METAPHORS AND IDEOLOGY – GENDERED METAPHORS IN ECONOMIC DISCOURSE*

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Abstract: Under the theoretical wing of Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Critical Metaphor Analysis we deal with one specific aspect of economic discourse in English in an attempt to draw attention to the distinctively gendered metaphor of SLENDERNESS on which the concept of the ideal company is based today. The analysis is based on the notion of downsizing and metaphorical expressions that give linguistic voice to the LEAN IS HEALTHY metaphor. Our aim is to demonstrate how ideological values are subtly intertwined with metaphors in economic discourse, so that seemingly harmless metaphors support and reconstruct an aspect of social reality—an androcentric world view.

Keywords: conceptual metaphor, downsizing, economic discourse, ideology, gendered metaphors.

Introduction

Under the theoretical wing of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, Kövecses 2002, Semino 2008) and Critical Metaphor Analysis (Charteris-Black 2004), in this paper we will deal with one specific aspect of economic discourse in English in an attempt to point out the value-laden SLENDERNESS metaphor on which the concept of the ideal company is based today, as well as its distinctively gendered nature. The analysis is based on the concept of downsizing (defined as “reducing the total number of employees at a company through terminations, retirements, or spinoffs”) and on many metaphorical expressions which linguistically embody the LEAN IS HEALTHY metaphor. Our aim is to demonstrate how ideological values are subtly intertwined with metaphors in economic discourse, so that seemingly harmless metaphors support and reconstruct one existing aspect of social reality—an androcentric world view. We will point out how “the tyranny of slenderness” (Tyler &
Wilkinson 2007), which has been around for a long time and mostly pertains to women and their attitude to their own bodies (and consequently to the position they take up on a social ladder), is metaphorically applied to the physical appearance and internal structure of companies, their efficiency and profitability, which in turn may result in a distorted understanding of some aspects of the reality in which we live.

In this paper we combine two theoretical frameworks: Conceptual Metaphor Theory, as developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and later modified to better accommodate metaphors that occur in authentic discourse (e.g. Semino 2008; Deignan 2005), and Critical Metaphor Analysis (Charteris-Black 2004), a version of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) which draws heavily not only on the main insights of CDA but also on the cognitive theory of metaphor. According to the proponents of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, conceptual metaphor refers to the understanding of one, usually abstract and less structured, concept, expressed as the target conceptual domain, in terms of another, more physical and more easily comprehensible concept, expressed as the source conceptual domain. However, the mappings from the source to the target domain are only partial, which is why metaphors represent a simplified and sometimes distorted picture of phenomena. In their seminal work Metaphors we live by, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) suggest that metaphors are much more than a mere rhetorical or poetic device used for decorative purposes, but that they are pervasive throughout everyday language. They structure the way we think and act, not only the way we talk—therefore, metaphor is a matter of mind, not only and not predominantly one of language. This claim is a radical shift from previous traditional approaches to metaphor, which stated that the main role metaphor plays in a text was ornamental.

The metaphorical expressions linguistically embodying the conceptual LEAN IS HEALTHY metaphor which form the data collection used in our analysis have been gathered from various sources: several English economics and business dictionaries, some business and finance oriented dailies and weeklies, websites and personal blogs published in English, and a number of papers downloaded from the Internet which deal with the topic of company restructuring. The method of metaphor identification we have applied here is that proposed by the Pragglejaz Group (2007). We have used it as a reliable tool with which to check the metaphoricity of the lexical units relating to downsizing as well as to establish their basic and in context meaning.
Metaphors and Ideology

The tenet of Conceptual Metaphor Theory that metaphors shape the way we not only talk but think and even act as well provides the basis for a view according to which metaphors play a vital role in cultivating and reinforcing ideologies, since metaphors allow us to emphasise some desirable aspects of a concept at the expense of those aspects which we want to keep hidden or out of focus. Ideology is understood here as a cognitive phenomenon, a “(shared) conceptualization[s] of particular aspects of reality” (Semino 90). “The combination of different parts of long-term mental representations of (particular aspects of) ‘reality’ constitutes a particular ideology, which will be socially shared by the members of particular groups” (Semino 90). The relationship between discourse and ideology is “a dynamic one”, since “discourses reflect particular ideologies, but also contribute to shape them and change them; ideologies result from discoursal and social practices but also determine and constrain these practices” (Semino 90). As a linguistic phenomenon, discourse is in this paper examined in relation to ideology, which is a predominantly cognitive phenomenon.

Metaphors may have great persuasive power, since they usually demonstrate a biased interpretation of situations and events. This derives from the main characteristic of metaphors—one phenomenon is presented in terms of another phenomenon, which necessarily leads to downplaying or foregrounding certain aspects of the phenomenon in question. By choosing which aspects of a phenomenon they will highlight or hide, metaphor creators consciously or unconsciously reveal their own value judgements and ideological stances. A strong ideological basis of metaphors allows their creators to influence the way we conceptualise certain concepts and phenomena, which makes them a powerful and dangerous weapon in the process of shaping opinions. Critical Metaphor Analysis, on the other hand, is an approach to discourse which “enables us to challenge existing ways of thinking and feeling about human behaviour and its relation to language” (Chartieris-Black 252), as well as to activate our own ability to be aware of the ideologies on which metaphors are grounded and to present “alternative ways of thinking and feeling about the world”, which is “a fundamental aspect of human freedom.” (Chartieris-Black 252). As Deignan (23) claims, “[t]he case for metaphor as ideological is developed from the observation that the interpretation of situations and events presented by any metaphor is only partial, and therefore flawed”, which stems from the principle of metaphorical highlighting and hiding (Lakoff & Johnson 1980), according to which the metaphorical source domain focuses on a single aspect of the concept, while at the same time hiding some other aspects of the concept. This allows for metaphor to serve as a potentially ideological tool, presenting “a particular interpretation of situations and events”
Moreover, metaphors often distort “because they are over-simplifications” (Deignan 23), since target domains are much more complex than they are presented as being by the use of source domains, thus suggesting “an artificially simple understanding” (Deignan 23) of concepts. Being “among our principal vehicles of understanding”, metaphors “play a central role in the construction of social and political reality” (Lakoff & Johnson 159). Charteris-Black (21), the originator of Critical Metaphor Analysis, argues that metaphor, viewed as a blend of semantic, cognitive and pragmatic dimensions, serves the purpose “of influencing opinions and judgements by persuasion” (Charteris-Black 21). We will argue here that corporate discourse dealing with downsizing is characterised by metaphors which perpetuate dangerous gender-based stereotypes and may influence perceptions and judgements.

**Metaphors in Corporate Discourse**

The term “corporate discourse” (a subtype of economic discourse) refers here to all types of texts written or spoken with the aim of describing the size of a company and the number of its employees. In a discourse thus defined, the idea of company is conceptualised and perceived by means of several conceptual metaphors. All of these are based on an overarching **COMPLEX ABSTRACT SYSTEMS** metaphor, which is used to stress “the function, stability, development, and condition of the system.” (Kövecses 128-129). These four characteristics of abstract systems are conceptualised by means of four different source domains: MACHINE, BUILDING, PLANT and HUMAN BODY, which means that the concept of company, being itself a kind of a system, is also conceptualised in these ways. In corporate discourse, however, the concept of company is most frequently anthropomorphised—the company is conceptualised as a human being to which various human properties are attributed. In our case, the **COMPANY IS A PERSON** metaphor is most frequently realised by means of the **COMPANY IS A HUMAN BODY** metaphor in which the parts of the corporate structure and its human resources match certain parts of the human body. Thus we speak of the **head** of a company, **the backbone** of a company, old **hand**, new **blood**, **body** of employees, etc.

By conceptualising the company as a human body we give it an ontological status, which in turn allows us to attribute to it various human characteristics, *inter alia* that of being sick. Thus, the company conceptualised as a human body may become sick and be in need of a cure, due to its inability to outcompete other companies in the market, incompetent management, an economic crisis, or a surplus of employees which slows down its...
development. In such cases, the company is often conceptualised as a patient suffering from a
disease which impedes its further progress. Metaphorically speaking, “a high level of
economic activity is a symptom of good health and vitality” (Boers 232), while efficiency and
profitability are also valued positively, as illustrated by the expressions such as *vibrant*
enterprises, *thriving* company, *nimble* company, etc. Here are some examples of the COMPANY IS A PATIENT metaphor (henceforth all metaphorical expressions will be underlined).

(1) Do you know why companies *fall sick* and *die*; that there are *panaceas* that can turn a critically ill *organisation* around into a *healthy* one and *proper treatment* is necessary as the remedies can sometimes be worse than the *disease*?

(2) Cost control is an important *antidote* or effective *remedy* to administer in desperate turnaround situations.

(3) The key here is how the costs can be cut to restore *financial health* in the short term without hurting the *ailing company* in the long term.

When the company is *in good health*, there is no need for a *company doctor* who will
give their *diagnosis*, help the sick patient (*ailing company*) with their advice and prescribe a *cure* against the *disease* the company is suffering from (*corporate disease*, a *chronic* deficit, financial *anemia*, etc.). In order to *heal* the company, it is sometimes necessary to remove the *sick tissue* which threatens to spread to the whole of the organism and we talk of *amputation*, *financial injection*, even of corporate *surgery*, which leads to *recovery*. This is illustrated in the following examples:

(4) There are many companies *falling sick* due to *corporate diseases* such as global economic recession, rapid changes brought about by globalisation, terror attacks and incompetent management.

(5) To *rehabilitate* a strong and healthy corporate *immune system* or culture in order to sustain long-term growth.

(6) *Prescription* without *diagnosis* is malpractice, and thus carrying out corporate restructuring without knowing the *ailments* is disastrous. The key is early *diagnosis* as it increases the chances of curing most diseases.

(7) So, those most affected by the compulsory cost cutting (*corporate surgery*) find extraordinarily effective ways to resist it.

(8) It is not the only *remedy* available to managers to improve a company’s performance.

(9) It is better to *amputate* all loss-making ventures and unprofitable sales whenever possible.

(10) For complete corporate *recovery*, it is important to finish the full course of *antibiotics prescribed* in all the three phases.
In the processes of metaphorisation and personification companies are structured as human beings. However, the metaphor which is the focus of our paper, the SLENDERNESS metaphor, is characterised by a highly gendered source domain, so that the metaphorical structure of a female body (not the human body in general) is mapped onto the abstract target domain, the company. This will be dealt with in greater detail in subsequent sections.

**Downsizing as Metaphor**

Closely connected with the COMPANY IS A PATIENT metaphor is the LEAN IS HEALTHY, i.e. FAT IS UNHEALTHY metaphor. The domains of health and physical activity are very productive in economic discourse in English, which is again due to the fact that conceptual metaphors are grounded in human bodily experience and that we conceptualise phenomena around us in terms of our own knowledge about the ways the human body functions. As quoted in the *Dictionary of Economics* (Aćimović et al. 76), “an intensive wave of downsizing in a large number of organisations and industries is typical of the early ninety-eighties”, since when metaphorical expressions linguistically embodying the LEAN IS HEALTHY metaphor have been present in economic and corporate discourse in English, and it is on those expressions that the DOWNSIZING metaphor is essentially based. Companies characterised by an excessive number of employees, especially in middle management and administrative jobs, started to be called *fat* or *obese*, were forced to *go on a corporate diet*, and the only way to *get rid of* and *trim away* *body fat* was to *slim down*. Let us illustrate this by several examples from our data collection:

(11) In a world where diets and diet metaphors abound, companies have been obsessed for the past several years with trimming away the fat, getting lean and mean, and shedding weight in order to survive the recession and compete in the new global economy.

(12) It is known as downsizing, rationalizing, streamlining and, perhaps most commonly, restructuring. With a bow to the diet culture, some prefer to call it just plain slimming down.

(13) The War on Obesity: Corporate Downsizing

Corporate “body fat”, as it turned out, was trimmed away most frequently through massive and uncritical layoffs, and the hysteria surrounding corporate slenderness and the exaggerated “starving” of companies soon reached an extreme degree, to such an extent that the term *corporate anorexia* was introduced, by analogy with the disease increasingly seen in women, especially in young women suffering from various eating disorders. The following
examples illustrate the corporate anorexia metaphor, in which starvation, dieting and exercising are recommended as suitable ways of achieving competitiveness, if employees and the company itself are ready to use such a strategy:

(14) Some business bosses unfortunately have blinders on and feel that drastic cost-cutting alone is the answer when times are tough. They develop corporate anorexia. Those companies have become so skinny they'll be the last to get healthy again.

(15) Is there a way to prune without starvation? Diet and exercise alone will not create the structure needed to cope with the demands of mass customization.

(16) Anorexia, whether it be human or corporate, is a disease, not a cure. Corporate anorexia is a fear-and-denial-driven, dangerous reaction to often real competitive threats.

(17) However, the economic ups and downs of the past decade have prompted some companies to cut so much fat and become so lean that they are no longer healthy–they suffer from what some experts call "corporate anorexia."

(18) Even if an anorexic company manages to retain its best, most experienced people, how effective can they be?

(19) What really takes the calorie-laden corporate cake however, is keeping the Chief Executive Officer in place when that’s who was basically responsible for the unhealthy weight gain in the first place.

(20) They treat downsizing not as a fad diet ... but as just one part of a long-term program to renew their corporate prosperity.

(21) Conversely, however, as with a diet that is taken to extremes, the health of a business can be compromised if Slim Down strategies are taken too far for too long.

Due to massive layoffs of employees, companies have become thinner, more slender and leaner, while the HEALTH and FITNESS metaphors have become inevitable in corporate discourse in English when restructuring and a permanent reduction in workforce are being discussed:

(22) Contrary to popular belief, a lean staff is not necessarily more entrepreneurial.

(23) And this obsession with size and shape may well be why ours will be known as the era of right sizing – downsizing, rationalising, trimming, cutting back, call it what you want, it all amounts to the same thing – waging a war against organisational fat

(24) It’s come to the fore all the more so recently as a result of the global recession – companies forcibly put on a starvation diet, retaining just enough of a skeleton staff to survive, rather like wartime rationing.

(25) A diet is nothing less than a philosophy for living, yet when we try to apply a sensible dietary regime to our organisations with a view to trimming them and turning them around, the emphasis
seems always to be on the number of bodies we have as opposed to the weight of skills and talent they individually and collectively contribute.

It is easy to see the analogy between the SLENDERNESS metaphor used in corporate discourse, on the one hand, and the ideology of women’s magazines in which metaphors and other cognitive and verbal devices embodied in the discourse manipulate readers. The SLENDERNESS and HEALTH metaphors are positively valued in contemporary society, particularly due to the importance attached to regular physical activity in maintaining good health, but much more importantly, to the significance and symbolism attributed to slenderness, especially that of women. The trend of a toned, worked-out and muscular female body has been with us since the early 1980s, when the actress Jane Fonda published a book on working out and aerobics that became very popular among babyboomers and marked the beginning of a fitness frenzy in the US and Europe. Parallel with this trend, however, there has been a trend for eating disorders to become increasingly prevalent among women, the two most serious being anorexia and bulimia. A face without wrinkles, a body without cellulite, and especially slenderness as the main prerequisites for women’s success have themselves become a metaphor–they are the most prominent symbols of women’s achievement and a large amount of effort, willpower, deprivation and self-control are needed to realise them. Metaphorically mapped onto the corporate level, the process of slimming down and becoming fit by means of iron discipline, dedication and sacrifice refers to layoffs of employees and their reductions in pay. The results will, however, make up for all the effort and pain, as clearly indicated in the following examples:

(26) Is there a silver lining in all of the pain and suffering associated with corporate America's downsizing diet?

(27) The tendency to prolong a Slim Down by executing it in slow motion is natural and human. Leaders often want to delay taking action, recognizing that it will be painful to people in the organization. However, in their desire to avoid pain, they can actually cause even more harm by drawing out the process.

(28) The emotional repercussions of a Slim Down can never be avoided entirely. However, they can be minimized by slimming down quickly.

The implications of the SLENDERNESS metaphor in corporate discourse are clear and analogous with reality: companies need to take care of their “bodies” and their physical appearance, have healthy habits and go on exhausting weight-loss diets in order to achieve
perfect looks which guarantee good performance, increase profitability and improve business results.

In the real world, however, the obsession with thinness leads to a second eating disorder, *bulimia*, which immediately found its place among the other metaphorical expressions characteristic of the **downsizing** metaphor. This disease refers to binge-eating interrupted by deliberate efforts to avoid the consequences of such eating by vigorous exercise, fasting, and self-induced vomiting. The major cause of such behaviour is dissatisfaction with one’s own body weight and looks and a powerful desire to be thin. Metaphorically speaking, at the corporate level, companies are experiencing a vicious circle of employing and dismissing employees. On the one hand, companies suffer from *corporate anorexia*—they lay people off and “starve themselves”, maintaining only skeleton staff, while on the other hand, with the aim of outsourcing their business, they purge their existing personnel, thus becoming “victims of corporate bulimia”. The following examples illustrate the above-mentioned metaphorical expressions:

(29) It is therefore abhorrent for companies to embrace a ‘hire-and-fire’ approach in their human resource policy. This is equivalent to *bulimia*, an illness in which there is a great and uncontrollable desire to eat, usually followed by induced vomiting in order not to gain weight. Such “*corporate bulimia*” rips the fabric of corporate cohesion, self-interest replaces corporate interest as suspicions among staff increase and loyalty towards the company wanes.

(30) And we see it time and time again in our corporations which seem obsessed with severe organisational *dieting*. The downsizing is usually followed by what appears to be a *raging appetite* to get bigger again instead of maintaining leanness. It’s the bulimic diet cycle.

(31) And the “last in, first out” downsizing tool is really a killer because it essentially says toss out the new, clean, invigorating blood. I guess it amounts to organisational bulimia!

(32) Unless we apply those strict standards of corporate fit and value, those organisations will quickly return to where they were—fat and unhealthy and too out-of-shape to move.

The cognitive framework of corporate slenderness, with its ideologised metaphorical vocabulary, is grounded in an entrenched and stereotypical representation of the female body, which is attractive only if it meets the unattainable criteria the mass media sets for women, predominantly through advertisements and women’s magazines. Such a cognitive framework serves as a partial justification for the massive layoffs caused by downsizing, since it conveys the following message: just like women, companies have to watch their weight, go on strict and exhausting diets and trim away fat if they want to remain successful in a severely competitive market. And just like women, they are facing a vicious circle of alternative over-
eating and starving, dissatisfied with both the profit they are making and the position they are achieving in the race for business prestige and success.

**Corporate Slenderness, Metaphors and Ideology**

The connection between ideology and metaphors most frequently functions unconsciously--ideologies are neatly hidden behind the metaphorical veil, since metaphors structure concepts and phenomena in a simple and artificially simplified manner. The most effective metaphors are those that are built into the language and mind unconsciously by means of established conventions and serve as perspectivisation and attention-grabbing devices—they highlight certain attitudes, views and opinions, while downplaying some other irrelevant and undesirable aspects of a phenomenon. Thus, apparently harmless metaphors may be an ideologically charged weapon, relying on simple explanations and strong emotional effects. However, as Lakoff and Johnson claim, metaphors do not only reflect reality but “may create realities for us, especially social realities” (156). If they are repeated long enough, they may be “a guide for future action” (156). And although “words alone don’t change reality”, “changes in our conceptual system do change what is real for us and affect how we perceive the world and act upon those perceptions” (145-146). The creation of a new reality happens “when we start to comprehend our experience in terms of a metaphor, and it becomes a deeper reality when we begin to act in terms of it” (Lakoff & Johnson 145).

The SLENDERNESS metaphor, in the way it is used in corporate discourse, may be understood as a powerful ideological tool. It helps create an analogy between the socially desirable ideal of female slenderness on the one hand, and corporate “slenderness” on the other, thus perpetuating and reinforcing stereotypical representations of the social, personal and business success of women as a result of their physical appearance.

**Conclusion**

In this paper an attempt has been made to illustrate how ideological stance is subtly intertwined with metaphors in corporate discourse, as well as how seemingly harmless and benign metaphors are in fact ideologically loaded and depict the values our contemporary society is based on. Ideology forms an integral part of the downsizing terminology “without its presence becoming obvious, overbearing or overly assertive” and in such a way as to cause it to be consumed “unconsciously or inadvertently as another logical component of the argumentation in question.” (White & Herrera 319). In this way, “what easily passes as commonsensical, as an absolute truth, in fact contains marked ideological values.” (White &
Herrera 319). The cognitive framework of slenderness on which the downsizing metaphor rests, despite the fact that it was most probably unconsciously selected, accepted and used for the conceptualisation of the declining number of employees in a company, reflects the importance attached in contemporary society to a female body. In this sense, these metaphors may be regarded as one of the instruments for reinforcing stereotypical gender roles and a biased mindset in regard to the evaluation of women’s contribution in society. The downsizing metaphor and the metaphorical expressions linguistically embodying it thus become “more cognitively accessible to the reader by the use of stereotypes” (White & Herrera 318), while simultaneously supporting and reconstructing an existing aspect of social reality—a dominant androcentric worldview.

It is of the utmost importance to raise awareness of the existence of metaphors which are saying much more than appears superficially at the level of language, as well as to build mechanisms which will help reveal and disclose systems of metaphorical mapping and thus free economic discourse of those metaphorical expressions which, sometimes even unintentionally, reflect ideologies, especially ideologies of power and their value judgements. According to cognitive linguists, the unconscious, unquestioning and uncritical acceptance of such metaphors, together with a lack of awareness of the motives for the selection of some metaphors and not others, affects not only the way we think but, even more dangerously, the way we act as well.

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