

CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS IN POPULAR BUSINESS DISCOURSE

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1. Introduction

Hearing the word „metaphor”, we usually think of a device commonly used by poets for aesthetic, rhetorical purposes. As a lexical item, a metaphor is defined in the *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary* (1995: 1045) in the following way: „A metaphor is an imaginative way of describing something by referring to something else which has the qualities that you want to express.”

As a rhetorical device, it is described in *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms* (1987: 144) like this: „In general, a metaphor ascribes to some thing or action X a property Y which it could not literally possess in that context.”

In his poem titled *I wandered lonely as a cloud* (1807), the English poet, William Wordsworth (1770-1850) uses the following figure of speech based on such a comparison:

*I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd
A host of golden daffodils.*

The poet uses a metaphor to compare the daffodils to a crowd of people and a host of angels. The word „crowd” brings to mind an image of the daffodils chattering amongst one another, leaning their heads near each other in the wind. The word „host” makes them seem like their golden petals are shimmering like golden halos on angels.

The American poet, Robert Frost (1874-1963) is notably a poet of metaphors more than anything else as well. To Frost, metaphor is really what poetry is all about. There is a wonderful metaphor in his poem titled *Good Hours* (1914):

*I had for my winter evening walk
No one at all with whom to talk,
But I had the cottages in a row
Up to their shining eyes in snow.*

The metaphor *cottages with shining eyes* is based on the mapping between the physical and abstract domain: cottages don't really have eyes, but the lighted windows give them that appearance.

Frost's other beautiful poem titled *Mending Wall* (1914) is based on the apt metaphor *Good fences make good neighbours*.

In spite of the novelty of the above metaphorical expressions in these poems, the metaphors used in them are conventional and commonplace, therefore we

understand them easily.

Metaphors are, however, used not only by writers and poets, but by people in their everyday lives as well. As stated by Lakoff-Johnson (1990: 3), „our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature” Without metaphors we would not be able to understand such basic concepts of our world, like *life, argument, love, thought, society*, etc. Let us just think of the following metaphorical expressions: *They are at a crossroads in their relationship. This relationship isn't going anywhere. They are in a dead-end relationship. This marriage is on the rocks. This relationship has been on spinning its wheels for years. Their marriage has really gone off the track. They had come to the parting of their ways. They parted on amicable terms.* (cf. Lakoff 1994). If we hear these sentences in context, we will know that they are about love. The speaker wishes to convey the meaning of „lovers” with the word „passengers”, the meanings of „the events of the love affair” with the word „journey”, and „the goal of the relationship” with the word „destination” In other words, we conceive and characterise an abstract reality, i.e. „love” in term of concrete ones. The metaphor LOVE IS A JOURNEY underlies the above linguistic expressions, which includes three elements of a journey: the passengers, the journey itself and the destination.

As illustrated by the above example, metaphors are not just superfluous, though pleasant rhetorical devices, but an indispensable property of our thinking and conceptualisation (Kövecses 2005: 14). Thus our language is highly metaphorical, which uses thousands of expressions based on concrete, physical entities in order to express high-level abstractions. It was cognitive linguists who recognised what an important role metaphors play in our thinking. In this paper, I will make an attempt to identify the type of metaphors that are most frequently used in the specific vocabulary of popular business discourse.

2. The role of metaphors in our conceptualisation

In order to understand all this better, it seems appropriate to look briefly at how metaphors are interpreted in the cognitive framework. As claimed by Lakoff (1987), Lakoff-Johnson (1980) and Kövecses (1998, 2005), our conceptual system is metaphorically structured and defined. Thus the way we think, what we experience and what we do every day is often a matter of metaphor. Cognitive linguists assume that we structure concepts (*love, happiness, anger, fear, time, wealth, desire*, etc.) on concrete, physical bases (*human body, buildings, machines, animals, plants*, etc.). In other words, conceptual metaphors always combine two domains: a concrete, well bounded „source domain” and an abstract, „target domain”

It seems that our language and mind are imbued with metaphors. The business world is also awash with metaphors, just like other domains of human experience.

It is proved by the fact that they occur in great numbers in journals introducing and analysing the latest events and developments of business, economy and society. The sources of the metaphorical examples used in my analysis are some editions of *The Economist* published in May and June 2006 and those of *The Guardian Weekly* published in August and September 2006. The reason why I have chosen these two periodicals is that they basically deal with current political, economic and business matters for an audience of both experts and non-experts, like I am, and seek to inform and entertain more generally.

Now let us examine what kind of metaphors play a role in our understanding of concepts used in business English.

3. Metaphors underlying idiomatic expressions of business English

3.1. ECONOMY/BUSINESS IS A HUMAN BODY

The concepts „health” and „illnesses” are closely related to the human body. The general features of health and illnesses serve as common source domains in the systems of abstract vocabulary used in the language of business and economics as well. What elements can the scenarios „health and „illnesses” have as source domains? These are as follows: the healthy condition of a human body, the symptoms of illnesses, the physical, psychological and psychosomatic conditions and concomitant effects of illnesses, the treatments of illnesses, and the recovery or death of patients.

According to the transfer between the concrete and abstract images, we can talk about the appropriate and inappropriate state of an economy/a company, the difficulties and problems of an economy, and measures taken to solve economic difficulties as target domains. The general well-being of an economy/a company is understood in economic terms as its economic health. There are also some threats to the economic health, which can be tackled or not. Thus an economy/company can also suffer injuries or fall ill, undergo medical treatment and recover or collapse. These are illustrated by the following examples:

3.1.1 AN APPROPRIATE CONDITION OF A COMPANY IS A HEALTHY CONDITION

America *is doing well*, with relatively *healthy* growth in jobs.

The overall economy still seems *healthier* than it has been for a long time.

India now boasts *robust* economic growth.

America’s economy continues to grow *robustly*.

Mastercard *is doing nicely*.

Benign economic conditions have encouraged *stable* banks.

The mainland’s banks have never looked *in better shape*.

The economy is *in good shape*.

3.1.2. INAPPROPRIATE CONDITIONS (DIFFICULTIES, PROBLEMS) ARE DISEASES

The economy remains strong despite the *symptoms* of „*Dutch disease*”

The German company bought the *ailing* British volume car producer in 1994.

Most economies have been *weak*.

In general, Japanese companies are looking *pale*. But plenty are no at all *fit*.

Any hint of a surge will be likely to send market into *spasms*.

The danger is that Wall Street’s *sneeze* will bring a *case of flu* with it.

Top of the list must be improving their *sclerotic* economies.

It is not clear whether this *sclerosis* is increasing: the evidence is mixed.

One result of this *paralysis* is an oil-export bottleneck.

Under these circumstances, the ban on Lenovo Computers seems a little *paranoid*.

The case against Milberg Weiss does not address the economic *lunacy* of the kind of litigation in which the firm specialized.

It is the product of a *crippled* economy and a *crippled* democracy.

The Japanese economy has long seemed *allergic* to growth.

High oil prices have not yet produced an economic *shock* among consuming countries.

This is the biggest *headache* of all for the Indian industry as a whole.

Lending is a sober business punctuated by odd moments of *lunacy*.

Perhaps the most *acute crisis* is in electricity.

There is a growing realization that their strategies for dealing with *chronic* problems are failing.

That country had an *acute case* of what became known as the „*Dutch disease*” in 1982.

Without easy credit, dear oil will cause more *pain*.

Even the American Food and Drug Administration is *suffering serious side-effects*.

The *malady*’s origins lie in a 1992 decision.

3.1.3. ECONOMIC MEASURES ARE MEDICAL TREATMENTS

The IMF view is that *prevention is better than cure*.

Viagra of volatility

Equally unclear is how much money the *donors* actually want to give.

Countries, including Austria, Britain, France and Germany were now trying their own ways *to stop the bleeding*.

The bank say there is not much point in a *bypass* mechanism.

Dell has tried to develop a service division *to remedy* this.

The slow *remedy* over a decade was the creation of many service industries.

There are no takeovers, no dramas, no *miracle cures*.

Can Bill Gates *cure* the word?

In the 18th and early 20th century Germany was the *pharmacy* for the world.

Two insurers *injected* €450m of capital into the *wounded* bank.
 One of Europe's finest conglomerates needs more radical *surgery*.
 They are not ready to *swallow* the nasty *medicine* of change. Reform is always painful.

3.1.4. RECOVERY OF AN ECONOMY IS RECOVERY OF A PATIENT

The capital markets need time and money to *get on their feet*.

Zambia's industry *is coming back to life*.

It always takes time to *recover from the shock*.

Latin America's growth figures are boosted by *recoveries* from earlier collapses in Argentina.

Low volatility is a reflection not of complacency, but a long period of *healing* in corporate America.

Crysler is good at *coming back from the dead*.

Only Fiat, *coming round after a near death experience*, is enjoying an exhilarating *recovery*.

3.1.5. COLLAPSE OF AN ECONOMY/BUSINESS IS DEATH OF A PATIENT

It is too soon to *write an obituary* for traditional software.

It doesn't mean that the big guys are going to *die* overnight.

Hedge funds *pass away* all the time.

3.2. BUSINESS IS WAR

Business is often structured metaphorically in terms of war. Let us see what kind of mappings can be observed in the metaphor BUSINESS IS WAR. When we think of war, we usually have the following images of it: battles, the belligerents, weapons, strategies, victory or defeat. In accordance with the cognitive theory of metaphors, these serve as source domains, while the target domains involve: business talks, businessmen, strategies used in business, success or failure.

When we think of business life, we often have the image of a war in which businessmen are soldiers fighting with each other on battlefields, often in the front line, using different strategies and tactics. They attack each other's positions and defend their own. Sometimes if they find a position indefensible, they can abandon it and take a new line of attack or they even redraw the battle lines. Now let us see some linguistic expressions used in the language of business, in which we witness the mappings of the above mentioned source and target domains:

Whatever happens in the *battle* over this particular deal, consolidation seems impossible.

American stock exchanges: *Redrawing the battle lines*.

The main *battlefield* at present is retail trade.

Air travel: the next green *battleground*.

Any difficulties for an overloaded Airbus today could spill over into efforts to take on Boeing on the new *battlefront*.

Italy again *in the firing line*.

The euro usually gets caught in the *crossfire* of serious dollar versus yen *fire fights*.

The danger is that by *attacking on all fronts*...

Instead of *mounting* a really effective *attack* on the market leader, the new magazines seem to be obsessed with *fighting* each other.

Now the most illustrious publisher is *under fire*.

Even so, the FSA has *fired* its first warning *shot* over the complacent industry.

Indonesia's president boldly steps into the world's diplomatic *minefields*.

The global community had better *build some air raid shelters* before the *bombs start to fall*.

Why did none of the *besieged* companies bother?

Witro and Infosy each employ more than 50,000 people, and this year they are planning to *recruit*, respectively, 15,000 and 25,000.

Hat would raise returns for China's *army* of small savers.

It is true that the foundation's *strategy* is not to monopolise the field.

But that *tactic* no longer works.

The world's *blockade* of the PA has hit harder and quicker than anybody expected.

Google, having made many *enemies*, must now *fight many battles*.

Morgan Stanley, an investment bank, *launched* an unusual *attack* on the New York Times Company.

3.3. BUSINESS IS A GAME AND SPORT

Games and particularly sports are also often used for metaphorical conceptualisation, and the language of business and finance is also awash with metaphorical expressions based on these source domains. Games and sports have rules, players, sportsmen are competitors competing with each other, they use different tactics and strategies and the outcome is either victory or defeat.

The participants of business life can also be considered as rivals, business also has its rules, businesspeople use different strategies, and can be winners or losers as well. To justify this, let us have a closer look at the following metaphorical expressions and the metaphors underlying them:

3.3.1. BUSINESS IS A GAME

So what do the winners do right to succeed in this *tough game*?

French firms interested in further investments in Argentina need clear *rules of the game* in the economic field.

It is not just a *game* for the government. Private individuals can *play*, too.

There are plenty of people within the company who want to *play* the power *game*.

The company has to raise its *game*.

Toyota has shown that it can *play the game*.

Besides, City group has been back *in the game*.

That sort of *game* is not new to investors.

If the fund manager posts negative returns in the first few months, *the game is over*.

3.3.2. BUSINESS IS A CARD GAME/DOMINOES

Jaroslav Kaczynski uses the image of a *bridge table*, where the four *players* are businesspeople, spooks/bureaucrats, gangsters and politicians. All engaged in *games* against the public interest.

The sale of profitable government enterprises to strategic investors is not *on the cards*.

Channel *lays the cards on the table*.

Mr Bush has begun to *reshuffle* his White House team.

Many observers predict a „*domino-effect*” of further huge mergers.

3.3.3. BUSINESS IS A GAME OF CHESS

Knights and pawns check king.

Bayer, which has offered to buy Schering for €3,7 billion so acting as a *white knight* to fend off a hostile rival bid from Merck.

3.3.4. BUSINESS IS GAMBLING

The *stakes* are high for Sony

This time the *gamble* should fail.

But not everyone is *betting on* a simple rise in prices.

Since the fall of communism, Russian businessmen have repeatedly *gambled on* the amnesia of foreigners *betting* that the greed of investors would obscure memories of instability.

The strategic *bets* were being *placed* by guesswork.

To that extent, they have *won* the strategic *bets*.

There are always punters willing to *gamble on* very risky stocks in the hope of *hitting the jackpot*.

Private-equity firms may be willing to *bet against the pack*.

Fund management Alpha betting: Whether they earn alpha or not, they have to *roll the dice* and try to get it.

3.4. BUSINESS IS A SPORT

A retooled NASDAQ could *compete* hard against the NYE.

That would benefit the economy through increased *competition*.

It has a good chance of succeeding even against well established *competitors* such as My-Space.

Indian banks would be set for decades of growth in which Indian banks would become powerful *rivals*.

Germany's export *champions* rightly do not see that as a problem.

The car industry is forming into two camps: *winners* and *losers*.

One big *winner* from the growth of retail has been ICICI Bank.

He wants the company to *win* 15% of the global car market.

They are already *losing* good business to smaller joint-stock banks.

Buta's businesses trading up clash with those trading down, some of them may end up as *losers*, too.

In industry, a sin services India has produced *world-beaters*.

The latest *record-breakers* are copper, and platinum.

Share prices of the listed exchanges have *come off their records high*.

The journals of business, finance and economics mentioned above have provided plenty of evidence for the fact that various disciplines of sport and games are foregrounded as source domains in the interpretation of the different aspects of business. They include the following: CARD GAME, DOMINOES, CHESS, GAMBLING, ATHLETICS, CAR RACE, BOXING, FOOTBALL, HUNTING, SHOOTING, HORSE RIDING and FLYING. Consider the following examples:

3.4.1. BUSINESS IS ATHLETICS/A RACE

Sberbank has enjoyed a *long run* as the only listed Russian bank stock with any liquidity.

Companies in Germany's traditional industries will *run their course* and spin-offs and start-ups will eventually take place.

Local government *raced* to boost local growth rates.

But by now other foreign banks were in *the race*, *chasing* a dwindling number of profits.

The world's biggest computer maker *is stumbling*.

Even for non-core workers, however, there are regulatory *hurdles*.

The price of copper has *jumped* around at levels a few hundred dollars below its peak.

Large one-day *jumps* in the Dow and other indices were regular features on the nightly news.

They cannot give a *head start* to favoured investors.

3.4.2. BUSINESS IS A CAR RACE/DRIVING

Three years after the *rally* started, they face an array of new investment opportunities.

As stock markets have *rallied*, they have flocked back into equities.

There are investors *chasing* the market, rather than *driving* it.

That was the year in which China began trying, with limited success, *to put on the*

brakes.

They would find the economy easier to *steer*.

A growing shareholder rebellion threatened to put a spoke in the *wheels* of its proposed merger with Severstal.

Only few companies have *tyres* big enough to kick.

How much *fuel* is left in the global housing *engine*?

3.4.3. BUSINESS IS BOXING

All this is a *blow* for freer global trade.

The White House sees little need for a *heavyweight* in the trade job.

The IMF will hold the *ring* for the process.

3.4.4. BUSINESS IS FOOTBALL

Yet Japanese banks are standing on *the sidelines*.

FSA, Japan's financial regulator imposed an unprecedented *penalty* on Chomo Aoyama Pricewater House Cooperators, a leading auditor.

The Fed has given itself some room for *manoeuvre*.

A *whistle-blower* eventually revealed the massive systemic deception, which caused the company to collapse.

Citigroup is one of the *cheerleaders* of the becoming boom.

3.4.5. BUSINESS IS HUNTING

Although both are adding stores and making money, it is still easy to tell the *hunter* from the *hunted*.

Small savers across Japan can *hunt down* a bank branch.

The proportion of working-age people who have a job or *hunting for* one is supposed to grow in a recovery.

3.4.6. BUSINESS IS SHOOTING

But this *shot* across the *bows* was surely well timed.

If executives *miss one target*, there is a good chance that they will *hit* another.

When they *hit one target*, they immediately *set* another.

A room full of bankers *pulled the trigger*, having watched Macy's *miss one target after another*.

3.4.7. BUSINESS IS RIDING A HORSE

Some institutions were getting close to that level and had to *rein* in new lending.

Saddled with some of the highest labour and tax costs in Europe, German companies compete at the top end of the market.

The resulting company will *spur* the Italian and Spanish economies into overdrive.

Banks want to protect the *turf*.

Another *horse to back* is consolidation.

3.4.8. BUSINESS IS FLYING

Indian business will once more *land* on the ground *with a thump*.

India has *taken off* at last. Only with further reforms can it *spread its wings* and *soar*.

Can India *fly*? The question is no longer whether India can *fly* but how high?

Indian business will once more *land* on the ground *with a thump*.

The 12-month core PCE deflator will *hover* around.

Why is it proving so difficult to engineer the *soft-landing* that the government has been trying for?

The IMF offers rapid access to cash if strong economies are *hit by financial turbulence*.

Even a *soft landing* for property could cause a *bumpy* one for the whole economy.

3.5. BUSINESS IS MARRIAGE

Another common scenario often foregrounded in business discourse is related to marriage serving as a source domain for metaphorical mappings. It has again a great variety of aspects ranging from FLIRTING, COURTSHIP, LOVE RELATIONSHIP, ENGAGEMENT, PROPOSAL OF MARRIAGE, MARRIAGE, HONEYMOON, GIVING BIRTH TO CHILDREN, MARRIAGE CRISIS to SEPARATION or DIVORCE.

A merger can metaphorically be interpreted as marriage in which the two companies and organisations joined together are figured as married partners. Just like in marriage, integration can have its good and bad sides for the merged companies, they can go through difficult periods and if their decision turns out to have been too hasty, they can even regret joining. These metaphors of marriage are reflected in the following metaphorical expressions:

Freescale *gets engaged*, but continues to *flirt* with other *suitors*.

It will be less a *love match* than a *marriage of convenience* if the *knot* is eventually *tied* between Freescale Semiconductor, a chipmaking firm that used to be part of Motorola, and a consortium of private-equity firms.

The *marriage* of Daimler-Benz and Chrysler was announced in May 1998.

Marriage made in heaven – or hell.

The *marriage made in heaven* soon turned into the hitch-up from hell.

Man and Scania are a *good match*.

France's Arcelor, the world's second biggest steelmaker would *jump into a hasty marriage* with Severstal.

The company sent out a 38-page document to highlight the advantages of its *proposed marriage* with the Russians.

The process of integrating the world's two largest steelmakers would be

exhilarating, thrilling and difficult. Very clearly this is a *marriage of reason*. I hope it will become a *marriage of the heart*.

Scandal-scarred Lola is heading for victory, but his *honeymoon* could be short.

Years after a *tortuous labour*, South Africa finally *gave birth* this week to its first competitive fixed-line telecoms operators.

The Financial Services Agency set out to *break* the cosy *ties* between banks and their former regulator, the finance ministry.

3.6. BUSINESS IS ACTING IN A THEATRE/CINEMA/CONCERT and BUSINESS IS DANCING

Not only political discourse but the language of business is often characterised by terms of acting or performing in a theatre, with the participants in the business scenario being the actors, stars who are sometimes applauded or booed by the audience. Consider the following metaphorical expressions:

The solution is to have a format whereby the big players talk through their global problems and *act in concert*.

The symphony orchestra does not attempt to cure the sick.

Diversification destroys the *performance* of the organisation.

Equity markets so far have *applauded* many mergers.

You can hardly blame the White House for moving one of its *stars* elsewhere

The rising costs of money and raw materials took leading roles in that economic *horror movie*.

Bidding for Berliner Bank is seen by many as a *dress rehearsal* for the sale of Bankgesellschaft Berlin next year.

Asian stocks are a *play* on today's healthy global economic growth.

The big high-street banks *made a song and dance*.

Team Lease is already *dancing* at the edge of what is allowed.

Crowding the *dance floor*.

General Motors, Delphi and the unions: *Last tango* in Detroit?

Overall, as for the functions of metaphors in popular business discourse, the following observations can be made: On the one hand, most of these metaphors are general rather than genre-specific, and consequently they enable even non-experts to understand terms in business, economics and finance. On the other hand, metaphors used in press language frequently have a decorative and illustrative purpose as well. I am convinced that in scientific articles on business and economics, metaphors also fill terminological gaps, e.g. *cash flow*, which means the movement of money into or out of a firm or business.

Metaphors tend to occur all through the discourse, often at the beginning introducing the topic, but mainly in mid-text, reflecting the argumentative nature of journalistic language. A detailed analysis of how metaphoric expressions are organised across a text and what discourse functions they have in the different slots

could, however, be the topic of another study.

4. Conclusions

In my paper I have made an attempt to justify cognitive linguists' claim that metaphors are not only a poetic and rhetorical device, but they pervade our thinking and conceptualisation as well. Accordingly, they are ubiquitous, and the language of business is also replete with them. I assume that the majority of abstract expressions used in popular business discourse can be understood only through metaphors. In my analysis, I have found that scenarios, such as HEALTH, ILLNESSES, WAR, GAMES/SPORT, MARRIAGE and THEATRE enable us to conceptualise various aspects of business life. As evident from the above, one target domain has numerous mapping systems, and the main target domain can also have some versions. The reason for this is that with concepts having various aspects, several source domains are needed to conceptualise them.

No doubt the strength of the cognitive metaphor theory used in the above analysis lies in the fact that it provides a tool to understand the world around us better, and to explore our cognitive system through conceptual metaphors. I hope I have been able to give an overall picture about what new vistas the cognitive approach to metaphors has opened up in the analysis of human cognition, and thus in the understanding of the language of business, finance and economics.

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