



Climate change, Covid-19 and other stories... the Titanic Metaphor as a parable to depict modern shipwreck

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CEL
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 **aterphors 2024**

0. Introduction

The Titanic resurfaces as a metaphor

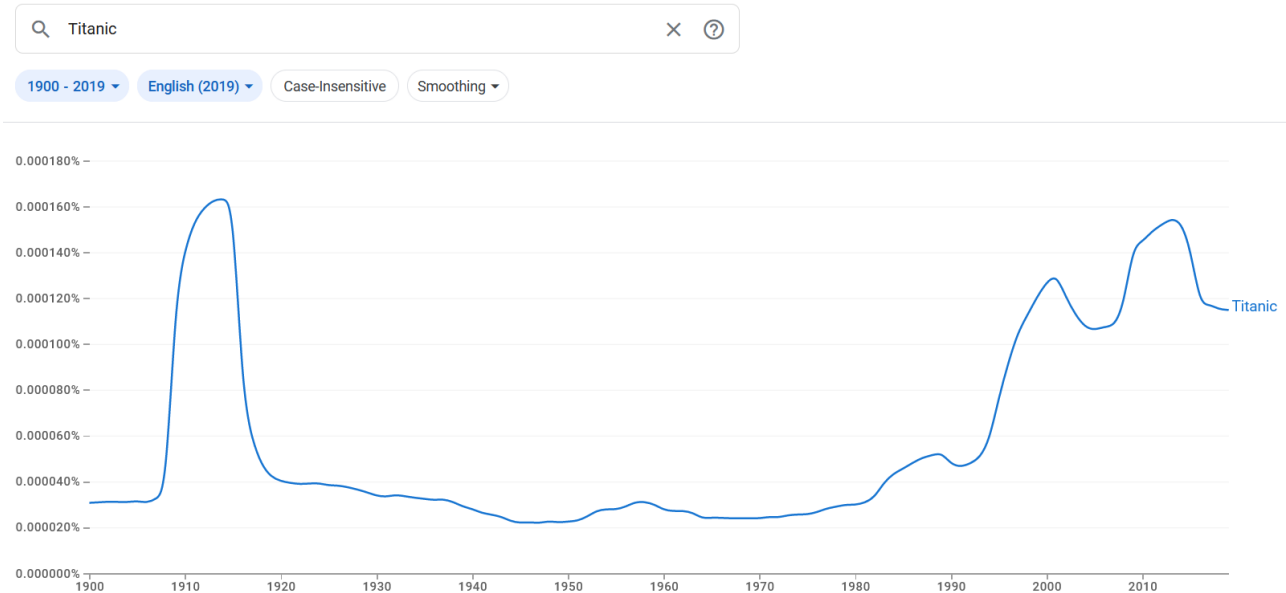
1912: shipwreck of the Titanic

1985: Robert Ballard finds the wreck of the Titanic

1997: James Cameron's movie

2012: First centenary of the Titanic disaster

Google Books Ngram Viewer



(1) “the world’s largest metaphor” (NOW – 13-03-08 – US the Diplomat).



 **aterphors 2024**

0. Introduction

What does the word Titanic evoke in us?

- the supposedly unsinkable ship?
- James Cameron's 1997 film?
- an abstract narrative born of both of the above, a modern-day metonymy whose actual reference is unclear?

0. Introduction

What does the Titanic metaphor refer to?

Focus on the way the Titanic is **used metaphorically to express modern shipwrecks**:

(2) This is the only way we can turn this big Republican-made Titanic situation around. A little melodramatic don't you think? (...ps.blogs.nytimes.com)

(3) Like the **Titanic** striking a massive iceberg in 1912, a deadly novel coronavirus, later named COVID-19, struck Wuhan (hongkongfp.com)

(4) Today's election is merely a choice of who is going to captain the sinking **Titanic**. (rednecksrevenge.org)

(5) The climate change **titanic** has already hit the iceberg. This needs to be on a war footing. (eco-business.com)

0. Introduction

Outline

0. Introduction

1. Theoretical framework, corpus and methodology

1.1. Theoretical framework: cognitive linguistics

1.2. Corpus / Data building

1.3. Methodology: corpus linguistics

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3. Concluding remarks

1. Theoretical framework, corpus and methodology

1.1. Theoretical background: cognitive linguistics

“Cognitive linguistics approaches language in a way that prioritizes human thought as an explanation for the observed characteristics of language. In particular conceptualization, or how people construct abstract concepts and schemata to think about the world”. (McEnery & Hardie 2012: 169).

Metaphor = the tool that contributed to the elaboration of a figurative link between cognition and language:

“Metaphor is not just a matter of language, but of thought and reason.” (Lakoff 1993: 208).

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT)

1. Theoretical framework, corpus and methodology

1.1. Theoretical background: cognitive linguistics

Titanic = **source domain** to refer to various abstract target domains in English.

Target domains conceptualized through the Titanic metaphors = “modern shipwrecks”, i.e. significant crises (environmental, political, economic, medical, etc.)

Visual representation of the word “Titanic” in the Word Sketch option available from English Web 2021 (EnTenTen 2021) on SketchEngine (we selected “nouns modified by “Titanic” and 30 as the number of collocates) proof of the **“negative axiology”**.

1. Theoretical framework, corpus and methodology

1.2. Corpus / Data building

Corpus:

- **Timespan** = 2012-2024 (2012 = Centenary of the Titanic's shipwreck, and 2024 = present period) = a 12-year period of time (few occurrences were retrieved in 2024).
- **Corpora** used to retrieve linguistic occurrences =
 - English Web 2021 (enTenTen21) (*SketchEngine*)
 - Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA, *English-Corpora.org*)
 - the News on the Web Corpus (NOW corpus, *English-Corpora.org*)
 - Coronavirus Corpus (*English-Corpora.org*)
- Visual occurrences of the Titanic metaphor, through a Google search (selection of the 10 most relevant occurrences, mostly as illustrations of the verbal metaphorical occurrences).

2. Results and discussions

2.1. Quantitative results

ON CLICK: [CONTEXT](#) [TRANSLATE \(??\)](#) [ENTIRE PAGE](#) [GOOGLE](#) [IMAGE](#) [PRON/VIDEO](#) [BOOK](#)

HELP	①	★	ALL FORMS (SAMPLE): 100 200 500	FREQ	PER MIL
1	①	★	Titanic	3700	3.73

To begin with, search for the word “Titanic” in the COCA (not combined with collocates), with the following option: “case-sensitive > YES” (to avoid retrieving occurrences of the adjective “titanic”).

3,700 occurrences >> selection of a random sample of 1,000 occurrences >> 420 of them were within the 2012-2024 timespan (580 outside selected timespan).

Out of the 420 Titanic occurrences, 46 were deemed **metaphorical** (10,95%).

1. Theoretical framework, corpus and methodology

1.3. Methodology: corpus linguistics

Only retrieval of **metaphorical occurrences related to the Titanic**:

>> use of a specific CQL search combining the word “Titanic” with the following keywords: **iceberg**; **shipwreck**; **wreck**; **s?nk*** (for tokens such as *sink*, *sinks*, *sunk*, *sank*, *sinking*, *sunken*, etc.).

CQL (Complex Query Language) searches allow you to perform more complex searches than the “simple searches”:

“The Corpus Query Language is a special code or query language used in Sketch Engine (2014) to search for complex grammatical or lexical patterns or to use search criteria which cannot be set using the standard user interface.” (SketchEngine 2014)

The MEET tag used to retrieve collocations of “Titanic” in combination with one of the above keywords, with a 5-word span to the left and 5-word span to the right.

1. Theoretical framework, corpus and methodology

1.3. Methodology: corpus linguistics

CQL (meet [lemma="iceberg"] [lemma="titanic"] -5 5) • 2,829 occurrences
0.05 per million tokens • 0.0000046%

CQL (meet [lemma="shipwreck"] [lemma="titanic"] -5 5) • 306 occurrences
less than 0.01 • 5e-7%

CQL (meet [lemma="wreck"] [lemma="titanic"] -5 5) • 1,522 occurrences
0.02 per million tokens • 0.0000025%

CQL (meet [lemma="sink"] [lemma="titanic"] -5 5) • 6,699 occurrences
0.11 per million tokens • 0.000011%

Corpus compiled by combining the word “Titanic” with other keywords so as to get a manageable corpus in terms of size (aware that another method may have been possible, e.g. looking for keywords in isolation)

1. Theoretical framework, corpus and methodology

1.3. Methodology: corpus linguistics

Same procedure followed for corpora on English-Corpora.org (COCA, NOW corpus & Coronavirus corpus) by looking for collocates, i.e. words occurring in a neighboring context: search for the word “iceberg” used in collocation with “**Titanic**” within a span 5 to the left, 5 to the right (for COCA, span was 7 and 7 to collect larger number of occurrences):

List Chart Word Browse **Collocates** Compare KWIC -

iceberg Word/phrase [POS] ?

titanic Collocates [POS]

+ 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 +

Find collocates Reset

2. Results and discussions

2.1. Quantitative results

Collocates of TITANIC	enTenTen21	COCA	NOW	Coronavirus
iceberg	2,829 / 0.05	113 / 0.11	1,178 / 0.00	47 / 0.00
shipwreck	306 / 0.01	12 / 0.01	629 / 0.00	6 / 0.00
wreck	1,522 / 0.02	72 / 0.07	2,856 / 0.00	7 / 0.00
s?nk*	6,699 / 0.11	322 / 0.32	4,838 / 0.00	174 / 0.00

Number of occurrences (raw frequencies) and relative frequencies (frequencies per one million words) for the collocates of "Titanic"

2. Results and discussions

2.2. Qualitative results: types of occurrences

3 main cases:

- 1) The occurrences refer to **purely factual, historical events related to the Titanic by the time it sank** (presence of dates, places, names of people involved, etc.);
- 2) The occurrences refer to a **retrospective re-evaluation of the historical event** years after (*question whether the Titanic...*);
- 3) The occurrences **refer to another domain** by using this historical event, which became a **parable**, with a focus on other actors involved in the event, be they human beings (iceberg watcher, builder, captain, social classes, the band, etc.), or inanimate entities (iceberg, deck chairs, etc.).

2. Results and discussions

2.2. Qualitative results: target domains

Most frequent (**negative**) **target domains** referred to by the TITANIC:

- **Climate change:** (6) “[...] world to unite to tackle climate change, comparing the looming environmental crisis to the sinking of the **Titanic**” (uk.finance.yahoo.com)
- **Politics:** (7) “The problem is no one is capable of saving the US Titanic. The iceberg was struck sixteen years ago when the Deep State engineered a plundering campaign [...]” (The Market Oracle)
- **Economy (depression):** (8) “If the American economy was the **Titanic** and the iceberg that sank the Titanic was the financial crisis, then STEM jobs would be [...]” (Fast Company)
- **Covid-19:** (9) “corona-virus is as unexpected in 2019/20 as was the **Titanic** sinking by an iceberg in 1912. Many lives again are gone before their time.” (southernstar.ie)

Possible mix of domains, such as **economy** and **Covid**: (10) “[...] the world’s economy is a ship called **Titanic** and its iceberg bears the name Corona” (NOW – 20-04-02 – ZA – zoutnet.co.za)

2. Results and discussions

2.2. Qualitative results: target domains

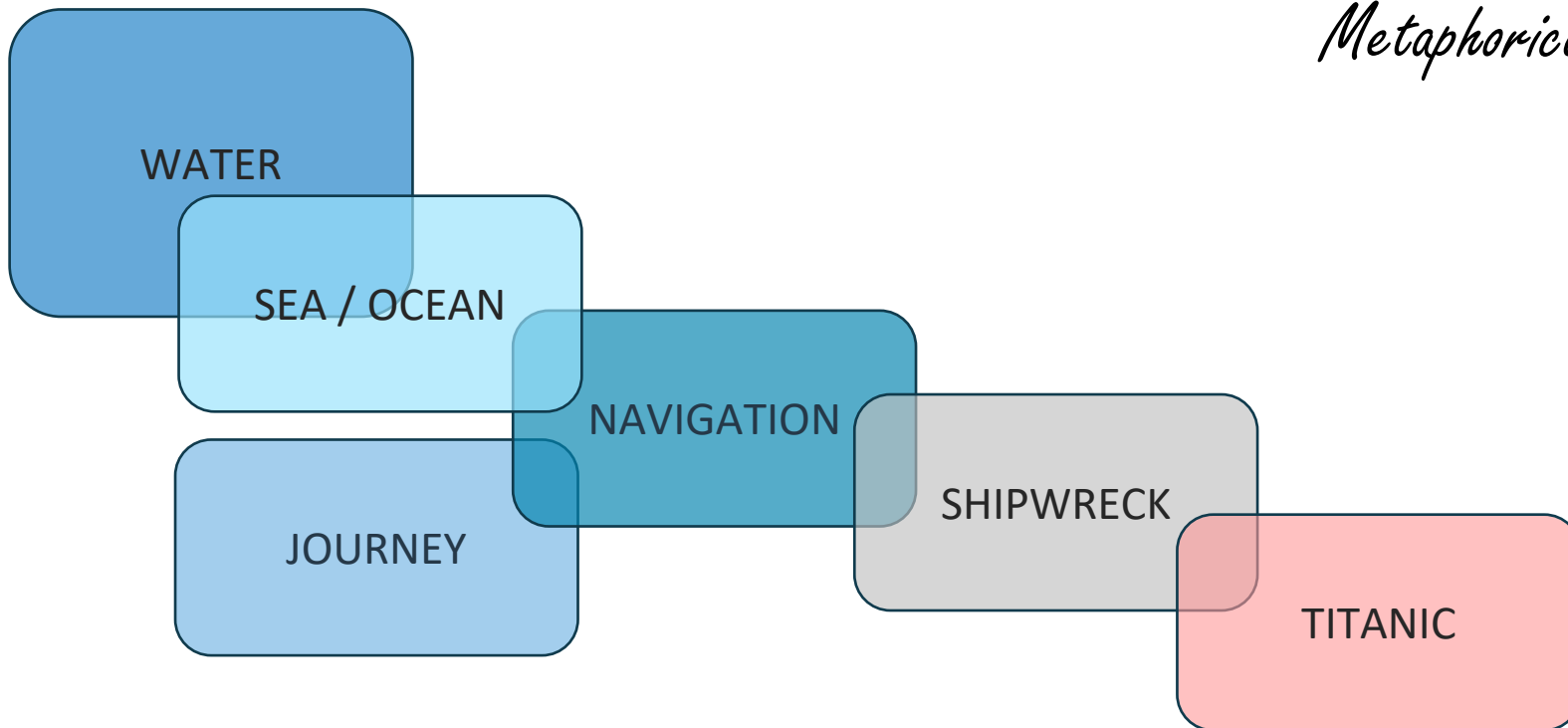
The TITANIC metaphor can also refer to **more specific (negative) domains**:

- **the NBA:** (11) “Should that play out, it would be the NBA’s ultimate **Titanic** hitting the iceberg moment” (sportingnews.com)
- **HR:** (12) “Parents and teachers should not ignore the tip of the iceberg lest the **Titanic** of human resources should collapse midway.” (nation.com.pk)
- **Corruption:** (13) “Zuma Presidency, corruption and State capture tore into the economy much like the proverbial iceberg that tore through the **Titanic’s** hull.” (miningweekly.com)
- **the US public school system:** (14) “Think of the public-school system as the **Titanic** going to hit an iceberg” (time.com)

etc.

2. Results and discussions

2.2. Qualitative results: a subtype of shipwreck metaphor?



2. Results and discussions

2.2. Qualitative results: a metaphor for Covid



“The Titanic with the inscription Humanity is heading for an iceberg in the form of the coronavirus. Helmsman shouts: Iceberg ahead!”, S. Roth, 13 April 2021

2. Results and discussions

2.2. Qualitative results: a metaphor for Covid



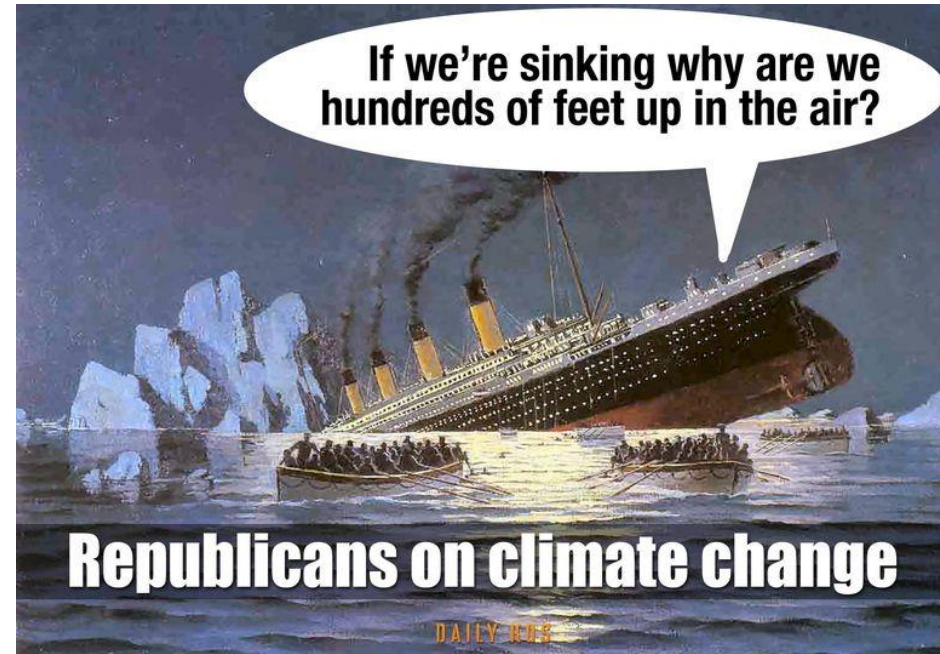
John Cole, 2020, *The Week*

2. Results and discussions

2.2. Qualitative results: a metaphor for climate change



David Horsey for the *Spokesman-Review*, 16 April 2012, “Climate change: iceberg right ahead?”



GO GREEN @ECOWARRIORS: “When it comes to climate change, we are all on the Titanic and its sinking fast, but vast majority of people are still at the top end, drinking wine and above water and still have to turn around and look at that sinking ship” - Image Daily Kos (Twitter)

2. Results and discussions

2.2. Qualitative results: a metaphor for climate change

(15) (...) We will not be able to turn to miss that iceberg, and we're going to hit it, and **when we hit it, the rich are still going to be able to get their access to food, to arable land, to water**, and so on. It's going to be the poor, **it's going to be the steerage that are going to be impacted**. It's the same with the Titanic.

I think that's why this story will always **fascinate** people. Because it's **a perfect little encapsulation of the world**, and all social spectra, but until our lives are really put at risk, the moment of truth, we don't know what we would do.

« [Titanic: The Final Word with James Cameron](#) »,
National Geographic Channel, 2012

2. Results and discussions

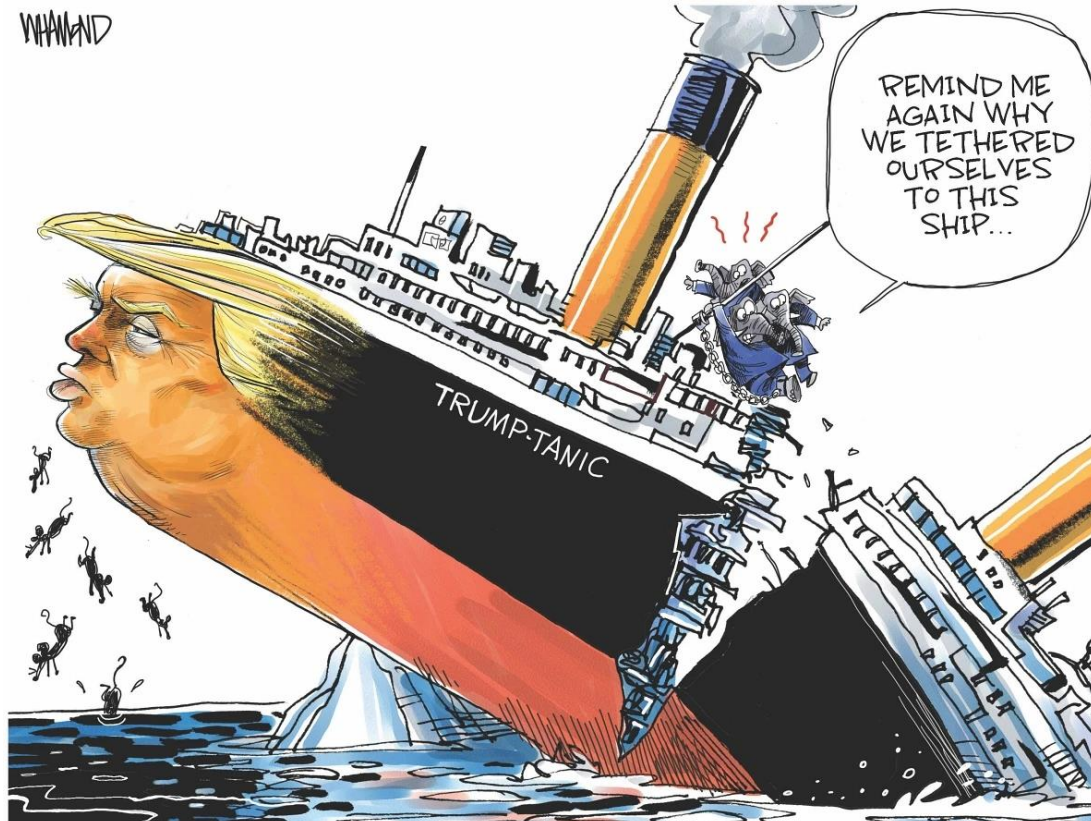
2.2. Qualitative results: a metaphor for Brexit



Front cover of *The National*, 4 November 2016

2. Results and discussions

2.2. Qualitative results: a metaphor for political hubris



Thom Hartmann, 30 May 2021

2. Results and discussions

2.2. Qualitative results: a metaphor for the healthcare system

(16) **The sinking of the Titanic is a powerful metaphor for the potential collapse of medicine.** Like the Titanic, the medical system is fragile, and it is becoming increasingly clear that it is doomed to fail without proper attention and vigilance. With an influx of more complex patients and staffing shortages, medicine cannot keep up with the demands being placed upon it. To prevent further decline and ultimate failure, we must take proactive steps to address the many challenges that face the industry today. It's time to change course!

“The Titanic sinking: a metaphor for the impending collapse of medicine” (7 March 2023): <https://www.kevinmd.com/2023/03/the-titanic-sinking-a-metaphor-for-the-impending-collapse-of-medicine.html>

2. Results and discussions

2.2. Qualitative results: a metaphor for business & entrepreneurship

(17) Expert opinion on the topic varies, but had Titanic hit the iceberg head-on, it might well have withstood the impact. In life, and in business, there is often a tendency to avert our problems. We avoid difficult conversations or we skirt around the issues that bother us. But in the long run this can cause even greater damage, so **be assertive and take your challenges head-on.**

“Why Titanic is the Perfect Metaphor for Business?” (28 September 2020): <https://matt5409.medium.com/why-titanic-is-the-perfect-metaphor-for-business-5827a632d8d>

2. Results and discussions

2.2. Qualitative results: a metaphor for Cognitive therapy

(18) If you are struggling to see or understand your position in 2020, we invite you to use the skill of Therapeutic Fanfiction and **envision yourself on the RMS Titanic**. We know that for some of you, this metaphor might feel grim. Our intention here is to help you use the **powers of your imagination** to practice sitting with hard and uncomfortable truths.

“We Will Go Down With This Ship : What the Titanic can teach us about facing hard truths” (17 August 2020):

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/starship-therapise/202008/we-will-go-down-ship>

2. Results and discussions

2.2. Qualitative results: highlighting-hiding of semantic effects

	Peril	Social inequality	Collective fate	Apocalypse	(Ir)-responsibility Hubris
Covid-19	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Climate change	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Brexit	✓		✓	✓	✓
Trump's presidency	✓	(✓)	(✓)	✓	✓
Entrepreneurship	✓				✓
Cognitive therapy (depression)	✓		✓	(✓)	✓

2. Results and discussions

2.2. Qualitative results: anatomy of a metaphor

Metaphorical entailments		Components
Iceberg	Covid, global warming, inflation...	INCIDENT
Insufficient lifeboats	Shortage of masks, vaccines, financial safety net...	AGGRAVATING FACTORS
1st class passengers vs. 2nd & 3rd class passengers	Social elites vs. the middle class & the lower classes, the 3 rd World	PROTAGONISTS (ALL VICTIMS)
Band playing	Accepting fate, ineluctability, defeat	ATTITUDE
Captain White Star Line	World leaders (Trump, Boris Johnson, Theresa May...)	CULPRITS
Unsinkable ship	The Planet, Our Western Societies	SYSTEM, WORLD
Cold Atlantic Waters	Distress, despair, loss...	EMOTION

3. Concluding remarks

Titanic: a metaphor, a parable, a myth?

- **Productivity** of the TITANIC metaphor (linguistic and visual), especially since the success of James Cameron's movie;
- Mostly to conceptualize **negative abstract target domains**;
- Elasticity of the Titanic metaphor (very potent): can apply to **any type of dangerous yet tantalizing situations** where the components are virtually present;
- From a **real historical event** which turned into a **myth** through repetitions, to a **metaphor**, up to a **parable**:
"Parable is the root of the human mind—of thinking, knowing, acting, creating, and plausibly even of speaking." (Turner 1998: 169)
- Element of **fascination** (story-telling surrounding the Titanic >> mythological dimension, suggesting some type of divine punishment, some doom contained in the paradoxical name of the boat, supposedly unsinkable, because of the hubris of men // repetition of the curse with the sinking of submersible 'Titan' in June 2023, 5 dead people, showing that the water element is stronger than men).

References

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Now Corpus (News on the Web): <https://www.english-corpora.org/now/>

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<http://www.sketchengine.eu>

Thank you for your attention

2. Results and discussions

2.2. Qualitative results: linguistic signaling

Linguistic signaling of the metaphors: several markers signal the metaphorical use of the word *Titanic*:

- **Words semantically related to the idea of comparison** (metaphorical comparisons) **or association**: *akin to, similar to, equivalent to/of, same, as, like, liken, resemble, compare, much in the way of, described as, feel, be/become (XXX is/becomes the Titanic), etc.*
- **Words semantically related to the idea of a (metaphorical) reconceptualization**: *think of X as, analogy, literally, metaphor, proverbial, picture, illustrate, new (version) of, another, etc.*
- **Pre- or post-modification of the lexeme *Titanic*, generally accompanied by a change in the determiner**: *housing / economic / climate change / American / Tigers / OPEC+ / Rushdie... Titanic, Titanic of XXX, a Titanic which/that..., his/her Titanic, etc.*
- **Hypothetical markers**: *if, may, might, etc.*

On the contrary, the presence of a figure in the occurrence (dates: 1912; measures: 500,000 feet deep, etc.) is very often the signal of a literal reading.

2. Results and discussions

2.2. Qualitative results: semantic effects

