# METAPHORS DESCRIBING THE ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL CRISIS IN BUSINESS PRESS ARTICLES

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*Abstract*

The paper aims to highlight that metaphors have proved essential and relevant to the description, explanation and understanding of the economic and financial crisis that the world has experienced over the last years. In order to achieve this, we have carried out a study to identify and analyse the conceptual metaphors used to explain and describe the economic and financial crisis in English. Our study is based on the corpus approaches to metaphor analysis. Therefore, we have worked on a corpus of English economic and financial articles, which were selected from those published, between 2009 and 2012, in the English journal The Economist. During this period, many of the world's countries officially acknowledged the financial crisis. Obviously, this meant taking drastic measures that have severely affected the population. The quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data obtained within this study is meant to show how this economic and financial phenomenon and its effects are conceptualized in business press articles.

**Keywords: economic and financial crisis; conceptual metaphors; corpus analysis**

## 1. Theoretical approaches – from the comparative perspective to the cognitive approach to metaphor

Metaphors have been studied from a number of different perspectives by a wide variety of disciplines including linguistics, philosophy, literary studies, psychology and education among others. This has led to the emergence of different and sometimes controversial ideas and theories that have attempted to define, describe and analyse metaphors.

From the multitude of approaches to the study of metaphor, two questions have arisen focusing on whether metaphors should be considered linguistic phenomena related to how we express things or cognitive phenomena related to how we understand them (Cameron & Low, 1999).

Ortony (1979: 3) underlines that "any serious study of metaphor is almost obliged to start with the works of Aristotle". Therefore, we aim to begin our research on metaphors describing the economic and financial by highlighting some of the most important ideas developed within the traditional approach as initially described by Aristotle.

According to scholars in ancient times, metaphors belonged exclusively to the domain of rhetoric. Thus, they analysed them alongside other tropes as imaginative, poetic and ornamental devices. Explanations of what metaphors are can be traced back to Aristotle. In his well-known works *Poetics* and *Rhetoric,* most studies focus on his

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discussion on the place of metaphor in language as well as its relationship with communication.

Aristotle provides a formal definition of metaphor in *Poetics* (21, 1457b6-7) "*Metaphora* is the *epiphora* of the name (*onoma*) of something [to something else]." Explaining this definition, Kirby (1994: 532) draws our attention to the fact that Aristotle risks using tautology since both *metaphora* and *epiphora* have the same root *pher-/phor-*, which means "carry". The difference is made by the use of the prefix *meta-*, which may mean "across, after, behind". Thus, the word *metaphora* can literally mean a "carrying across or behind".

In the following chapter (22, 1458a21-23), Aristotle underlines that metaphor, like foreign terms and unusual word forms, is a kind of "alien" term (Kirby, 1994: 534) that is used to achieve "impressiveness" and to avoid familiar language. At the end of this chapter, concluding his discussion of metaphor, he expresses an extremely important idea. He states that this device is the most important one to be skilled in and this skill cannot be learned from somebody else – it needs to be an innate gift. Moreover, this gift consists in "*seeing likenesses in things*" (Kirby's italics). The central idea is that metaphors are based on similarity or resemblance between objects. Therefore, one's capacity to understand and use metaphors resides in the capacity to perceive similarities between things.

Although we are far from the ancient times, metaphor is still commonly perceived and taught as it was defined in the *Rhetoric* (1410b), i.e. "an elliptical simile, a comparison of things without the use of 'like' or 'as'."

The central idea of the comparison view is that when analysing a metaphor we decide what characteristics the two parts of a metaphor have in common. As soon as we identify those characteristics, we reconstruct a comparison saying that one thing is similar to another because it has a certain characteristic.

The interpretation of metaphor as a linguistic phenomenon serving aesthetic purposes has dominated the study of metaphor for centuries.

The first major break with Aristotle's traditional rhetoric was made in 1936 when I.A. Richards published *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*. Instead of explaining metaphor in terms of comparison, substitution, transfer or analogy, the interaction theory perceives it as a cognitive process, not as a "verbal matter". He switched from the lexical level by treating metaphor as a semantic phenomenon and studying it at sentence level, and first advanced the concepts of "tenor" and "vehicle" and the view of interaction. The *tenor* is the thing that is being commented upon, the topic, whereas the *vehicle* is the thing that is used to talk about the topic. According to this view, metaphor is the result of an interaction of thoughts. Therefore, metaphorical meaning is generated by the process in which two different meanings ('tenor and vehicle') are activated together in a single form as a result of which they highlight characteristics and associations of each other.

Richards explains that:



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> "In the simplest formulation, when we use a metaphor we have two thoughts of different things active together and supported by a single word, or phrase, whose meaning is a resultant of their interaction." (1936: 93)

Following Richards, Max Black considers metaphor a "double unit" consisting of a semantic setting and an image, which he called a "frame" and a "focus". Unlike Richards, Black has a clearer image on the role of context in metaphorical meaning.

Black explains his concept of *focus* as a filter through which a "system of commonplaces" or in "suitable cases... deviant implications [of the figurative term] established *ad hoc* by the writer" are processed. This happens through selection, emphasis, suppression and organization of "features of the principal subject by implying (or 'projecting upon' it) statements about it that normally apply to the subsidiary subject [the meaning of the figurative expression outside of any metaphorical context]" (1954: 44).

To put it simply, Black's interactionist approach to metaphor is based on the idea that two "subjects" interact in metaphor (a primary one and a secondary one). Another key concept is the "set of associated implications" related to the secondary subject. Thus, metaphor is analysed by transferring and attributing the elements of the "set of associated implications" to the primary subject. This process results in the reorganization or even change of the primary subject.

> "(a) the presence of the primary subject incites the hearer to select some of the secondary's subject properties; and (b) invites him to construct a parallel implication-complex that can fit the primary subject; and (c) reciprocally induces parallel changes in the second subject." (in Ortony, 1939: 24)

Judging things from this perspective, the interactionist approach anticipated the cognitive function of metaphors. The interaction theory also introduces the idea that metaphors are not necessarily only based on pre-existing connections between two subjects, but can also generate new knowledge and insight by changing relationships between the things designated.

John R. Searle, in his monograph *Expression and Meaning*, approached the study of metaphor from a different perspective than his predecessors. From his point of view, metaphor is not merely a lexical or syntactic phenomenon, but also a discourse phenomenon. Therefore, the metaphorical meaning needs to be looked for in a broader linguistic environment.

The speech acts theory makes a clear distinction between the literal or sentence meaning and the utterance meaning, which refers to the meaning that the speaker intended. Thus, metaphor is seen as a pragmatic phenomenon analysed on the level of contextually embedded utterances. For this reason, metaphors are seen as something outside the language that can be semantically analysed.



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Within the pragmatic approach, similarity is disregarded. Since things can be similar in some respect or another, we cannot know exactly which aspect the speaker thought of when uttering the sentence. Moreover, there are metaphors in which there seems to be no similarity between the two subjects. In order to illustrate this, Searle gives the following example: "Sally is a block of ice". Apparently, there are no literal similarities between objects that are cold and people who are unemotional. In spite of this, we still understand what the speaker wants to say.

The major shift in terms of perceiving metaphors happened when linguists replaced the notion of metaphors as a deviant use of language with a view that stated that metaphors are an essential device in human thought and discourse (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). By stating that human reasoning is largely figurative, linguists have attempted to determine not only the role of metaphors in our cognitive activity but also the way in which we use metaphors to communicate our thoughts.

According to this new perspective, metaphor is defined as a cognitive mechanism whereby one conceptual domain is partially mapped onto a different conceptual domain, the second domain being partially understood in terms of the first one: "the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another." (1980: 5). The domain that is mapped is called the *source* and the domain onto which it is mapped is called the *target*. In a later revised version, Lakoff provides further explanations and defines metaphors as "permanent mental mappings between source domains and target domains" (1993).

According to this cognitive perspective, metaphors enable people to understand a relatively abstract or unstructured subject matter in terms of a more concrete one, or at least a subject matter that is more structured. The terminology for the concrete subject is **source domain** and for the abstract subject is the **target domain**. A metaphor is thus a transfer of some of the characteristics of (A) to (B), where the target domain (B) is often abstract and is described by our comprehension of (A).

Kövecses, in an attempt to spread some light on the terminology used in the cognitive theory, draws our attention to the fact that it is compulsory to make a distinction between what is called conceptual metaphor and **metaphorical linguistic expressions**.

> "We thus need to distinguish conceptual metaphor from **metaphorical linguistic expressions**. The latter are words or other linguistic expressions that come from the language or terminology of the more concrete conceptual domain (i.e., domain B)." (Kövecses 2010: 4)

The metaphorical linguistic expressions are the ones that signal the presence of a conceptual metaphor. Conceptual metaphors do not appear in everyday language, the metaphorical expressions do. These are the ones that indicate a certain way of thinking.



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> "We can state the nature of the relationship between the conceptual metaphors and the metaphorical linguistic expressions in the following way: the linguistic expressions (i.e., ways of talking) make explicit, or are manifestations of, the conceptual metaphors (i.e., ways of thinking). To put the same thing differently, it is the metaphorical linguistic expressions that reveal the existence of the conceptual metaphors." (Kövecses 2010: 7)

The cognitive approach focuses on the idea that conceptual metaphors are not isolated, but systematically structured. Moreover, metaphors are grounded in our physical and cultural experiences.

## 2. The corpus approach to the study of metaphors describing the economic and financial crisis

The theory of conceptual metaphor has been applied and extended to the field of English for Specific Purposes, the specialised languages of economics and finance in particular. Many economists and linguists, such as McCloskey (1983), Henderson (1982), Charteris-Black (2000, 2004), Boers (1997), Skorczynska and Deignan (2006), Koller (2004, 2005) have carried out research on metaphors in economic contexts over the past decades. They highlight that metaphors in economic contexts play a significant and indispensible role in understanding abstract economic theories and complex economic phenomena.

Following the current trend of corpus approaches to the study of metaphor (White, 1997, 2003, 2004; Charteris-Black, 2004; Deignan, 2006; Stefanowitsch and Gries, 2006; López and Llopis, 2010), our paper is based on a corpus of English business press articles published in the specialised journal *The Economist*.

In order to identify and analyse the different types of metaphors describing the economic and financial crisis in specialised texts in the field of economics and finance, we compiled a corpus of 30 articles, which were published between 2009 and 2012. Some of these articles refer to the idea of economic and financial crisis in general, whereas others refer to some of its more concrete forms, namely the euro crisis or the European debt crisis. This is explained by the fact that most of the articles describe certain economic and financial aspects that are characteristic of the European area.

In order to carry out our research, we used a computer software – *WordSmith Tools* version 6.0. We used *Wordsmith* in two ways, according to its respective functions. Firstly, we used the *Wordlist* tool to generate a frequency list, which arranges all the words in the corpus in order of frequency and the number of times they appear. Secondly, we used the *Concord* tool to find all the examples of a word in the corpus and show them in concordance lines. This tool was particularly helpful for seeing how certain words are used in context, identifying common collocations and establishing if words are used with a general or metaphorical meaning.

Stefanowitsch argues that the first two strategies present some limitations, namely, the limitation of the size of the corpus imposed by a manual search, and the need of



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having some previous knowledge of the source domains, which is required in a search for source domain vocabulary. However, he recognizes that the second strategy is suitable if research is focused on a particular source domain.

Stefanowitsch (2006: 2–5) describes three specific strategies that have been used to find metaphorical expressions instantiating conceptual mappings:

a) looking for metaphors by hand, usually by reading through the corpus and extracting all the metaphorical expressions one comes across;

b) searching for metaphorical expressions which contain words from their source domains; and

c) searching for metaphorical expressions which contain words from their target domains.

According to Stefanowitsch (2006), the third strategy of searching for target domain vocabulary allows researchers to overcome the main shortcomings of the other two. Therefore, he advances a method that helps to overcome these limitations. In addition, it also deals with the main methodological problem corpus linguistics must face when studying metaphorical mappings. While corpora are accessed using word forms, metaphorical mappings are not easily related to linguistic forms and are, thus, not easy to be retrieved automatically. In order to overcome this limitation, Stefanowitsch suggests a different approach, which he calls 'metaphorical pattern analysis' (MPA). First, one or more lexical items are selected from the target domain under study and a sample of their occurrences are extracted from the corpus. Then, the metaphorical expressions the lexical items belong to are identified as metaphorical patterns, and groups of conceptual mappings are established on the basis of the metaphors they instantiate.

To provide an example, in our study, the term 'financial crisis' was selected as an instance of lexical item from the target domain studied. A search for its hits in the corpus identified the metaphorical expression 'sow the seeds of the next financial crisis'. According to Stefanowitsch (2004: 138–139), the identification of a metaphorical pattern is based on the syntactic/semantic frame the term occurs in. Furthermore, we checked if similar patterns exist in the source domain. This allowed us to make a correlation between the item from the target domain and the items from the source domain that could be expected to occur in the same pattern. The pattern 'seeds of the financial crisis' was then considered to instantiate the conceptual metaphor THE FINANCIAL CRISIS IS A PLANT.

## 3. Analysis and discussion

The results obtained with *WordSmith Tools* are presented and discussed below both from a qualitative and a quantitative point of view.

After generating the frequency word list of the present corpus, we selected 25 specialised words from the world of economics and finance: crisis, recession, euro; bank, growth, economy, market, debt, financial, money, budget, company, fiscal, price, bail-out,



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fund, inflation, capital, deficit, finances, demand, bond, share, asset, sector. Once the metaphorical expressions were identified, we proceeded to describe the metaphorical mappings they instantiated.

The quantitative analysis identified 240 metaphorical expressions. The following source domains were identified for the target words above: illness (153); fire (49); container (16); natural phenomenon (11); mess (9) and plant (2).

Moreover, the qualitative analysis of the metaphorical expressions enabled us to describe and establish connections between the metaphorical mappings generated by each source domain. Each of these source domains together with its metaphorical mappings is presented and analysed below.

### 3.1. The Economic/Financial Crisis Is Illness

A simple look at the numbers aforementioned reveals that the source domain of illness is by far the most used domain in business press articles. Therefore, the domain that generated most of the metaphorical mappings identified.

Lakoff explains that many conceptual metaphors are grounded in our physical experiences. The abstract notions can be referred to as entities. This can be achieved through the introduction of ontological metaphors that might serve the purpose of quantifying, identifying, referring, setting goals etc. In other words, they contribute to the comprehension of nonphysical objects as entities. Something abstract, such as an activity, emotion, or idea, is represented as something concrete, such as an object, substance, container or person. In other words, in ontological metaphor abstract ideas and concepts are embodied**.**

Furthermore, it is easy to notice that the conceptual metaphors identified above make use of one of the most accessible and close to the human being source domains, namely, our own existence.

At different moments in our life, all of us experienced illness, either in a milder or in a more severe form. This is a universal experience everybody shares, irrespective of gender, age, nationality, race, etc. Therefore, everybody is familiar with the situation in general, the stages we go through, the steps to follow or the usual course of action.

By conceptualizing the abstract notion of the economic and financial crisis as an illness, the authors of business press articles in *The Economist* have generated an elaborate metaphorical scenario that can be described using the following metaphorical mappings:

- The economic/financial crisis in any form corresponds to different types of illness – contagion (21) / illness (6) / disease (2) / affliction (1)

e.g. "The "Vienna initiative" was a plan, drawn up in 2009, that halted the rot of ***financial contagion*** spreading through central and eastern Europe."

e.g. "The ***euro zone's illness*** is returning."



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- Economies/financial institutions affected by the crisis correspond to people being ill (4) / wobbly (3) / afflicted (2) / sick (1) / paralysed (1) / sclerotic (1)

e.g. "The ***sick banking system*** of Europe"

- Economies/financial institutions not affected by the crisis correspond to people being healthy (5)

e.g. "Even the ***healthiest banks***—including those that insist they never needed help—continue to rely on government assistance in the form of liquidity facilities"

- Lack of economic/financial crisis corresponds to health (7)

e.g. "it is not just the euro that is at risk, but the future of the European Union and ***the health of the world economy***."

- Experiencing financial difficulties corresponds to suffering (10)

e.g. "Few, if any, European countries ***suffer*** from all of Greece's ills"

- Length and intensity of the economic/financial crisis corresponds to length/intensity of an illness – acute (2) / chronic (4)

e.g. "The ***chronic lack of growth*** threatens to poison politics, which has now become the greatest danger of all for the euro."

- Taking drastic measures against the financial crisis corresponds to enduring pain (8)

e.g. "America would have to endure that kind of ***fiscal pain*** every year for ten years."

- Drastic measures taken against the financial crisis correspond to painful (5) manifestations of an illness

e.g. "*The consequences of default*, which could include a banking collapse and inaccessible capital markets, *would be far more* ***painful*** than those of devaluation."

- Economies/countries/financial institutions affected by the economic/financial crisis correspond to patients (6)

e.g. "Start, again, with Greece. Far from curing the ***patient***, the medicine is coming close to killing it."

- Specialists trying to find solutions to the economic/financial crisis correspond to doctors (3)

e.g. "So the ***doctors*** prescribe more of the same: austerity, structural reform and a war against tax evasion."

- Analysing and identifying economic/financial problems corresponds to diagnosis (1)
- Recommending solutions for the financial crisis corresponds to prescribing (2) treatment



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e.g. "The medicine he administered during the Swedish crisis, and ***has prescribed*** ever since, is bitter: an immediate write-down of all bad assets and forced recapitalisation of banks,"

- Solutions to the economic/financial crisis offered by specialists correspond to cure (10) / treatment (5) / remedy (3) / antidote (2) / medicine (6) / pill (2) / homeopaths (1) / chemotherapy (1) / morphine (2)

e.g. "That is why peripheral governments in the euro zone ***have so far swallowed their medicine***, although not without a lot of grumbling and plenty of financial help from their neighbours."

- Improvement in the economic/financial situation corresponds to recovery (21) from illness

e.g. "***Recoveries after financial crises*** are normally weak and slow..."

It is worth highlighting that the choice of metaphorical expressions indicates the extent or intensity of the economic/financial crisis, as well as whether the solutions adopted are efficient or not:

e.g. "On March 30th Ireland ***sent the homeopaths packing*** and ***started taking stiffer medicine. The first pill was a steep cut in the price*** that Ireland's newly-formed "bad bank", the National Asset Management Agency (NAMA), is paying for the assets it will take off the banks."

### 3.2. The Economic/Finacial Crisis Is Fire

As in the previous source domain of illness, the source domain of fire generates an entire metaphorical scenario that we are familiar with from our experience. However, the number of metaphorical expressions identified in our corpus is approximately three times smaller compared to the previous domain. A possible explanation for this could be the fact that we experience illness much more often than we experience fire. Some of the metaphorical expressions conceptualizing the economic/financial crisis as fire are presented as follows:

- The economic/financial crisis corresponds to fire (16) / blaze (3) / conflagration (2)

e.g. "Now that a great ***financial blaze*** has taken hold, the euro zone is facing its 1666 moment."

- Poor financial indicators signalling financial problems correspond to smoke (2) signalling fire

e.g. "But ***wafts of smoke*** from eastern Europe suggest the job of stabilising Europe's banking system is not yet done."

- Unsolved financial problems correspond to flames (4)

e.g. "The interconnectedness of Europe's banks (see article), encouraged by the single currency, is acting as a combustible channel for ***flames*** to travel from building to building."



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- Specialists trying to solve financial problems correspond to firefighters (2)

e.g. "With the worst of the banking crisis now receding in most rich countries, it is tempting to send the ***financial firefighters*** home."

- Solving financial problems corresponds to extinguishing flames (1)

e.g. "The failure ***to extinguish the Greek flames*** has allowed the conflagration to spread to Ireland, Portugal and, intermittently, to Spain."

- Measures taken to solve the financial problems correspond to firewalls (15)

e.g. "...recapitalise Europe's banks and boost the fund created as a ***firewall*** to protect solvent euro-zone governments."

### 3.3. The Economic/Financial Crisis Is A Container

This metaphor conceptualizes the economic/financial crisis as a location, which we enter and get out of:

e.g. "Portugal and Ireland are ***in recession***, and may need second bail-outs".

"...when a rise in consumption taxes pushed the economy ***back into recession***,"

### 3.4. The Economic/Financial Crisis Is A Natural Phenomenon

Natural forces are difficult to avoid and control. Conceptualizing the crisis as a natural force, the authors imply there is little we can do about it.

- The economic/financial crisis corresponds to a catastrophe (5) / disaster (4) / storm (1) / iceberg (1)
- Poor financial indicators signalling financial problems correspond to clouds (1) signalling a storm

e.g. "The worst ***global economic storm*** since the 1930s may be beginning to clear, but another ***cloud already looms on the financial horizon***: massive public debt."

### 3.5. The Economic/Financial Crisis Is A Mess

We know from daily experience that whenever we are not organized enough and we not pay sufficient attention to our possessions, the things around us tend to become disorganised or even chaotic. Therefore, the solution is to clean up and organize everything again.

e.g. "The right and wrong ways to deal with the rich world's fiscal mess..."

- Finding solutions to solve the financial crisis corresponds to cleaning up (3)

e.g. "Cleaning up the housing market would help cut America's unemployment rate..."

### 3.6. The Financial Crisis Is A Plant

Only one metaphorical expression conceptualizing the financial crisis as a plant was used twice in the entire corpus:



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"The lessons it learns may prove useful to governments around the world that are now having to stand behind the debts of their banks to stop them from collapsing, while at the same time desperately trying not ***to sow the seeds of the next financial crisis***."

## 4. Conclusions

The cognitive approach has broadened the borders of metaphor study. Cognitive linguists have considered metaphor from a different perspective than their predecessors, attributing metaphors to the realm of thought rather than to language and highlighting that metaphors are essential to the way we perceive and understand the world around us. This study aimed to apply the contemporary theory of metaphor and the corpus approach to metaphor to identify and analyse the conceptual metaphors used to describe the economic and financial crisis in business press articles. The analysis and discussion of the conceptual metaphors and their metaphorical expressions identified in our corpus have reinforced claims made by the contemporary theory of metaphor. Thus, metaphors have proved essential and relevant to the description, explanation and understanding of the economic and financial crisis that the world has experienced over the last years.

The analysis of the metaphorical expressions generated by the conceptualization of the economic and financial crisis as illness, fire, container, natural phenomenon, mess and plant reveals that these conceptual metaphors make use of one of the most accessible and close to the human being source domains, namely, our own existence.

Moreover, preference for certain metaphorical expressions in a particular context highlights the author's intention of underlining certain aspects of the economic and financial realities.

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