The Construction of Company Identity through Memory. 'Specialised' Metaphorical Meanings for Pastness on Italian Business Web Pages

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Abstract

This paper proposes a metaphor-based approach to the discourse about the company's past in a cross-cultural perspective. Specifically, it analyses the metaphorical schemata used to build corporate identity through the conceptualisation of "social forms" of organisational culture in a context of remembering. The paper contends that the discourse of Italian companies deployed for the construction of a corporate memory hinges on 'specialised' aspects of the *war/game/building* metaphors used to conceptualise company success in terms of collective achievements, stability and strategic leadership.

Keywords: company identity, memory, specialised aspects of a concept, metaphors.

1. Introduction and theoretical background

A particular role in identity-building processes is played by the narratives of the past (Huyssen 1995). In recent years, sociologists have extended the concept of a memory-based identity to the social level noting that "the possession of an historical identity and the possession of a social identity coincide" (MacIntyre 1984: 218).

This study proposes a metaphor-based approach to the discourse of the company's past, i.e. corporate history texts (CH), as part of the identity-centred communication that shapes the corporate culture (for a detailed account of the interrelation between language and the construction of a corporate identity, see Salvi 2011) and lies at the interface of the company/national value system and a broader concept of (business) progress. The analysis is based on the understanding of the company's memory in terms of a historical

repository in which social forms[1] of organisational culture, i.e. values, visions, symbols and norms developed over time, are stored and contribute to the construction of the overall corporate persona. The focus is on metaphors, both expressed linguistically and constructed intersemiotically (Chiaro 2004)[2] on the web page with regard to identity and the way the past is conceptualised, ultimately reflecting culture-specific cognitive and discursive schemas.

1.1. (Collective) memory, history and the framing of a corporate identity

Halbwachs [tr. Coser 1992] provides a definition of the basic concepts necessary for conducting inquiries into the field of social memory. Among different forms of memory, he describes collective memory as the active past that forms our identities insomuch as it is the product of individuals who remember. As such, it is affected by history but also by a whole range of 'commemorative' symbolisms, which are part of and shape the community's identity.

In corporate websites, CH is actually placed in the 'About us' or 'identity' texts. Typically, history is treated as a foundation for identity in social terms, i.e. collective strength, structural knowledge (Rowlinson et al. 2010), and managerial competence (Gatti 2011a), on the sociological assumption that "being social presupposes the ability to experience events that happened to groups and communities to which we belong long before we joined them as if they were part of our past" (Zerubavel 1996: 287).

1.2. Metaphors as culture-specific socio-cognitive tools

The prevailing view in social cognition is that people rely on schematic knowledge of social stimuli to selectively interpret and elaborate the complex array of social information (Middleton and Edwards 1990; Fiske and Taylor 1991; Lakoff and Johnson 1999). From a cognitive

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[1] The use of the term 'social forms' in organisations relies on the definition provided by Pólos, Hannan and Carroll (2002).
[2] Due to space constraints, a detailed analysis of the page semiosis will be provided elsewhere. For the same reason, further instances from the verbal texts have had to be omitted.

perspective, the understanding of the semantic relationship among fields of related concepts and the words that express them relies on the notion of semantic frames (Fillmore 1985). A frame is a cognitive model that organises our world knowledge and allows us to make appropriate inferences based on systematic knowledge. More generally, a frame refers to the background knowledge necessary to understand a concept. As such, it comprises many sub-frames of a concept that can capture the information of more detailed situations within that frame. When conceptualising experience through metaphorical structuring, we pick out what is 'important' to us in the experience; in other words, we select partial structure from the general concepts. In doing so, we restrict the concept to *specialised* aspects often appearing in 'disguised' or 'refined' form. The present study draws from Lakoff and Johnson's claim that "specialized aspects [...] are used in certain subcultures or in certain situations" (2003: 87), and aims to unveil the common conceptual traits underlying such limitations of metaphorical frames.

2. Data

The analysis relies on corpus data consisting of verbal and non-verbal texts. Because of the cultural perspective adopted, only Italian business websites have been selected and a corpus of the top 25 companies on the 2009 Fortune Most Admired (FMA) list was taken as contrastive reference only – based on findings of previous studies (Gatti 2010; 2011a; 2011b). For the representativeness and the homogeneity criteria, the Italian corpus (IC) contains the CHs of the websites of the first 25 companies (in alphabetical order) listed in the *Borsa Italiana* (www.borsaitaliana.it/borsa/azioni/fse-mib/lista.html).

3. Analysis: Corporate identity metaphors in Italian CH discourse for the web

The sample documents feature an extensive use of metaphors embedded in the verbal and the visual texts by means of complex metaphorical schemata which impinge on the notion of *strategy* referred to as both the direction and scope of an organisation. In lexicogrammatical terms, strategic planning is verbalised through

the description of well considered tactics, i.e. 'goals', 'growth programs' and 'sales plans', in extending clause complexes placed in post-modifying position (e.g. *The goal is to supply energy and contribute to the country's development*; *the Group is reorganized in order to...* etc.). Not surprisingly for corporate case histories, goals are often ambitious given the promotional nature of the text-type. For example, Ansaldo avers "our goal is to become a world leader in our industry by promoting a culture of quality, safety and responsibility". Similarly, Generali proclaims "the creation of a large insurance company that could compete with the big players emerging in nearby Lombardo-Veneto Kingdom and elsewhere in Europe".

In the visual, strategic metaphors are built cross-modally and draw from ontologies of leadership and winning strategies in the various fields (e.g. portraits of historical leaders; successful products and events; symbols of supremacy, bravery and strength – such, as we will see, as the lion). Cross-semiotic understanding highlights another aspect peculiar to Italian corporate discourse interwoven in historical narrative. Namely, in Halbwach's sense, the *blurring between broader history*, often expressed in national terms, *and organization history* thus ultimately creating a kind of 'organisational collective memory' through historical awareness.

Relying on Hunt and Menon's (1995) dimensions/sources of the four major metaphors for competitive strategy in business and marketing, and in agreement with Charteris-Black's (2004) criteria for the definition of metaphor, I have classified the metaphor mapping relations and their specialised semantic aspects as identified in the corpus though linguistic (lexical) analysis[3].

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[3] Through lack of space, we can only list the findings as a note: Major conceptual domains found (and number of instances): a – *war* (7), b – *game* (11) and c – *building* (6). 'Specialised' aspects used in verbal/non-verbal encoding: a – strategic planning, strong leadership, role/position, exemplary service, gain/have control; b – teams, players, competition, achieve new records, leading global/national player, tough competition, good results; c – consolidation, reliance on solid (financial) bases, restructuring, solid and longlasting experience. Expressions in language: a – verbal: *supremacy*, *service*, *operation*, *entry in (territory)*, *strategic plan*, *key areas*, *control*, *guidance*, *new bases*, *forced to pull out*, *strategic move*; visual: lion, historical conflict images; b – verbal: *team*, *competition*, *competitor*, *multi-tracks (strategy)*, *(international) player*, *win*, *race*, *records*, *position* (rank), *compete*

Italian firms seem to organise the discourse of the company's past, or memory, around 'specialised' conceptual aspects of the basic 'war', 'game' and 'building' metaphors. The operating notion in the corpus texts is *strategic management*, which restricts the use of the conceptual frame by ruling out other basic concepts. For example, the *war* metaphor is used with reference to strategic planning, strong leadership, supremacy, etc. while the lexicon of conflict, e.g. war, attack, kill, fight, weapons, battle (Charteris-Black 2004: ch. 6) are absent. What provides coherence and internal systematicity to the metaphorical argumentation is actually a set of entailments based on the notion of strategy. Thus the above concepts are 'specialised' to BUSINESS IS STRATEGIC WAR, BUSINESS IS A STRATEGIC GAME AND BUSINESS IS A STRATEGIC CONSTRUCTION. Overall, the concept motivating the set of metaphors in IC discourse could be read as A SUCCESSFUL COMPANY IS THE RESULT OF SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES.

The following subsections provide the analysis of a sample group of sub-mappings which characterise the encoding of specialised aspects of the three main metaphorical concepts – entailed to the notion of strategic business – in the historical discourse of Italian companies.

3.1. Social aspect of strategy: Business is a strategic team game and the Finmeccanica SpA emphasis on the role of collectivity

Team game is only one of the metaphors for *strategy* in games, one we use to talk about or highlight the social or collective nature of a game, e.g. role-playing and leadership scenarios. In business discourse, when people argue about strategies of human interaction, they use the structurally complex metaphor BUSINESS IS A TEAM GAME (Marsh 1988). Finmeccanica SpA's 'history' pages offer an interesting example of how this submapping of the *game* metaphor is coherently built into text and semiosis. The overall narration rests on the concept of 'human interaction', which is conventionally

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with, *results*; visual: teams of employees, managers in group, people working on assembling lines, receiving and passing on tools/parts, founders' family groups; c-verbal: *foundations*, *solid pillars*, *sound base, consolidation*, *restructuring*, *renovate*, *framework*; visual: imposing historical buildings, impressive interiors.

rooted in the basic notion that 'Companies are people'. The visual emphasis on the 'social' participants is strong (14 out of the 18 pictures of the company's timeline show people at work). In a metaphorical reflection of the company's managerial strategies, the human contribution to company success is illustrated in terms of relationship between each individual unit and the organisation as a collective entity. In language, such salience is consistently rendered through recurring expressions hinging on people as social actors, e.g. *Finmeccanica today is a truly multi-domestic and multi-cultural group, with 74,497 employees, 43.3% of whom work outside Italy*, which make it *a group able to compete with leading European operators*.

As mentioned above, frames are the basic concepts people use to process social information (Gibbs 2003). With reference to the notion of team and teamwork in organizational discourse (Thomson Gale's Encyclopedia of Management, www.enotes.com), the *team* metaphor contains the following mapping:

TABLE 1
The *team* metaphorical mapping

a) Task and resources	*d*) Role and functions
b) Relevant information to the team's work	*e*) Strategy and work plan
c) Pursuit/Mission	*f*) Follow-up

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which finds corresponding expressions in the Finmeccanica verbal text:

(a) Finmeccanica was given <u>a clearly defined task...</u>

(b) <u>[w]hich would become the core of the mechanical industry</u> for the next fifty years. [...] <u>Attention</u> <u>focused on</u> sectors [...] <u>with an eye on the emerging</u> electronics <u>sector</u>.

(c) <u>The quest for</u> a more competitive dimension...

(d) [...] leaving Finmeccanica the <u>functions of</u> strategic and industrial guidance and control. [F.] strengthened <u>its role as</u>...

(e) [...] Finmeccanica <u>sold off</u> [...], <u>and</u> <u>acquired</u>...

(f) Finmeccanica <u>continued with coherence and success</u>...

To sum up, the part/whole sequential relations of the visual-verbal intersemiosis favours the ergative interpretation in which the

Medium (i.e. the medium through which the process is actualised) is 'the group/team' both at content and expression strata.

3.2. 'Supremacy' and 'leadership' aspects of strategy: The Generali SpA metaphors between ontologies of *game* and *war*

An in-depth reading of the 86 pages of the Generali's pdf book *The Years of the Lion* (*YoL*) reveals that the overall argumentation about the company's history impinges on the concept of *strategic business*, entextualised through metaphors of *game* and *war*. Nevertheless, consistently with the lexical choices of the other companies of the corpus, there are no words belonging to the semantic field of "conflict". Cross-metaphorical coherence is given instead by metaphors of 'leadership', 'supremacy' and 'win strategy planning' that are thus expressed in the written text:

– Leadership: (a) *A leading player in the global market (1991-2000 heading)*; (b) *[...] in 2006 Generali consolidated its leadership in the life sector and became leader in the non-life business...*

– Supremacy: (a) *Soon, Generali's supremacy in the Italian insurance market annoyed its competitors...*; (b) *Generali confirmed its position as the country's top player in....*

– Win strategy planning: (a) *[The company's] most strategic move, however, was the decision to widen its sphere of interests...*; (b) *The acquisition [...] was part of a strategy aimed at achieving growth, profitability and asset strengthening...*

With the exception of the title, where the word *lion* accomplishes both metaphorical and metonymic mappings, the animal lexicon is omitted in the verbal text. Instead, in the visual such conceptualisation of the company is metaphorically rendered through the pervasive image of the lion[4], which provides the cue for interpreting the company's values and strategic policies. Moreover, the lion metaphor as metonymy provides cross-metaphorical coherence by means of the extensive network of coherences on the

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[4] The St. Mark lion has been used as the company's logo since 1848, when the insurance company chose the image of the Venetian Republic as a symbol for its Italian identity. However, in the visual texts it is deployed in the metaphorical sense to show strength, bravery and strategic leadership (e.g. *YoL* pictures at pp. 60, 72, 78).

war and *game* metaphors, and through cross-modal consistency, i.e. the lion triggers inferences related to the company's success as both a fighter (*war*) and a winner in the market arena (*game*).

3.3. *Specialised* meanings of 'solidity' and 'perpetration': *building* metaphors

In general terms, *building* is a productive basic source domain (Lakoff and Johnson 2003) carrying socially-driven connotations (Charteris-Black 2004: 70) that capture the idea of a building as a symbol of worthwhile social endeavour. In the IC such metaphor is used to convey a positive[5] evaluation of strategic managerial activities, as their outcome is valuable. Abstract concepts such as 'knowhow' and 'experience' are conceptualised as the result of business strategic choices. Within this building frame, the company is conceptualised in terms of an organisational structure whose long-term success in the market is based on 'conservative' values such as stability and solidity[6]. In the sample texts, 'building' metaphors are referred to in terms of the basic metaphors:
– The Company is a building: metaphorical expressions of (financial and organisational) solidity: (a) *Today, the [Group's] [...] prestige owes a great deal to [...] the Company's founders who developed a highly modern project based on solid pillars: a wide [...] shareholding community, a sound capital base, a diversified operating structure...*; (b) *[h]alf a century of hard work to achieve remarkable experience, financial solidity and international presence.*
– Perpetuation over time. 'Consolidation' metaphors for progress towards long-term stability: (a) *Generali further pursued its consolidation drive by investing in local companies or by establishing new ones*; (b) *Building and consolidating its knowhow in biotechnology, DiaSorin now...*

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[5] In the sample data the negative aspects of the source domain of building, e.g. labour, material and high costs, are absent.
[6] In the FMA corpus, instead, discourse is dominated by more dynamic notions such as *growth*. Consequently, the metaphorical expressions used in the verbal and non-verbal texts are motivated by source domains in the semantic field of 'motion', such as journey, path, river, etc. (Gatti 2012b).

4. Conclusion

A metaphor-enriched perspective on discourse analysis supports the view according to which people interpret many aspects of the social world using conceptual metaphors (Landau *et al.* 2010; Gatti 2012a).

The discourse of Italian web CHs hinges on metaphorical frames that are based on a cultural understanding and interpretation of the social and business worlds. Indeed, corporate historical narratives seem to contribute to the construction of a collective memory through a recalling process of the individual-to-collectivity type, metaphorically based on the umbrella concept of 'Strategic Business'. Specifically, the identity-centred discourse of corporate histories is structured around *specialised aspects* of the basic metaphors of *war*, *game* and *building*. These selected aspects provide elements for sub-mappings relating to 'social' and 'positive' notions such as teamwork, strategic leadership, solidity, stability and perpetration, which rule out other typical conceptual frames, such as the 'conflict' and 'exhaustion' schemata.

In the ongoing large-scale recontextualisation of corporate meanings in a globalised business environment, the present study provides further evidence of the interaction between global and national spheres. A better understanding of the national identity in a given community context, as well as the emphasis on its distinctiveness, should help both international business researchers and practitioners engaged in comparative market research.

Acknowledgments

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