

Financial hurricane: the use of a word related to weather to explain the global economic crisis

Financial hurricane: o uso de uma palavra ligada ao tempo para explicar a crise econômica global

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Resumo: *O uso de metáforas é ligado intrinsecamente à maneira como falamos, pensamos e agimos. As escolhas que fazemos entre uma e outra metáfora sugerem o tipo de pessoa que somos em termos de cultura, ideias e opiniões (Lakoff e Johnson, 1980). O intuito deste artigo é analisar o uso de palavras relacionadas ao tempo em artigos sobre economia. Para isso, consideraremos como nosso universo o site da revista The Economist. Os cinquenta artigos mais recentes que apresentam ocorrências da palavra hurricane foram analisados. Do total, cinco ocorrências de significados metafóricos do substantivo hurricane foram registradas. A imagem figurativa do furacão é associada com a economia para ajudar no entendimento dos efeitos da crise econômica, além de sugerir a ideia da crise como antagonista.*

Palavras-chave: *metáforas; hurricane; crise econômica.*

Abstract: *The use of metaphors is intrinsically related to the way we talk, think and act. The choices we make between a metaphor and another suggest the type of person we are in terms of culture, ideas and opinions (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). In this paper we aim at analyzing the use of words related to weather in economic articles. For that, we are going to consider The Economist magazine website as our universe. The fifty most recent articles which present occurrences of the word hurricane were analyzed. Of all, five occurrences of metaphorical meanings of the noun hurricane were registered. The figurative image of hurricane is associated with economics to help readers understand the effects of the economic crisis, making information likely enough and conveying the idea of economic crisis as an adversary.*

Key words: *metaphors; hurricane; economic crisis.*

1 Introduction

Often people use metaphors to express how they feel and perceive the world. Metaphors are so into our every day life that frequently we forget that when we choice between a metaphor or another we are also showing our culture, ideas and opinions. Even in reporting, metaphors are a common tool to give more clarity to the language used to talk about happenings.

In the last four years the global financial crisis has been in the centre of the news. In times of banking cracks and recessions, magazines and newspapers are the interlocutors

between economists and population. It is very common to identify metaphors of words related to weather to explain the economic crisis in articles.

In this paper we aim to analyze the use of words related to weather in articles about economy. For that, we are going to consider *The Economist* magazine online as our universe. From the occurrences of the word *hurricane*, the ones that present a non - literal and figurative, or metaphorical, meaning will be here analyzed.

First the concept of metaphor will be discussed. Then, the metaphorical use of terms related to weather will be explored. The next step is explaining our proposal of collecting data and methodological proceedings. The final part of this study will place the results of the research and our perception of the analysis.

2 Metaphors understood as part of our every day life

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980: 54) point out that metaphors are commonly understood as literary or rhetorical tools. They define *metaphors* as sentences that are outside the general domain of literal language and are what is usually called figurative or imaginative expressions.

The authors introduce *The Conceptual Metaphor Theory*, a functional concept of metaphors, which argues that metaphors are attached to our everyday life discourse. They explain that this approach helps us identify all the process involved in building a metaphorical expression. They believe this theory can also identify the way we perceive the world, think and perceive the world.

According to *The Conceptual Metaphor Theory*, it is possible to speak in emergent metaphors and emergent concepts. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) explain that emergent metaphors are the words that have concepts which emerge directly. They can represent experiences through sight and touch, that having boundaries or not we conceptualize as having entities.

This principle forces us to see the metaphorical expression as phenomena intrinsically related to the nature of the discourse. For them, the most basic characteristic of metaphors is the fact that considers one kind of experience in terms of another. Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 9/10) affirm that: The metaphor is not merely in the words we use it is in our very concept of an argument. The language of argument is not poetic, fanciful, or rhetorical; it is literal. We talk about arguments that way because we conceive of them that way and we act according to the way we conceive of things.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) call ontological metaphors the metaphors used to categorize and quantify feelings and physical phenomena of a particular substance or object as ontological

metaphors. Through this type of metaphors we consider an experience in terms of objects and substances for treating it as an entity or substance. They give the example of the noun *inflation* seen as an entity in the sentences (a) *If there's much more inflation, we'll never survive. We need to combat inflation.* and (b) *Inflation is hacking us into a corner.* In these sentences something nonhuman is seen as human, in a typical process of personification.

The authors also explain that, through the process of personification, the locutor suggests the interlocutor take an attitude towards the entity. In the example of *inflation*, the researchers affirm that the narrator gives an idea of inflation as an adversary, because it is a cause of losses for people. When inflation is understood as an entity, quantifying it and identifying characteristics of it, it becomes easier to be comprehended.

Two domains participate in conceptual metaphors, the source domain and the target domain (Kövecses, 2010). The source domain is the conceptual realm from which we build metaphorical expressions to perceive another notion, while the target domain is the conceptual domain that is understood throughout the metaphor. In the sentence *Life is a journey*, for instance, we can consider journey as the source domain and life as the target domain.

Cameron (2009) proposes a complex/dynamic system perspective between cognition and social sciences for the analysis of metaphors. The objective of this method takes into consideration the whole speech communities through its “complex dynamics of real-world language use in social situations” (Cameron, 2009: 3). It is important to understand linguistic and cognitive phenomena as processes that have inter-systems and sub-systems, with their own characteristics, and which are always in continual change. The changes in the process of producing metaphors are related to the dynamic of thinking and speaking.

Steen (2006) argues that language and thought are related to specific forms of cognition and proposes four cognitive approaches to analyze metaphors. The first one is adopting language as a system, the second is taking a metaphor in thought as a system, the third is studying a metaphor in language as use and the last is analyzing a metaphor in thought as use. The author says that this approach help people to better understand the interdependence of metaphors, which is, in other words, the perceptions of metaphor in different areas of linguistics knowledge. So these four approaches must be the starting point to any researcher, because they can help systematic distinction between any kind of metaphor processing.

3 Analyzing the occurrences of *hurricane*

In this paper, we are going to analyze the everyday uses of the term *hurricane* in the light of the conceptual metaphor proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). They propose an analysis of an argument as a system which can embrace a universe of expressions related to its meaning. Our *argument* will be *weather*. In the system of the argument *weather*, we are going to

take in consideration the expression *hurricane* in the context of a publication specialized in economics.

According to the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (Ehrlich, 2005: 429), *hurricane* is a noun which describes a “violent storm with very strong wind, especially in the Western Atlantic Ocean”. It also presents a typical example of the use of this term: “Hurricane Betty approaches the Cost of Florida”. It does not present an entry of a possible metaphorical use or meaning for this word.

Berber Sardinha (2007) presents the differences between a corpus-driven and a corpus-based investigation. The author explains that a corpus-based investigation is considered restricted because its analysis is made by using a corpus as a source of examples that generally checks frequency or intuitions about a linguistic phenomenon.

On the other hand, a corpus-driven analysis is made in an inductive way that allows us to recognize regularities in data. The first step is extracting evidences from the corpus and the second one is finding regularities. This methodology embraces the development of a method for metaphor identification in computer corpora. This last one was the chosen method.

This study aims at analyzing the use of words related to weather which were used in metaphorical way in articles about economy. For that, we are going to consider *The Economist* magazine online, the website of the weekly newspaper which focuses on international politics and business news and opinion, as our universe.

The researcher decided to analyse the word hurricane, because she perceived that this word was the most used in the articles she used to read about economy. The fifty most recent articles which present occurrences of the noun *hurricane* were collect in articles. After, we analyzed five occurrences of non-literal and figurative or metaphorical meanings of the noun. It is a qualitative study and the collecting of the data was done manually. Between August and November 2011, the data was collected by the researcher in the The Economist website, through the research tool.

4 Analysis of the occurrences of non- literal or figurative meaning of the word *hurricane*

The research in *The Economist* website presented 50 occurrences of the word *hurricane*, in the period of September 4th to February 17th 2011. Of all, five occurrences were not related to hurricane formation and hurricane events – as Hurricanes Katrina, Irene and Andrew, for instance. The word *hurricane* in these occurrences was related to the notion of damages resulting from hurricanes, but these violent storms were not the cause of the damage itself in these cases. These are the sentences collected:

1. “When the financial hurricane of 2007-08 hit the peripheral economies, it flattened public finances that had been flattered by the boom”

In “Ready for the ruck?”, published in October 22nd 2011.

2. *August was a particularly unfortunate month: it began with a reckless stand-off over raising the national debt limit and a downgrade to America’s credit rating, and ended with a hurricane.*

In “A choice of medicines”, published in September 10th 2011.

3. *“If the crisis reaches Italy, which I don’t think it will, then France will probably be part of the hurricane” says a senior Italian banker.*

In “Barack Obama and the Strategic Petroleum Reserve: Doing something about the price of oil”, published in June 24th 2011.

4. *“We have this hurricane that’s about to sweep across the country,” he insists, “and we can’t see it yet.”*

In “Health and longevity: Long live the fat American”, published in June 30th 2011.

5. *A hurricane that knocks out a few critical pipelines or refineries for a spell could easily undo all the president’s good work.*

In “Barack Obama and the Strategic Petroleum Reserve: Doing something about the price of oil”, published in June 24th 2011.

6. *The hurricane was internet traffic. The dams? His servers.*

In “Price of fame: Stick a pin in it”, published in April 4th 2011.

Analysis of the occurrences of <i>hurricane</i>	
Occurrences of the noun <i>hurricane</i> in The Economist website	50
Use of the word <i>hurricane</i> related to weather	45
Occurrences of metaphorical meaning of <i>hurricane</i>	5
Metaphorical meaning of the word <i>hurricane</i> related to economic crisis	3
Others	2

The word *hurricane* in sentence 1 “*When the financial hurricane of 2007-08 hit the peripheral economies, it flattened public finances that had been flattered by the boom*” substitutes the word crisis (financial crisis). In this case, *hurricane* is the correspondent to a complicated situation, an extremely difficult moment of pain, illness, danger, etc. that can or cannot worsen. In (1) the word *hurricane* is a metaphor to the whole crack in economies around the world, caused by public borrowing, bank debit crisis and job crisis.

Sentence 2, “*August was a particularly unfortunate month: it began with a reckless stand-off over raising the national debt limit and a downgrade to America’s credit rating, and ended with a hurricane*”, presents the noun *hurricane* in a context of financial bankrupt. The word in this sentence means the worst happening in a series of negative events. After the increase of public debit, American people were surprised by Hurricane Irene (it is an example of literal meaning of the word *hurricane* presented in the article).

In sentence 3 “*If the crisis reaches Italy, which I don’t think it will, then France will probably be part of the hurricane*”, the *hurricane* is represented as an effect of economic crisis, but the idea of destruction is even worse, because damages can hit more than one country. The central idea of the metaphor is that the global economic crisis is out of control. The comparison with hurricane events makes the idea of destruction caused by economic crisis likely enough.

Sentence 4 “*We have this hurricane that’s about to sweep across the country*” is part of an article about the increasing of obesity in the US. The narrator is not referring to a weather event, but to obesity. He explains why obesity epidemic may threaten Americans life expectancy. It seems the author tries to compare the damage of a devastating hurricane to an obesity epidemic, because in these two cases we can only see the phenomenon when it is already happening or when it is out of control. We can also observe that the idea of the hurricane force is used to say that the risks of an epidemic obesity occurrence are very strong as well.

Sentence 5 “*A hurricane that knocks out a few critical pipelines or refineries for a spell could easily undo all the president’s good work*”, is included in an article about the role of president Barack Obama in making petrol cheaper to American people. The author says a politic gesture of the president can bring impact in oil price throughout the globe. It presents a figurative image of *hurricane* that introduces a possibility of occurrence of an unexpected and terrible event: the raising of oil price. It suggests that the president is not prepared to deal with a problem which is compared to a hurricane event because of the harm it may cause. Besides, the idea of destruction is reinforced by the verb *undo*.

Sentence 6 “*The hurricane was internet traffic. The dams? His servers*” suggests a comparison between the damage of a weather event and a failure of web servers. The article presents some problems servers had with a service offered by *Yahoo*. The number of users increased so fast that the servers of the company stopped working, which is why the author compares the search for the service to a hurricane. The article suggests that the company was not ready to sell the service. Through the analysis of the occurrences of metaphorical use of the word *hurricane*, we can see that in four out of five occurrences the authors attempted to explain the economic crisis. All the sentences have in common the use of the noun *hurricane* related to the experience of people with physical phenomena. The sentences also present a *hurricane* personified and represented as an entity.

It is possible to suggest a relation with the concept of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) of an emergent metaphor. They explain that emergent metaphors are the ones that represent experiences through sight and touch, that – having boundaries or not – we conceptualize as being entities.

The figurative image of *hurricane* is associated to economics to help people understand the effects of the economic crisis. The authors of the publication have the idea of the hurricane as an adversary and, making equivalence between the economic crisis and this natural event, an economic crisis feels as dangerous in terms of damage as a hurricane.

It is really difficult to predict the effects of a hurricane, although it has a period of time to start and to end. Maybe it is one of the reasons this phenomena is used to make a comparison with the economic crisis.

In fact, a hurricane is something which exists apart from other things, having its own independent existence. On the other hand, the economic crisis is formed by different elements that are related, like the global economy and the behavior of Stock markets around the world, so it is possible to say that it is not an independent event.

So we can observe that the person that compares the economic crisis to a hurricane is defining the economic crisis as an independent event that cannot be prevented. Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 188) warn that metaphors can and should be avoided in speaking objectively, because “subjectivity can be dangerous, since it can lead to losing touch with reality”.

5 Final comments

Observing occurrences of non-literal expressions related to weather, we perceive an interesting way of talking about economics issues. In the data analyzed is possible to see that metaphors made a direct connection between a violent natural disaster and the economic crisis making information likely. However, this links convey the idea of economic crisis as an adversary. Therefore, it may be interesting to extend this study by taking another uses of non - literal or figurative expressions of terms related to weather to explain the collapse of financial system.

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