

Sylvia Jaworska (University of Reading)

Why did no one notice it? The discourse of ignorance in the British media reporting on the global financial crisis 2008-2011

s.jaworska@reading.ac.uk

The economic crisis of 2008 did not only shake the financial fundamentals of global economies, it was also widely perceived as a crisis of knowledge (Davies & McGoey 2012). The widespread view that accompanied its outbreak was that of the unpredictability of the events, which seemed to strike out of the blue. It was predominantly the lack of knowledge or ignorance on the part of financial actors that was seen as one of its causes. While ignorance is normally perceived as an absence of knowledge, recent research within the Sociology of Knowledge highlights its relevance as a strategic tool and constructive force in the process of knowledge creation and transfer (Mike 1998, Wehling 2006, Davies & McGoey 2012). Ignorance can take a form of deliberate silence (known unknowns) to hide uncomfortable truths or act as an alibi to disavow responsibility (Rayner 2012). It can also have positive effects in that it can stimulate new directions (Davies & McGoey 2012). Most research to date on the role of ignorance was concerned with constructions of scientific knowledge in public discourse and there is little research outside this area. Given that lack of knowledge is seen (by scholars) as underlying the perception of the economic crisis, this paper endeavours to examine the role of ignorance in this particular context. The underlying premise of this research is the notion that complex social events such as a financial crisis are essentially discursively constructed and that both knowledge and ignorance claims are pivotal in this process. Against this background, this paper addresses the following research questions:

- 1) How was ignorance/a lack of knowledge (*Nichtwissen*) discursively constructed in media discourse about the global financial crisis?
- 2) What kind of lexico-grammatical means were used to describe a lack of knowledge?
- 3) What role did ignorance assume in this context? Was it seen as an alibi to disavow responsibility or a productive force that has initiated new ways of thinking about the economy?

These issues are investigated by combining the methods and tools of Critical Discourse Analysis and Corpus Linguistics (Mautner 2007, Baker et al. 2008, Jaworska & Krishnamurthy 2010). The data under scrutiny consists of articles concerned with the global financial crisis and published in the major British national newspapers including the Financial Times. By scrutinising frequency lists and studying collocational profiles of lexical items denoting a lack of knowledge, this paper will demonstrate the main discursive patterns and strategies used to refer to not-knowing. In so doing, this paper attempts to shed light on the role of ignorance in the construction of complex events in public discourse and to contribute to the new linguistic field of language of not-knowing (*Sprache des Nichtwissens*), which is still in its infancy (Janich & Simmerling 2013).

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Dr Sylvia Jaworska is a Lecturer in Applied Linguistics in the Department of English Language and Applied Linguistics at the University of Reading. In 2007, she received her PhD in Applied Linguistics from Aston University, Birmingham (UK). She is particularly interested in the use of tools and methods of Corpus Linguistics to study cross-cultural representations of various social phenomena such as feminism, gender and multilingualism in media and commercial discourses including social media.