

**A Rhetorical Approach to Analyzing Turbulent Environments.  
The Role of Symbolism in Communicating the Global Financial Crisis**

The aim of this paper is to present the most important notions connected with crisis communication by taking into account the current global financial crisis. In order to study the nuances of corporate crisis communication, the issue of re-enchantment and its symbolic-discursive application will be employed. Owing to the limitations of this paper, the author wants to discuss one aspect of symbolism in organizational discourse, namely the magical power of crisis rhetoric on the example of metaphors.

**Re-enchanted Corporate Crisis Communication**

The interrelation of discourse and organization is a topic discussed by scholars representing different domains, such as sociology, economics or linguistics, to mention just a few of them. To discuss this issue in greater detail, the postmodern approach of re-enchantment will be taken into consideration since it encompasses the symbolic or discursive side of a company influencing its members. According to this viewpoint, the cultural and linguistic forms take precedence over material technologies and organizational structures in shaping the corporate identity (Reed, 1999). Those who share the discursive approach to organizational studies underline the role of language in the creation and performance of companies. First of all, organizations exist because they are generated through discourse (Mumby and Clair, 1997; Gergen *et al.*, 2004) since, when an organization appears, languaging appears as well (Magalhães, 2004). Secondly, employees archive their organizational life during conversations, which gives information about the past situation of their company and allows for the prediction of future conditions of entrepreneurial performance (Woodilla, 1998; Heath, 1994). What is more, words and phrases mirror the organization's history (Barker and Angelopulo, 2006) and constitute a substantial means of corporate control (Coates, 2002), being *an instrument of political power, power to command economic and social behavior* (Pietz 1978 in Stickrodt, 2007: 119). When we discuss the linguistic aspects of corporate communication, we cannot forget that language constitutes a system of symbols that allows us to picture events (Burr, 2003) and it represents the repertoire of symbols belonging to a particular community (Sztompka, 2002). The symbolic function of language should be stressed since *of all forms of symbolism, language is the most developed*

*and subtle* (Viviers and Van Schalkwyk, 2002:22). We perceive our environment through the symbolic perspective (Steinfatt and Christophel, 1996) and, thus, communication as such can be described as a process of exchanging symbols (Kuhn, 2008, Motley in Stewart, 1996).

A person is an *animal symbolicum* since we live not only in the physical world but in the symbolic one as well (Cassirer in Skidelsky, 2005) and, consequently, a company, consisting of different individuals, is a symbolic entity as well, being a symbol-processing social system (Boulding in Weick, 2001:71). Symbolism is especially useful in corporate communication since a symbol diminishes the amount of redundant information and allows for economical and effective communication (Mach in van Riel and Fombrun, 2007). Symbols serve as information-carrying devices that help organizations achieve operational objectives and are generally associated with quantitative results (Armenakis et al., 1996). What is more, symbols accompany social change (Turner, 2005). As Kmita (1982) states, a symbolic culture demands respect for the cultural and linguistic possibilities of the listener. This is also the case with crisis communication since every addressee has different interests and reacts in a different way to negative information (Lützenrath, Peppmeier and Schuppener, 2006). Efficient *outside-in thinking* (Larkin, 1999) demands taking into account the individual and collective features of company workers, which determines discrete and mutual crisis perception.

The role of language in change is also crucial since language is *not simply the medium through which change is brought about, but change occurs in language and, by doing so, language brings about a different state of affairs* (Ford and Ford in Tsoukas, 2005: 99). Since a human being is also a *homo demens* (Maffessoli in Kamińska, 2007:47), with behavior not always rational during everyday or group situations and moments of reinforced adjustment, he or she is likely to be easily re-enchanted by corporate discourse. This feature is especially visible in communicating and understanding crisis.

## **Crisis communication**

Crisis is an element of all modern companies since they operate in an unstable and complicated reality. They have to face different types of crisis, such as environmental catastrophes, global economic crises or corporate challenges (layoffs, cost reductions, M&A). One of the important notions connected with crisis is the way to communicate it. Thus, in this paper, we will briefly discuss the financial crisis from the corporate discursive perspective. As De Bonis et al. (in Allen and Synder, 2009:36) state, *a financial crisis is generally defined to be a wider range of disturbances, such as sharp declines in asset prices, failures of large financial intermediaries, or disruption in foreign exchange markets.*

Taking the multispectral nature of financial crisis into consideration, we can state that crisis communication concerns both the internal and external audience, including workers and stakeholders. As has been stated above, both language and communication rely heavily on symbols. Thus, in the coming section, we will try to discuss the role of symbolism in corporate crisis communication. We should remember about the interrelation of magic and symbolism since *symbols are important to magicians — from the qabalist meditating on the shapes and meanings of the Hebrew letters, to the Hoodoo worker dressing her lodestone, to the chaos magician meditating on a sigil* (Dunn, 2008:4). A modern manager shares some of the above-mentioned features, thus, in the coming sections, I will try to discuss the corporate crisis communication through the prism of magic.

### **Magic rhetoric in crisis communication**

It should be stated that magic is part of our life since *people everywhere perform magical acts, speak persuasive words, and wear “lucky” items to increase the efficiency of the natural forces* (Stevens, 2005). The same applies to corporate communication since magic, being *the process of inducing belief and creating community* (O’Keefe in Covino, 1994:11), determines both verbal and nonverbal company performance. As some say, *magic is also part and parcel of some professions* (Maus, Brain and Pocock, 2001:23) and the same applies to those working in corporations. Managers use magic to make their employees work more effectively or force them to react in certain ways under difficult conditions. The use of magic is especially visible in communicating crisis since magic is used in situations involving strong emotions of hope and fear (Malinowski, 1998).

Freud said that *words and magic were in the beginning one and the same thing, and even today words retain much of their magical power* (Zubko, 2003:497), thus it is impossible to separate the magical and linguistic domains in our discussion on corporate communication. This feature can be observed in linguistic devices. For example, tropes are indispensable notions of organizational discourse (Oswick, Putman and Keenoy, 2004) since they help in interpreting the current events determining the performance of a company (Eisenberg in Heath, 1994:118). Especially one of them, namely the metaphor itself, is a crucial element of a magical spell since it *verbally and in thought makes the transfer of attributes between entities* (Tambiah in Sørensen, 2006:21).

## **Metaphor - a magic tool in corporate crisis communication**

Metaphor with its dual nature and a sort of mystery embodied in it seems to be the most powerful instrument in the hands of a corporate magus. Since every word or sound can be treated as magic behavior if it is used in a proper situation and with the right intention (Chudzik, 2002), it is especially the complexity of metaphor which makes it a magical instrument. Metaphors, with such source domains as warfare (Monin and Monin, 1997; MacFarlane, 1999) are very popular in business since the latter's crucial characteristics, such as competitiveness and fighting for customers, allow for this comparison. As far as the metaphorical aspect of corporate financial catastrophe is concerned, two domains dominate, namely container and war, whereas the third one – disease – is much less popular in crisis rhetoric. Container is used for picturing the fact that inside activities are controlled, whereas outside ones represent negative aspects, such as enemies or potential dangers (Millar and Beck, 2004). To narrow the scope of the interest, we will concentrate exclusively on the linguistic performance of CEOs in crisis communication. There are different reasons why metaphors are used by managers in communicating crisis. As I researched in my previous studies on metaphors (e.g. Bielenia-Grajewska, 2009), these tropes are used in some discussions on difficult matters, such as mergers and acquisitions, since using concepts from animal world or fairytales (e.g. Bear Hug, Lobster Trap, Black Knight) diminishes the negative atmosphere of the situation and, as Etzold and Buswick (2008:279) state, they *make important issues easier to discuss by masking the direct topic*. The second reason is that famous investment bankers want to be known in the business world and using remarkable takeover language makes this possible (Slater, 1999). The same applies to managers who are often famous for using funny and picturesque rhetoric. As Goffman (2000) states, there are two factors determining individuals' uniqueness: the symbols which are used for communication proper and the symbols characteristic of a given individual, used for other than communicative purposes. In the second case, it is often the metaphor that shapes one's idiolect. The third reason for the popularity of metaphors among managers is that metaphors can be treated as *messengers of meaning* (Maasen and Weingart, 1995:9) and thus can describe complex entities in a few words (Tilley, 1999). What is more, *metaphors do not answer questions, they rather pose new questions that business has to answer* (Etzold and Buswick, 2008:284). Hence, in the case of business communication, they can be used in the pursuit of finding new solutions to the problems connected with crisis. For example, metaphors are used in professional literature on company change to describe building the corporate reputation in crisis by comparing it to *opening a savings account for a rainy day*

(Alsop in Coombs and Holladay, 2006:124). As far as the metaphorical repertoire of managers is concerned, a good CEO should be like a crafted magician, being careful with using dead and well-known metaphors since nowadays *we are constrained by tropic trammels, we are prone to linguistic laziness, we are in thrall to hackneyed expressions* (Brown, 2003:195). This person should try to find new metaphors since *to adhere to a single symbol system is to close doors of opportunity and enlightenment; it is for the stagnant and boring mage* (Dunn, 2005:5). Warren Buffet is an example of a crafted rhetor who uses metaphorical language for communicating difficult situation to those investing in Berkshire Hathaway Inc (Berkshire's Corporate Performance). He compares investors to *small birds that had strayed into a badminton game*, whereas the crisis itself is compared to a *debilitating spiral*. In his lectures, he also uses baseball metaphors (Miles, 2004:96) or the fictional person Mr. Market (West and Anthony, 2000:105). Those metaphors in corporate discourse which serve as *tools for conscious, creative analysis; as ways of creating emotions; and as ways of fostering unconscious learning processes* (Öztel and Hinz, 2001:153) help financial advisors to show their knowledge on investing strategies and make people understand the crisis as well as the possibilities of overcoming it.

## Conclusion

The aim of this short paper was to highlight the most important aspects of corporate crisis communication. The purpose of this brief article was to show the importance of symbolism and magic in communicating crisis. It is especially the global financial crisis which requires proper tools of communicating it to the global public since people of different professional, cultural and educational backgrounds are interested in the way global crisis affects themselves and their savings. Metaphors seem to be one of the best symbolic devices which re-enchant the crisis audience and guide its perception of financial cataclysm.

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