1980). Metaphors are assumed to structure corporate discourse referring to organisational life, business images, social and environmental issues (Moon, Crane & Matten 2005). Metaphors in corporate discourse facilitate the complexity of discursive representations by means of foregrounding understandable, simple and less complicated features (Moon, Crane & Matten 2005), since metaphors provide structure to mental representations of complex concepts (McGlone 2007).

Metaphors are amply used in framing corporate narratives of climate change (Bomberg, 2015; Koteyko 2012; Kapranov 2015; Russill & Nyssa 2009). Framing in corporate and public discourse involves interpretative storylines that provide impulses to the public, government and corporations involving a particular issue at hand, explaining why this issue poses a problem, what has caused that problem, who is

responsible for the problem and what should be done about the problem (Nisbet 2009).

International fossil fuels corporations seem to frame their climate change discourse as morally good entities that support sustainable development and social responsibility (Livesey 2002; Moon, Crane & Matten 2005). Previous scholarship suggests that predominantly metaphoric frames are applicable to climate change narratives, such as the frames of progress, development, morality, and ethics (Koteyko, Thelwall & Nerlich 2010; Nerlich 2010; Nisbet 2009). Fossil fuels corporations are reported to be metaphorically framed by the metaphors 'Carbon Morality', 'Carbon Crusade', and 'Carbon Conscious' that involve moral and religious implications (Koteyko, Thelwall & Nerlich 2010). These conceptual metaphors are suggested to be related to the metaphor 'Science is Religion' (Nerlich 2010), where public and corporate supporters of climate change action are conceptualised as 'believers', 'climate evangelists', and 'climate prophets' (Nerlich 2010), as opposed to the climate change sceptics who are portrayed as 'heretics' (Nerlich & Koteyko 2009).

### *1.3 Climate change-related issues in corporate Annual Reports (ARs)*

ARs constitute a significant source of information for the company's investors, business partners, government and non-government bodies (Neu, Warsame & Pedwell 1998). International fossil fuels corporations recognise that their involvement in environmental activities needs to be reflected in the ARs as a token of the corporate environmental performance (Wiseman 1982). Stakeholders, customers, and regulatory bodies exert pressure on fossil fuels corporations regarding their climate change-related activities (Haque & Deegan 2010). For instance, BP and other fossil fuels corporations have to abide by the greenhouse emission limits imposed by the Kyoto Protocol. Consequently, these corporations are required by law to report the greenhouse data in their ARs. It can be generalised that corporate accounts of managing and mitigating the issue of climate change are reflected in the AR (Pulver 2007).

ARs by fossil fuels corporations receive substantial attention in conjunction with their environmental activities that involve greenhouse gasses emission data, corporate accounts of natural resources management, and climate change-related activities (Meijer & Kleinnijhuis 2006; Stanny & Ely 2008). Previous research indicates that

BP reports environmental and climate change data in its ARs to present an environmentally-friendly 'green' image to the public (Kapranov 2015) and frames this image by the frequent words 'community', 'carbon emission', 'smart', etc. (Skorczynska & Carrio-Pastor 2015).

## 2. Hypothesis and specific research aims

Given that the DWH initiated a shift in BP's corporate strategy involving the environment and occupational safety (Hoffman & Jennings 2011), it was assumed in *the Hypothesis* that the DWH impacted upon BP's climate change discourse. Following that assumption, it was hypothesised that BP's climate change discourse would be characterised by qualitatively different conceptual metaphors in ARs before and after the spill. Hence, the following *specific research aims* were formulated: i) to identify conceptual metaphors associated with climate change in the ARs by BP in 2005-2014; ii) to establish whether or not BP's climate change discourse before and after the DWH would be characterised by similar or different conceptual metaphors.

## 3. Materials and method

The corpus of the study comprised BP's ARs available online at the corporation's official website [www.bp.com](http://www.bp.com). BP's ARs dating to 2005-2014 were searched electronically for the key words *climate*, *climate change*, *Deepwater Horizon*, *ecology*, *environment*, *global climate change*, and *spill*. The following sections of the ARs were analysed: i) The Chairman's Letter, ii) the Group Chief Executive's Review, and iii) Climate Change. Descriptive statistics of the ARs analysed in the article were given in *Table 1*.

Year	Climate Change Section/Subsection, pages and the total number of words	Chairman's Letter Section, pages and the total number of words	The Group Chief Executive's Review, pages and the total number of words
2005	Climate Change Subsection Title: 'BP and Climate Change', p.31, 107 words. Climate change discourse is embedded into the section 'Environment and Social Performance', pp.30-31, 1359 words.	pp. 2-3; 1004 words	pp.4-5; 1 213 words
2006	Climate Change Subsection Title: 'BP and Climate Change', p.31, 218 words. Climate change discourse is embedded into the section 'Safety,	pp.2-3; 1546 words	pp.4-6; 2 224 words

	Environmental and Social Performance’, pp.30-31, 1356 words		
2007	No separate subsection covering the issue of climate change. Climate change discourse is embedded into the section ‘Safety, Environmental and Social Performance’, pp. 22-23; 1 365 words	p.2; 754 words	p.3; 825 words
2008	No separate subsection covering the issue of climate change. Climate change discourse is embedded into the section ‘Alternative Energy’, pp. 27-29, 1623 words	pp.2-3; 680 words	pp. 4-5; 14 24 words
2009	Climate Change Subsection Title: ‘Environment – Greenhouse Gas Emissions’, p.6, 89 words. Climate change discourse is embedded into the section ‘Our Performance. Progress in 2009’, pp.6-7, 1150 words	pp.2-3; 1157 words	pp.4-5; 1630 words
2010	Climate Change Subsection Title: ‘Environment – Greenhouse Gas Emissions’, p.16, 214 words. Climate change discourse is embedded into the section ‘Our Performance’, pp.16-17	pp.1-5, 1168 words	pp.8-15, 1647 words
2011	Climate Change Subsection Title: ‘Climate Change’, p.70, 530 words. Climate change discourse is embedded into the section ‘Environmental and Social Responsibility’, pp. 69-73, 3335 words	pp.8-11, 1472 words	pp.14-17,1805 words
2012	Climate Change Subsection Title: ‘Climate Change’, p.52, 482 words. Climate change discourse is embedded into the section ‘Environmental and Social Responsibility’, pp.51-54, words 4529	pp. 8-9,1046 words	pp.10-11,1287 words
2013	Climate Change Subsection Title: ‘Climate Change’, p.45, 360 words. Climate change discourse is embedded into the section ‘Environmental and Society’, pp.44-46, 2 578 words	pp. 6-7, 1017 words	pp.8-9, 1182 words
2014	Climate Change Subsection Title: ‘Climate Change’, p.42, 291 words. Climate change discourse is embedded into the section ‘Environmental and Society’, pp.42-44, 2539 words	pp.6-7, 959 words	pp. 8-9 , 1050 words

*Table 1: Descriptive statistics involving climate change in BP’s ARs 2006-2014*



The corpus was examined manually for the presence of conceptual metaphors. Metaphors were identified according to the methodology provided by Musolff (2004), where conceptual metaphors were regarded as cross-domain mappings of conceptual elements between two unrelated domains of experience.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

The results of the qualitative data analysis yielded several conceptual metaphors associated with climate change in the ARs by BP in 2005-2014. These findings are summarised in *Table 2*.

AR/Year	Conceptual Metaphor
2005	Citizen; Journey; Renewables
2006	Citizen; Journey; Renewables
2007	Journey
2008	Journey
2009	Citizen; Journey
2010	Citizen; Journey
2011	Citizen; Journey
2012	Citizen; Journey
2013	Citizen; Journey; Renewables
2014	Citizen; Journey

*Table 2: Conceptual metaphors associated with climate change in BP's ARs 2006-2014*

The findings presented in *Table 2* point to a rather consistent framing of climate change discourse by BP. It is evident from the data in *Table 2* that BP appears to frame its climate change discourse by the Citizen metaphor (identified in the ARs 2005, 2006, 2009-2014), the Journey metaphor, which is present in the ARs 2007-2014, and the Renewables metaphor (used in the 2005-2006, and 2013 ARs). These findings are indicative of BP's consistency in its framing of climate change discourse. This consistency is especially interesting when it is examined within a broader context of the DWH incident.

Given that the DWH is considered an ecological incident of significant proportions, it is reported that BP's corporate image and corporate discourse have been dramatically affected by the DWH spill (Abdelrehim, Maltby & Toms 2015; Cherry & Sneirson 2011; Choi 2012). Consequently, it would be logical to assume that BP's climate change discourse would be modified in the wake of the DWH spill.

However, quite the opposite is observed in *Table 2*. The results of the qualitative data analysis indicate that conceptual metaphors associated with climate change in the 2005-2014 ARs by BP do not seem to exhibit significant changes following by the DWH spill. As evident from *Table 2*, BP frames its post-DWH discourse on the issue of climate change by embedding it into the dyad of co-occurring metaphors Citizen and Journey. After the DWH spill, BP's ARs in 2010-2014 are consistently characterised by these conceptual metaphors. However, the present data reveal that the Citizen and Journey metaphors are not specific to the post-DWH discourse, since they are employed by BP in the ARs published prior to the DWH incident.

Compared to climate change discourse of other fossil fuels corporations (Livesey 2001), it can be assumed that the consistency of BP's climate change discourse prior to and following the DWH spill appears to be rather unique in the corporate world. In this regard, Livesey (2001) posits that a number of international fossil fuels corporations tend to modify their corporate discourse after they have experienced either safety-related or environmental incidents. This observation is supported by previous research studies that report significant shifts in corporate environmental performance following technology-related catastrophes (Cho & Roberts 2010). Specifically, The Royal Dutch Shell (Shell) substantially re-assesses its corporate discourse after the Brent Spar incident in the North Sea. Whilst that incident is not equal in proportion and magnitude to the DWH spill, it nevertheless serves as a point of departure for Shell to start framing its discourse by means of the construals of social responsibility, sustainable development, and ecological friendliness (Kapranov 2017; Livesey, 2002).

However, judging from the data, the DWH spill does not purport to a new framing of climate change discourse by BP. Prior to the spill, in the 2005-2006, and 2009 ARs, and after the spill, in the 2010-2014 ARs there appears a consolidated framing of climate change discourse by the metaphors Citizen and Journey. Arguably, this framing can be attributed to the discursive strategy of portraying BP as a climate change concerned citizen who is in the process of a journey towards a sustainable and climate change-friendly future.

The metaphor Journey is reflective of BP's corporate response to the issue of climate change. This response is durational and protracted in time with the end result being a carbon-free future, or, at least, a low-carbon emission future. The conceptualisation of BP's response to climate change as a metaphorical Journey is



supported by a contention that climate change narratives involve frames of economic development and progress (Nisbet 2009). Specifically, the frame of development is associated with the 'green' eco-friendly investments, market benefits and risks involved in the unresolved issues of climate change (Nisbet 2009). More importantly, the concept of development and progress to attain lower carbon emissions to mitigate negative consequences of climate change is framed by BP as the Journey metaphor. This metaphor is based upon the conceptual schema SOURCE - PATH - GOAL, with the SOURCE being numerous negative consequences of climate change, PATH referring to the corporate measures to mitigate climate change and GOAL involving either a low greenhouse gas emission future, or a carbon-free and biofuel/alternative energy future. This Journey takes time to eventuate, involves numerous steps in the form of practical measures BP is implementing and is committed to implement in the coming decades. Hence, the framing of BP's climate change by means of the Journey metaphor involves the usage of non-perfective aspect associated with the time needed to achieve the end of the journey, a climate change-friendly future:

“...BP is taking a number of practical steps, such as increasing energy efficiency in our operations, factoring a carbon cost into the investment and engineering decisions for new projects, and investing in lower-carbon energy products.” (BP 2013: 45)

It should be indicated that the Journey metaphor is often used in corporate discourse associated with climate change (Kapranov 2017). In the climate change narratives by BP, corporate measures to address climate change are understood as a long-term purposeful activity, which takes place in space and time, and as any other journey has the final point, exemplified by a 'green' low-carbon future.

Being on the metaphorical Journey towards the 'green' future, BP frames itself as a citizen who is responsible, climate change-concerned and dedicated to sustainable development. As a responsible citizen who lives in the community, BP does not shift the blame for the DWH to sub-contractors (Harlow, Brantley & Harlow 2011) and compensates the victims of the spill. In terms of the climate change agenda, BP portrays itself as a moral corporation by using the Citizen metaphor. Specifically, BP construes this metaphor by creating a self-image of BP as a part of society concerned with the issue of climate change. As a responsible citizen, BP emphasises that it aims to manage the environmental and social impacts of its presence, e.g.

“We actively monitor and report greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions to improve our understanding and management of potential carbon risks. We are working towards aligning with the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.” (BP 2015: 42)

As seen in the excerpt above, BP’s climate change narrative is concurrent with “abiding by the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.” (BP 2015: 42). In other words, BP frames its climate change discourse by embedding in into the Citizen metaphor. Arguably, this metaphor integrates social and climate change concerns of the general public. BP addresses these concerns by referring to environmental sustainability, community investment and the corporation’s efforts to mitigate greenhouse emissions.

It should be noted that the Citizen metaphor is concurrent with a predominantly metaphoric and eco-friendly re-branding of BP as ‘Beyond Petroleum’, where the green color of BP’s emblem seems to imply associations with renewable energy and decreased carbon dioxide emissions. This observation is supported by the occurrence of the Renewables metaphor, identified in the 2013 AR. Arguably, BP employs this metaphor to facilitate the ‘green’ re-branding of BP as ‘Beyond Petroleum’. The framing of climate change via the lenses of renewable energy by BP seems to re-inforce the eco-friendliness of BP’s self-image. In this framing, the metaphor Renewables represents cost-effective ways of managing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, and commercially viable reduction of greenhouse gas emissions from transport fuels over the coming years. Interestingly, the Renewables metaphor appears to be concurrent with the Journey metaphor (e.g., “...we have taken steps...”), as seen in the following quote:

“...we have taken steps to reduce emissions from our own operations and to improve further the quality of our products. In 2005, we took an important step with a substantial investment in the development of an alternative energy business that will offer our customers new choices of low-carbon energy. BP Alternative Energy is focused on the power generation sector – the largest single source of emissions from the use of fossil fuels – through investments in solar power, wind, gas and hydrogen power, where the latter employs the new technology of sequestration, in which carbon is captured and stored,

allowing hydrogen to be used to generate clean, carbon- free electric power.”

(BP 2006: 5)

## 5. Conclusions

This article presents a novel research aimed at identifying conceptual metaphors in BP's climate change discourse before and after the DWH oil spill. Judging from the findings presented in this article, BP frames its climate change discourse in 2005-2014 by means of the metaphors Citizen, Journey, and Renewables. The results of the qualitative analysis of the ARs indicate that prior to and following the DWH incident in 2010, BP's framing of climate change discourse appears to be represented by the metaphors Citizen and Journey, which exhibit a tendency to co-occur. BP employs these two metaphors consistently so that it can be assumed that the impact of the DWH incident has no bearings on BP's climate change discourse.

This finding is in contrast with previous research literature (Cho & Roberts 2010; Kapranov 2017; Livesey, 2002) which indicates that following technology-related catastrophes, international fossil fuels corporations, for instance, Exxon and Shell, significantly change their corporate discourse associated with environmental performance and climate change-related activities. However, prior to and following the DWH incident, BP construes a consolidated and stable discursive space associated with climate change and frames this space by means of the metaphors Citizen and Journey. It can be generalised that the issue of climate change is regarded by BP as a strategic problem which requires long-term solutions that exceed the time-frame of a single environmental incident, such as the DWH spill.

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