Climate change, Covid-19 and other stories… The Titanic metaphor as a parable to depict modern shipwrecks

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Abstract

With his eponymous 1997 blockbuster, James Cameron pulled the wreck of Titanic out of oblivion. By elevating ancient news into a modern myth (Barthes 1957), he made it truly unsinkable. Few may ignore the name of the infamous ship, be it for its tragic fate or the romance Cameron attached to it, even those who have, somehow, not seen the movie. This article first establishes the fact that the Titanic narrative has become shared knowledge: it has been made history, as a fluctuating combination of true and invented events. This hybrid texture makes it an elastic outline that can be reapplied metaphorically to a variety of contexts or, to borrow Turner's terminology (Turner 1996), a working *parable* to provide understanding for unprecedented situations. Based on a selection of occurrences retrieved from reference corpora of English, and following the precepts of cognitive linguistics (Lakoff/Johnson 1999, 2003; Lakoff 1993; Langacker 1987, among others), we argue that the Titanic as a shipwreck metaphor exhibits canonical target domains attached to WATER (Crépin 2023) such as FEAR and DANGER, as well as specific features such as CLASS, HUBRIS, or RESPONSIBILITY. The study of Titanic metaphors will also serve as a case in point to investigate the element of fascination that is at the heart – not only of the ocean – but of the metaphorical process more broadly, as we, as individuals, are more likely to retell the stories we are drawn to, and which are apt to teach us something about ourselves. A hundred years after its loss, the Titanic has become something else. It has survived as a narrative, an allegory, which since 2010 has been reapplied to a variety of topical domains of which this article presents a few examples.

Mit seinem Kassenschlager *Titanic* von 1997 barg James Cameron das berühmte Schiff aus der Versenkung und machte es zu einem modernen Mythos im Sinne Barthes'. Alle kennen die Titanic, wegen ihres tragischen Untergangs oder wegen Camerons Liebesgeschichte. Der Beitrag erhellt zuerst die Tatsache, dass die Titanic-Erzählung allgemein geteiltes Wissen ist, bestehend aus wahren und erfundenen Ereignissen. Ihr elastischer Umriss kann, so zeigen wir, metaphorisch auf eine vielfältige Menge von Kontexten bezogen werden. In Turners (1996) Terminologie fungiert die Erzählung so als Parabel für neuartige Situationen. Auf der Grundlage von Belegen aus englischen Corpora und mit den Regeln der kognitiven Linguistik (insbes. Lakoff/Johnson 1999, 2003; Lakoff 1993; Langacker 1987) legen wir dar, dass die Titanic als Schiffbruch-Metapher zum einen Zieldomänen veranschaulicht, die – wie insbesondere ANGST und GEFAHR – mit WASSER verbunden sind, dass sie zum anderen aber auch spezifische Konzepte wie KLASSE, HOCHMUT oder VERANTWORTUNG darstellt. Die Untersuchung von Titanic-Metaphern soll auch als Fallstudie dienen, um die für metaphorische Prozesse offenbar so bedeutende Faszination zu erkunden, die dafür sorgt, dass wir Menschen besonders von Geschichten gepackt werden, die uns etwas über uns selbst erzählen. Aus der vor über 100 Jahren gesunkenen Titanic ist etwas anderes geworden: eine Geschichte,

eine Allegorie, die seit 2010 auf alle möglichen Bereiche bezogen worden ist, von denen wir hier einige beispielhaft anführen.

Keywords: water, shipwreck metaphors; Titanic; parable; myth; multimodality; fascination

1. Introduction

What does the word *Titanic* evoke in us? Is it the supposedly unsinkable ship that sank on her maiden voyage in 1912, a monument to both human achievement and fallibility? Is it James Cameron's 1997 film, the blockbuster that has kept afloat the careers of Leonardo DiCaprio, Kate Winslet and Celine Dion ever since? Or, is it an abstract narrative born of both of the above, a modern-day metaphor whose actual reference is unclear?

By including footage of the wreck in his movie, Cameron dredged the Titanic up from the depths for the whole world to see. The film mixes two timelines and two paradigms, telling a fictional story against a backdrop of scientific, historical evidence. The characters themselves are partly inspired by real passengers of the Titanic, and partly invented, as is the case with the protagonists.

Likewise, when we refer to the Titanic nowadays, the input of historical and fictitious layers to the story is unclear. We do not refer to an isolated object or event, but to a phenomenon, or, as this paper will argue, a *myth*, in Barthes's sense (Barthes 1957) or, to borrow Turner's terminology (Turner 1996), a *parable* providing conceptualization and understanding for unprecedented situations. This may have been the fate of the ship all along, as her very name, *Titanic*, predisposed her to be mythologized, sacrificed on the altar of her creators' hubris, and taking down 1,500 passengers with her to the bottom of the sea.

In an interview for *National Geographic*, James Cameron himself brandishes his work as a metaphor for looming climate change:

> Part of the Titanic parable is of arrogance, of hubris, of the sense that we're too big to fail. Well, where have we heard that one before? […] You've got the starving millions who are going to be the ones most affected by *the next iceberg that we hit, which is going to be climate change.* We can see that iceberg ahead of us right now, but we can't turn (Shearman 2012, Emphasis is ours).

In other words, his adaptation was always meant to be allegorical in essence, and this might be the reason for its unabating resonance ever since. As the

modern world is daunted by the prospect of collective shipwreck – ecological, economic, pandemic, nuclear, or all of the above – the Titanic metaphor re-surfaces as a multimodal, polysemous vehicle to depict humanity's vulnerability in the face of icebergs ahead.

It is in this context that the scenario of the Titanic disaster has proved a particularly accurate analogy to depict the magnitude of the world's unpreparedness in the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, as suggested in these occurrences from the *Coronavirus Corpus*:

(1) I feel like the *Titanic*, and we have hit the iceberg, and we're trying to make decisions of what time we should have the band play (Coronavirus Corpus).

(2) For all practical purposes, the world's economy is a ship called *Titanic* and its iceberg bears the name Corona (Coronavirus Corpus).

This paper thus intends to answer the following research question: why and how has the Titanic narrative become a powerful, almost universal metaphor that can be applied and reapplied to a variety of negatively connoted contexts, both linguistically and visually?

The complex, multilayered and multimodal appeal of the Titanic analogy in times of crisis will be discussed in detail in section 4 of this article, after a thorough review of the methodology used to retrieve occurrences from online Corpora (section 2) and a discussion of the results of the quantitative analyses carried out on different corpora (section 3).

From a quantitative perspective, a basic search in the Google browser sheds light on the evolution of the use of the occurrences of the word "Titanic" over the twentieth century, as shown in Figure 1:

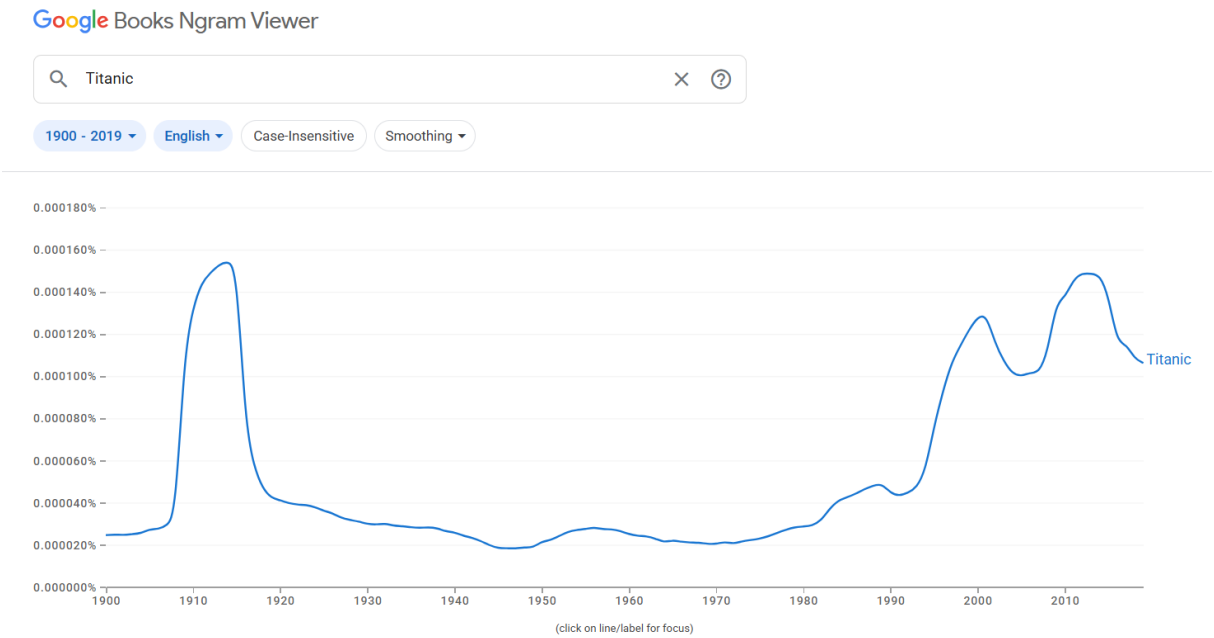

Fig. 1: Use of the word "Titanic" (1900–2019) (Google Books Ngram Viewer)

Looking at this graph, three peaks stand out: one in 1912, the year of the shipwreck, one just before 2000 which coincides with the release of Cameron's movie (1997), and one around 2012, which we propose to analyze in this paper. The centenary of the tragedy has obviously fueled a renewed interest in the press. However, it would be unlikely to explain such a loud mediatic echo. Our hypothesis is that, starting from the 2010s, references to the Titanic become largely *metaphorical* because of the conventionalization of the Titanic metaphor. The number of occurrences remains high from 2010 onwards, with another peak sure to mark Covid-related uses around 2020, as data beyond that period is not yet available.

The twentieth century opened with the sinking of the ship and closed with its cinematic resurrection. The cultural effect of Cameron's Titanic is arguably equal to the shockwave caused by the iceberg that finished the RMS Titanic eighty years earlier. In the twenty-first century, we are left with a legacy of both, as metaphors of the Titanic have become increasingly commonplace to refer to grand human projects that end up on the ocean floor, to the point where it has become, perhaps, "the world's largest metaphor" (NOW Corpus – 13-03-08 – US *The Diplomat*).

2. Theoretical framework, corpus and methodology

2.1 Theoretical framework: cognitive linguistics

To analyze the metaphorical occurrences of the Titanic, we worked within the framework of cognitive linguistics, a branch of linguistics focusing on the way our conceptual system is reflected in language (Evans/Green 2009: 14) in order to get a grasp of the way(s) abstract concepts are mentally conceptualized:

> Cognitive linguistics approaches language in a way that prioritizes human thought as an explanation for the observed characteristics of language. In particular conceptualization, or how people construct abstract concepts and schemata to think about the world (McEnery/Hardie 2012: 169).

Numerous works in cognitive linguistics have highlighted the fact that metaphor is one of the tools – if not *the* tool – that greatly contributes to the elaboration of a figurative link between cognition and language. According to cognitive linguists, not only is metaphor a means of conveying meaning, it is also a reflection of our thoughts and reasoning: "Metaphor is not just a matter of language, but of thought and reason." (Lakoff 1993: 208). This assumption led to the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT from now on), developed by Lakoff and Johnson in the 1980s. According to CMT, metaphor not only operates at the level of language, but also structures our conceptual system (Lakoff/Johnson 1980: 6), and the use of linguistic metaphorical expressions is proof that we do think metaphorically; indeed, it is possible to use metaphors to talk about a specific concept because this concept is first and foremost metaphorically conceptualized on a cognitive level.

The Titanic has been used as a source domain to refer to various abstract target domains in English, especially since the success of James Cameron's movie. The target domains conceptualized through the Titanic metaphors have to do with what we called "modern shipwrecks", i.e. significant crises, be they environmental, political, economic, medical, etc., as exemplified in occurrences (3) to (6):

> (3) This is the only way we can turn this big *Republican-made Titanic situation* around. A little melodramatic don't you think? (campaignstops.blogs.nytimes.com).

(4) Like the *Titanic* striking a massive iceberg in 1912, a deadly novel coronavirus, later named COVID-19, struck Wuhan (hongkongfp.com).

(5) Today's election is merely a choice of who is going to captain the sinking *Titanic* (rednecksrevenge.org).

(6) The *climate change titanic* has already hit the iceberg. This needs to be on a war footing (eco-business.com).

The visual representation of the word "Titanic" in the Word Sketch option available from English Web 2021 (enTenTen 2021) on SketchEngine is proof of that (we selected "nouns modified by 'Titanic'" and 30 as the number of collocates):

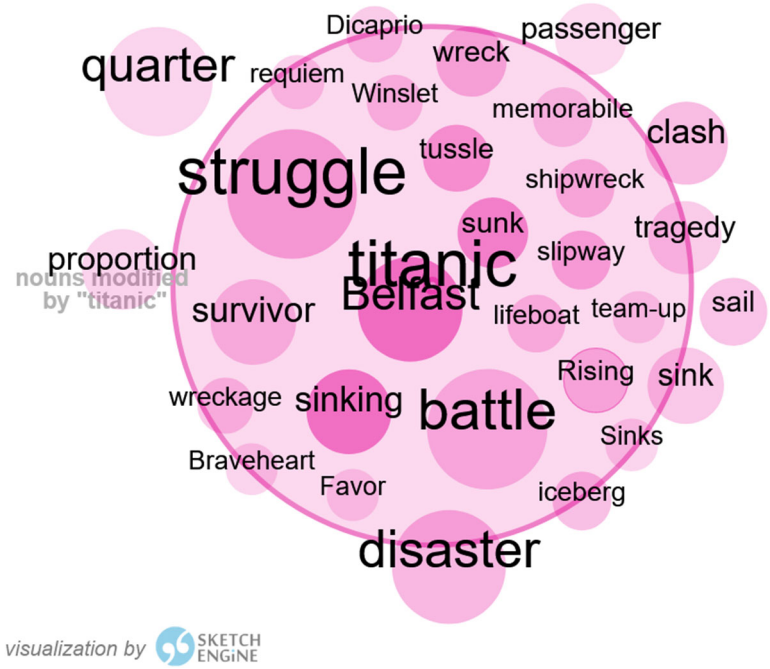

Fig. 2: First 30 most frequent collocates of "Titanic" (SketchEngine)

It is interesting to note that most nouns modified by "Titanic" – *shipwreck, wreck, wreckage, battle, sink, sinking, struggle, disaster, battle, tragedy*, etc. – refer to a crisis, which is perceived negatively, axiologically speaking, a point that will be further developed.

2.2 Corpus / Data building

To create a pilot corpus, we first decided on a relevant timespan, i.e. 2012–2024, as 2012 corresponds to the Centenary of the Titanic's shipwreck, and 2024 to the

present period. This enabled us to cover a 12-year period of time.[1] The corpora we used to retrieve linguistic (verbal, or textual) occurrences were the following ones: *English Web 2021* (enTenTen21), the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA), the *News on the Web Corpus* (NOW corpus), as well as the *Coronavirus Corpus*. The COCA, the NOW corpus and the *Coronavirus corpus* are available on *English-Corpora.org* and were used so as to get a diachronic perspective; enTenTen21 is available via *SketchEngine* and was used to get a contemporary, synchronic perspective, as the corpus only comprise occurrences from 2021.[2] As we wanted to carry out a multimodal analysis, we also retrieved visual occurrences of the Titanic metaphor, through a Google search, then selected the most relevant occurrences (mostly as illustrations of the linguistic metaphorical occurrences).

2.3 Methodology: corpus linguistics

We used corpus linguistics techniques to retrieve occurrences: it has to be noted that we only retrieved occurrences related to the Titanic, with the use of a specific Corpus Query Language (CQL) search combining the word "Titanic" with the following keywords: iceberg; shipwreck; wreck; s?nk* (for tokens such as *sink, sinks, sunk, sank, sinking, sunken*, etc.). To retrieve the most frequently used sequences of words in the English Web 2021 corpus, we used various queries on *SketchEngine* (2014). CQL searches allow linguists to perform more complex searches than the simple searches carried out above to account for the frequency of use.

We resorted to the MEET tag enabling to retrieve collocations of "Titanic" in combination with one of the above keywords, with a 5-word span to the left and 5-word span to the right. The CQL searches used are exemplified in Table 1:

[1] It has to be noted that few occurrences were retrieved in 2024.

[2] "The most recent version of the enTenTen corpus consists of 52 billion words. The texts were downloaded in October–December 2021 and January 2022. The sample texts of the biggest web domains which account for 40% of all corpus texts were checked semi-manually and content with poor quality text and spam was removed" (enTenTen21).

CQL (meet [lemma="iceberg"] [lemma="titanic"] -5 5) ● 2,829 occurrences 0.05 per million tokens ● 0.0000046%
CQL (meet [lemma="shipwreck"] [lemma="titanic"] -5 5) ● 306 occurrences less than 0.01 ● 5e-7%
CQL (meet [lemma="wreck"] [lemma="titanic"] -5 5) ● 1,522 occurrences 0.02 per million tokens ● 0.0000025%
CQL (meet [lemma="sink"] [lemma="titanic"] -5 5) ● 6,699 occurrences 0.11 per million tokens ● 0.000011%

Table 1: CQL searches to retrieve the collocates of "Titanic" (SketchEngine)

We established our database by combining the word "Titanic" with other keywords so as to get a manageable corpus in terms of size. We are fully aware that another method may have been possible, such as looking for keywords in isolation. The results will be presented and analyzed in section 3.

For the corpora available on *English-Corpora.org* – namely the COCA, the NOW corpus and the *Coronavirus corpus* – the same procedure was followed. The search enables linguists to look for collocates, i.e. words occurring in a neighboring context. Figure 3 shows the search for the word "iceberg" used in collocation with the word "Titanic" within a span 5 to the left, 5 to the right (for the COCA, the span was 7 and 7 so as to collect a larger number of occurrences):

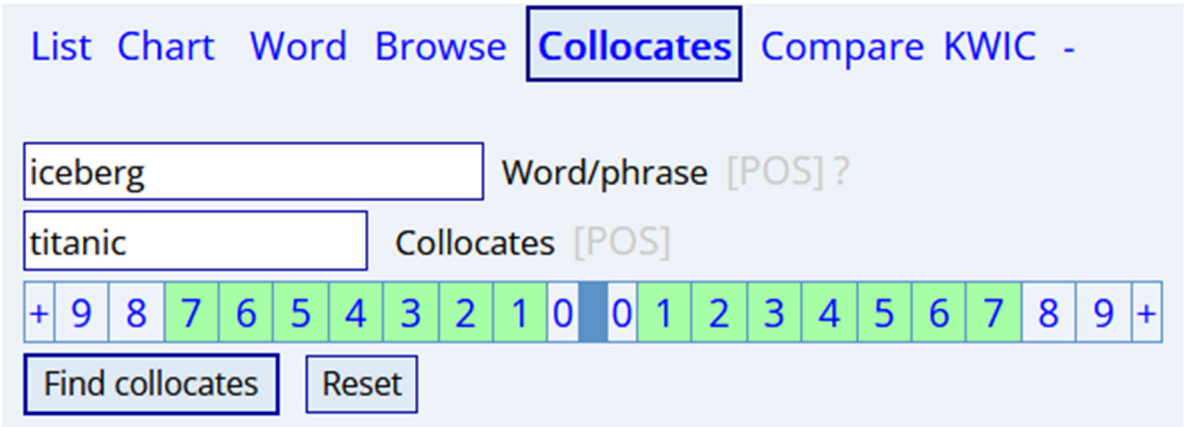

Fig. 3: Search for collocates of "iceberg" and "Titanic" (COCA)

The results for the various searches on the COCA, NOW and Coronavirus corpora are presented and discussed in the following section.

3. Results and discussion

The quantitative results are found in the tables below. Table 2 shows the number of occurrences found followed by the relative frequency in italics:

Collocates of TITANIC	**enTenTen21**	**COCA**	**NOW**	**Coronavirus**
iceberg	2829 / *0.05*	113 / *0.11*	1178 / *0.00*	47 / *0.00*
shipwreck	306 / *0.01*	12 / *0.01*	629 / *0.00*	6 / *0.00*
wreck	1522 / *0.02*	72 / *0.07*	2856 / *0.00*	7 / *0.00*
s?nk*	6699 / *0.11*	322 / *0.32*	4838 / *0.00*	174 / *0.00*

Table 2: Number of occurrences (raw frequencies) and relative frequencies (frequencies per one million words) for the collocates of "Titanic"

A careful inspection of our corpus enables us to identify three main cases:

(i) The occurrences refer to purely factual, historical events related to the Titanic by the time it sank (presence of dates, places, names of people involved, etc.):

(7) Wants Titanic Protected # More than 1,500 passengers and crew died after the supposedly unsinkable Titanic struck an iceberg in the wee hours of April 14, 1912 (nationalgeographic.com).

(ii) The occurrences refer to a retrospective re-evaluation of the historical event years after:

(8) This July 22, 2009 image shows the 17-ton section of the RMS Titanic that was recovered from the ocean floor during an expedition to the site (boston.com).

(iii) The occurrences make use of this historical event, which became a parable, to refer to another domain, with a focus on other actors involved in the event, be they human beings (iceberg watcher, builder, captain, social classes, the band, etc.), or inanimate entities (iceberg, deck chairs, etc.):

(9) "The school reform movement is like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic," said Jonathan Mooney, a dyslexic writer and activist (Denver).

(10) Today's election is merely a choice of who is going to captain the sinking Titanic (sovereignman.com).

We decided to confirm this intuitive categorization by searching for the word "Titanic", with the following option: "case-sensitive > YES", so as to avoid

retrieving occurrences of the adjective "titanic", which is semantically unrelated to the Titanic. Out of the 3700 occurrences, we selected a random sample of 1000 occurrences from the COCA; 420 of them were within the 2012-2024 timespan, and 580 of them were outside the selected timespan. Out of the 420 Titanic occurrences, 46 were deemed metaphorical after following the MIP procedure (Pragglejaz Group 2007), which is a systematic method for identifying metaphorically used words in discourse. It was developed to provide a reliable and replicable way to retrieve and analyze metaphors. The procedure involves four key steps:

1. Read the entire text–discourse to establish a general understanding of the meaning.
2. Determine the lexical units in the text–discourse.
3. (a) For each lexical unit in the text, establish its meaning in context, that is, how it applies to an entity, relation, or attribute in the situation evoked by the text (contextual meaning). Take into account what comes before and after the lexical unit.
   (b) For each lexical unit, determine if it has a more basic contemporary meaning in other contexts than the one in the given context. For our purposes, basic meanings tend to be
   —More concrete; what they evoke is easier to imagine, see, hear, feel, smell, and taste.
   —Related to bodily action.
   —More precise (as opposed to vague).
   —Historically older.
   Basic meanings are not necessarily the most frequent meanings of the lexical unit.
   (c) If the lexical unit has a more basic current–contemporary meaning in other contexts than the given context, decide whether the contextual meaning contrasts with the basic meaning but can be understood in comparison with it.
4. If yes, mark the lexical unit as metaphorical.

(Pragglejaz Group 2007: 3).

Regarding the linguistic signaling of the metaphors, several markers signal the metaphorical use of the word Titanic:

- Words that are semantically related to the idea of comparison (metaphorical comparisons) or association: *akin to, similar to, equivalent to/of, same, as, like, liken, resemble, compare, much in the way of, described as, feel, be/become (XXX is/becomes the Titanic)*, etc.

- Words semantically related to the idea of a (metaphorical) reconceptualization: *think of X as, analogy, literally, metaphor, proverbial, picture, illustrate, new (version) of, another*, etc.
- Pre- or post-modification of the lexeme *Titanic*, generally accompanied by a change in the determiner: *housing / economic / climate change / American / Tigers / OPEC+ / Rushdie… Titanic, Titanic of XXX, a Titanic which/that…, his/her Titanic*, etc.
- Hypothetical markers: *if, may, might,* etc.

On the contrary, as mentioned previously, the presence of a figure in the occurrence (dates: 1912; measures: 500000 feet deep, etc.) is very often the signal of a literal reading.

We were also able to notice that depending on the collocates of "Titanic", the occurrences are more or less metaphorical: there is a strong metaphorical propensity with *iceberg*, but a very low, almost inexistent metaphorical propensity with *shipwreck* and *wreck*.

A closer look at the metaphorical occurrences enabled us to list frequent target domains referred to by the Titanic:

- *Climate change*:

  (11) […] world to unite to tackle climate change, comparing the looming environmental crisis to the sinking of the *Titanic* (uk.finance.yahoo.com).

- *Politics:*

  (12) The problem is no one is capable of saving *the US Titanic*. The iceberg was struck sixteen years ago when the Deep State engineered a plundering campaign […] (The Market Oracle).

- *Economy (depression):*

  (13) If the American economy was the *Titanic* and the *iceberg* that sank the *Titanic* was the financial crisis, then STEM jobs would be […] (Fast Company).

- *Covid-19:*

  (14) Corona-virus is as unexpected in 2019/20 as was the *Titanic* sinking by an iceberg in 1912. Many lives again are gone before their time (southernstar.ie).

Domains are often found in combination, such as *economy* and *Covid* in occurrence (15):

(15) […] the world's economy is a ship called *Titanic* and its *iceberg* bears the name Corona (NOW – 20-04-02 – ZA – zoutnet.co.za).

The Titanic metaphor can also refer to more specific (often negative) domains, such as:

- *the NBA:*

(16) Should that play out, it would be the NBA's ultimate *Titanic* hitting the iceberg moment (sportingnews.com).

- *HR:*

(17) Parents and teachers should not ignore the tip of the iceberg lest the *Titanic* of human resources should collapse midway (nation.com.pk).

Corruption:

(18) Zuma Presidency, corruption and State capture tore into the economy much like the proverbial iceberg that tore through the *Titanic's* hull (miningweekly.com).

- *the US public school system:*

(19) Think of the public-school system as the *Titanic* going to hit an iceberg (time.com).

etc.

The success of this metaphor is found in its propensity to become an almost literal way of expressing oneself, as illustrated by the use of the adverb "literally" in occurrence (20):

(20) […] who disagree with her. "She is literally running the *Titanic* into an iceberg intentionally," he said. "Fifty-six rounds were reportedly fired during Tuesday evening […] (NOW – 20-07-23 – US – Fox News).

By adopting a multimodal approach, we will now delve further into the anatomy of the Titanic metaphor to understand the conditions of its topical success, both on the linguistic and pictorial levels.

4. Anatomy of the Titanic metaphor

4.1 Metaphorical paths

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has contributed to the use of metaphorical language to deal with unprecedented changes in our everyday lives. Along with WAR metaphors (Pennec 2021), WATER metaphors (Crepin 2023) and, peripheral to them, SHIPWRECK metaphors, have proven particularly apt to describe the magnitude of the distress caused by the virus. From "deadly new waves of contamination" to "tsunamis of Covid-19 hospitalized patients", "tides of infections" and "torrents of mortality" (all occurrences from the Coronavirus Corpus), it has become commonplace to both quantify and depict Covid (N_2) with a representative of the notional domain WATER (N_1), in nominal expressions GN_1 WATER OF GN_2 COVID. Although very recent in time, these figurative nominal expressions are already highly conventionalized.

In this context, the shipwreck metaphor carries with it the *negativity* attached to the WATER imagery (BEING IN WATER IS BEING IN TROUBLE, Crépin 2021), as well as the notions of UNCERTAINTY and DANGER that are emblematic of NAVIGATION metaphors, such as in occurrences (21) and (22):

(21) We're in trouble. (…) As a result of Covid-19, we're essentially being forced to navigate waters that are not only uncharted but also as stormy as can be (Coronavirus Corpus).

(22) South Africa needs a strong and confident captain to steer us through the uncharted waters of Covid-19 (Coronavirus Corpus).

As the adjective "uncharted (waters)" suggests in both examples, the feeling of anxiety derives from the *uncertainty* generated by the outbreak of the pandemic, or, to use another water metaphor, from the sense of "plunging into the unknown", as the whole world suddenly enters into lockdown.

The Titanic metaphor comes in the wake of a long tradition of shipwreck metaphors and allegories, from which it derives most of its metaphorical entailments, while adding some specific new ones. Allegorical shipwrecks from Homer's *Odyssey* (book 5 and book 12) and from the *Bible* (*Acts of the Apostles*, chapter 27) suggest some form of divine punishment, and therefore relate to the notion of DOOM, as exemplified in occurrence (23):

(23) Why prolong the agony? It's like rearranging the deck furniture on the Titanic. This was a doomed relationship (COCA 1992 – SPOK – CBS_Street).

Through the Titanic metaphor, mortals are being chastised for equating themselves to Gods, their ambitions and designs shattered by merciless waters.

This is all the truer with the Titanic as the ship, which at the time was lauded as the most robust liner ever built, and claimed to be *unsinkable*. The magnitude of the shock caused by her loss, and the power of the Titanic metaphor nowadays, greatly rely on the *storytelling* surrounding the ship on her maiden voyage. From her conspicuous size, cutting-edge engineering, state-of-the-art design, to her staff and experienced crew, the Titanic was meant to be the biggest, fastest, safest and most sumptuous ship ever built. So much so that her owners deemed it unnecessary to clutter the deck with an army of lifeboats, that would presumably never be of use. The gap between what the ship was expected to be and her tragic fate has been continuously re-emphasized, as well as the fatal hubris of men,[3] who believed they could do without lifeboats, or ignore weather reports signaling the presence of icebergs on the Titanic's route.

The contrast between human confidence and the frailty of human life accounts for the enduring fascination for the event, which by dint of being told and questioned, has become a story, a legend, and even a *myth* (see section 4.5). In hindsight, the very name of the ship, "Titanic", seems to have predestined her for mythology. The sinking of the unsinkable ship has become a powerful parable – "a short story used to teach or explain an idea, especially a moral or religious one" (*Cambridge Dictionary*) – to stage peril lurking ahead of human delusions of grandeur (see section 4.5 for more details). This can be seen in countless cartoons re-enacting the impending collision between the boat and the

[3] Statements by two of the survivors, Elizabeth Lines and Emily Ryerson, seemed to contradict Ismay's statements. Lines declared that she overheard parts of a two-hour conversation between Captain Smith and Ismay on Saturday, April 13. Sticking in her mind was Ismay's statement, "We will beat the *Olympic* and get in to New York on Tuesday," meaning they would arrive one day earlier than originally planned. The following day, Ryerson recalled Ismay holding a message and stating to her that "We are in among the icebergs." Despite this, he told her that they would be starting up extra boilers that evening to surprise everyone with an early arrival. For a wider discussion on human error involved in the loss of the Titanic, visit the National Archives website:
https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2012/spring/titanic.html (02.12.2024).

iceberg, using them respectively as props for humanity and forms of disaster it has brought upon itself.

4.2 The Titanic metaphor to stage collective fate

What makes NAVIGATION metaphors particularly apt to depict crises such as Covid-19, global warming or recession is the sense of *collectivity* implied by travelling by boat, which finds its best expression in the idiom "be in the same boat". This is made evident in Figure 4, a cartoon staging a Titanic-like ship named *Humanity* heading straight into an iceberg shaped like the Coronavirus.

Fig. 4: "The Titanic with the inscription Humanity is heading for an iceberg in the form of the coronavirus. Helmsman shouts: Iceberg ahead!", by S. Roth, 13 April 2021

In fact, the Titanic metaphor generally occurs in a context where a group is faced with a common threat. In the case of Brexit (Figure 5), the UK as a nation risks bankruptcy, while with Covid or climate change, it is the world's population that faces a deadly fate. In this context, some individuals' actions will have repercussions on the group, for better or for worse, which accounts for the fact that Titanic cartoons usually feature world leaders (Figure 6) steering their people into calamity.

Fig. 5: John Cole, *The Week,* 2020

In Figure 5, the (identifiably Titanic) ship representing the United States is sinking after hitting the iceberg labelled *Covid-19*. The character who appears to be the captain deplores the shortage of lifeboats with the boat already half-sunk, drawing a parallel with President Trump's acknowledgement of the importance of masks and vaccines only after thousands of Americans had already died of the disease.

(24) No, I'm not concerned at all. No, I'm not. No, we've done a great job (Donald Trump, 7 March 2020).

(25) The C.D.C. is advising the use of nonmedical cloth face covering as an additional voluntary public health measure. So it's voluntary. You don't have to do it. They suggested for a period of time, but this is voluntary. I don't think I'm going to be doing it (Donald Trump, 3 April 2020).

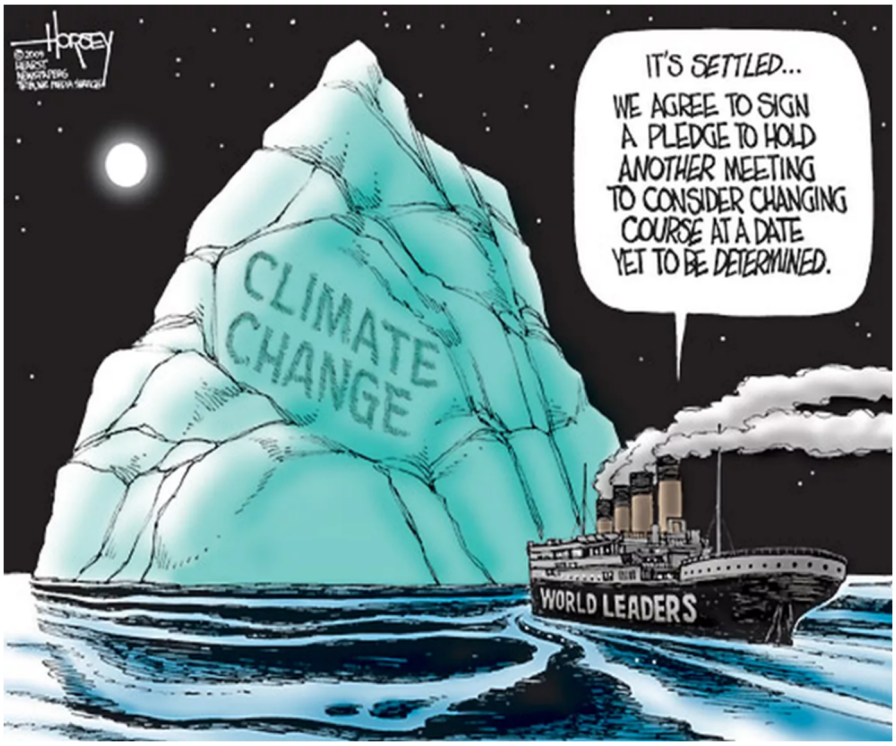

Fig. 6: "Climate change: iceberg right ahead?",
David Horsey for the Spokesman-Review, 16 April 2012

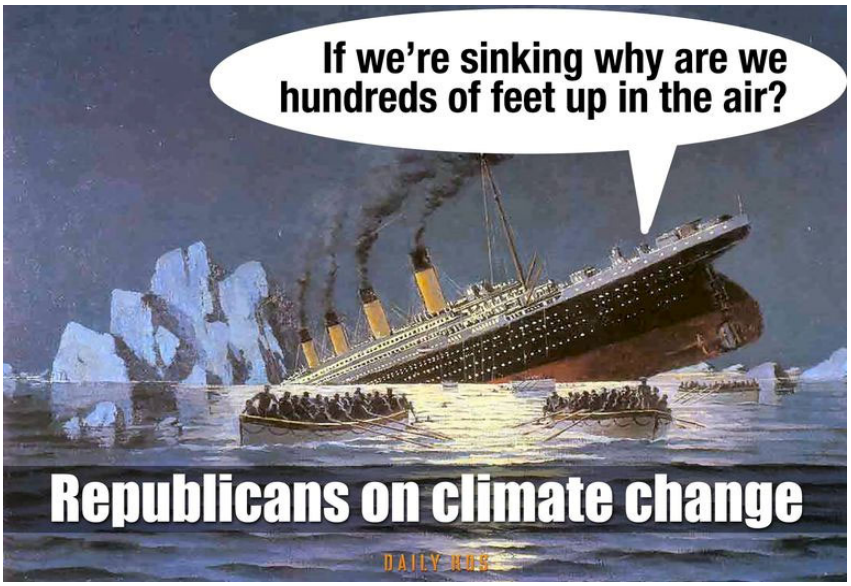

Fig. 7: GO GREEN @ECOWARRIORS*:*
"When it comes to climate change, we are all on the Titanic and its sinking fast, but vast majority of people are still at the top end, drinking wine and above water and still have to turn around and look at that sinking ship" – Image Daily Kos (X)

In Figures 6 and 7, political leaders (world leaders in Figure 6, The Republican party in Figure 7) are being satirized, accused of not taking climate change seriously. In Figure 6, the moonlight and the gigantic size of the iceberg suggest that it is ludicrous to ignore climate change any longer, reinforcing the sense of

irresponsibility of leaders that are reluctant to take action collectively. In Figure 7, the speech bubble is emblematic of conspiratory counter-narratives questioning, or simply denying the impact of global warming.

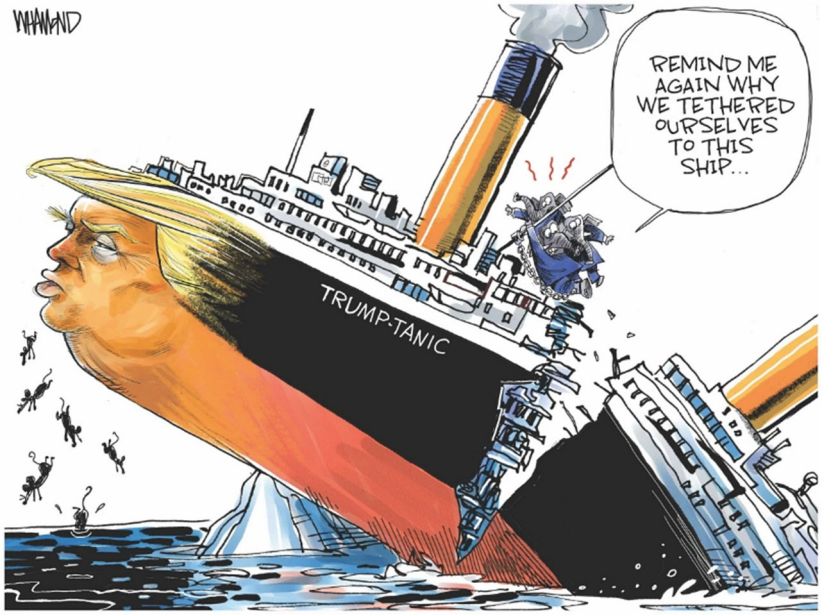

Fig. 8: Thom Hartmann, 30 May 2021

Figure 8 takes it one step further by portraying Trump not just as the captain of the ship, but as the ship itself (the *Trump-Tanic*), for all his perceived megalomania and recklessness, fast-forwarding the American people into disaster. The cartoon derides Trump's ego and dementia, while exposing the concern of members of his own party, the Republicans, in the course of Trump's agitated presidency (2017–2021). The situation is apparently so dire that even the rats jump off. This sense of collectivity, or rather lack of it, will be developed in section 4.4.

4.3 A most complex metaphor

Despite its scenario of a gigantic ship crashing into an even bigger iceberg, the Titanic metaphor has proven to be more complex, more "elastic" than conventional shipwreck metaphors. Due to its mixed origins – the 1912 disaster, the 1997 film adaptation, and countless discussions on both – its creative potential is much more productive and makes it a very polysemous analogy.

James Cameron's film (1997) not only brought the tragedy of the Titanic into every home, but also expanded its echo thanks to the fictional story Cameron weaved into it. In fact, many instances of Titanic metaphors have to do with the

fiction rather than the original story. This is the case of cartoons mimicking the iconic characters of Jack and Rose, learning to fly on the deck shortly before the accident. To that extent, Cameron's scene has become a powerful visual metaphor for naivety and innocence, which, in a more sarcastic tone, censures foolishness and delusion.

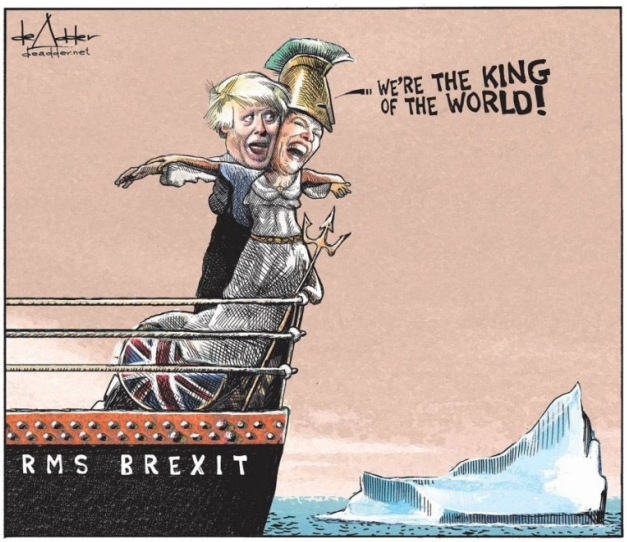

Fig. 9: "Brexit will be titanic success", Michael de Adder, Twitter @deAdder, 24 June 2016

A fine example of this is British politicians Theresa May and Boris Johnson, represented on the deck of the RMS Brexit, in a debased version of the young couple formed by Jack and Rose (Figure 9), heading steadfast into the difficulties that come with their decision to leave the European Union. The tagline, "We're the king of the world!", is also a reference to the scene in Cameron's movie.

This is taken a step further in the document below, which is an issue of Scottish weekly newspaper *The National* from November 2016. The cover is not only inspired by Cameron's film but consists of a satirical film poster starring Boris Johnson and Theresa May as its protagonists. Everything in this picture reminds the attentive spectator of the 1997 Titanic poster, with Johnson and May's faces perched over the ship – that they have allegedly caused to sink – while Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet are symbolically separated by the Titanic in the original. But arguably, the most subtle reference to Cameron's film here, and not to the historical event, is the very wording of Celine Dion's soundtrack "My heart will go on" included in the subtitle: "Our article 50 debate will go on", at the very bottom of the poster.

Fig. 10: "We'll make a Titanic success of it", @Scot National, 3 Nov 2016, X

In Figure 10, what prompted the Scottish independent newspaper – which was, needless to say, clearly opposed to Brexit – to brandish this parody of a Titanic film poster twenty years after Cameron's movie first came out, is a statement by Boris Johnson himself. As he was being awarded the *Comeback of The Year Prize* by the *Spectator Magazine* on 3 November 2016, Johnson declared: "In the words of our great Prime Minister [Theresa May], Brexit is Brexit and *we*'re going to make a Titanic success of it." Unsurprisingly, his figurative allusion to the Titanic was deemed unfortunate by some in the audience, who immediately retorted: "It sank", urging Johnson to rephrase: "*We*'re going to make a colossal success of it", which was slightly less awkward, but no less grandiloquent.

4.4 Highlighting-Hiding

Cameron's 1997 film certainly revived aspects of the Titanic's tragedy that make the event so singular in the collective memory. The anecdote of the musical band that kept on playing until the end, the fatal shortage of lifeboats, the iceberg cutting sideways into the hull, the imprudence of the captain and of the

White Star Line officials, who wanted to hit the headlines by making it to New York early… All of these details appear in turn in the occurrences of Titanic metaphors collected in this study, which testifies to the uniqueness of the Titanic story as analogic material.

Following on the process of *highlighting* and *hiding* principle theorized by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), whereby some aspects of the source domain are selected (*highlighting*) in the mapping process while others remain unused (*hiding*), significant details of the Titanic narrative surface into the metaphorical fabric in which they occur, while some remain muted, as they are not relevant in the context of the analogy.

First, the *shortage of lifeboats* as a sacrificial choice on the parts of the people in charge, stands out as a leitmotiv in the corpus. In a recent article exposing the dire straits of British universities facing bankruptcy, the Titanic metaphor is used to depict the critical lack of funding post-Brexit:

> (26) Government is now punishing universities for its past generosity, while *the lifeboat of foreign student fees* has been destroyed by new visa controls (The Guardian, 13 Sept 2024).

A more striking example of the lifeboat analogy is the parallel drawn between the lack of lifeboats on board the Titanic and the shortage of masks and vaccines during the Covid-19 pandemic, with the idea that some chosen few would have access to those while others would be left to die. A detailed comparison of the poor passengers' low chances of survival and the disadvantage endured by underprivileged families during Covid-19 can be found in this awareness campaign to support needy children – "Titanic task facing society in the wake of Covid":

> (27) For many, Covid-19 has been the equivalent of the iceberg facing the Titanic. Unavoidably destructive – but you might have some chance of clinging on to survival and rescue if you've got the resources to do so. For others, they have no chance ("Titanic task facing society in the wake of Covid").

This dichotomy brings out the notion of *class* that comes out in numerous occurrences. The gross injustice facing third-class passengers aboard the Titanic, especially when it came to access to the (insufficient) lifeboats, is made very vivid in Cameron's film, which supposedly reflects what really happened in 1912, based on survivors' testimonies.

The idea that the poor pay a greater tribute than the wealthy in the face of *collective tragedy* is one of the most striking features of the Titanic metaphor used since the 2010s, as it is both relevant to climate change and to the Coronavirus pandemic. As mentioned in the introduction, James Cameron himself emphasizes this sense of injustice in the context of global warming:

> *We* will not be able to turn to miss that iceberg, and *we*'re going to hit it, and when *we* hit it, the rich are still going to be able to get their access to food, to arable land, to water, and so on. It's going to be the poor, it's going to be the steerage that are going to be impacted. It's the same with the Titanic ("Titanic: The Final Word with James Cameron").

As mentioned in 4.2, another recurrent metaphorical entailment in our corpus is *the hubris* and *irresponsibility of world leaders*, which translates into failure to take action in time to save their people, just the way decision-makers onboard the Titanic made the gross error of overlooking the risk of encountering icebergs, as well as being too slow to organize the rescue after the impact, clinging on to the idea that the ship wouldn't – or couldn't – go down.

Similarly with climate change, and as is made evident in the cartoons above (Figures 6 and 7), people in charge are deemed too slow to act:

> Human arrogance led to the sinking of the RMS Titanic on its maiden voyage, and human arrogance can easily lead to the complete, irreversible destruction of our environment. […] Just as the real life sinking of the Titanic was not total chaos until the last half hour or so, *we* are not rushing around panicked while trying to fix *our* environmental crisis (Clark 2019).

Interestingly, a *sense of collectivity* emerges from these occurrences through the extensive use of the first-person plural pronoun "we", as well as generic allusions such as "human arrogance". The same applies in the next quote, which summons the Titanic metaphor to depict the impending "*collapse*" of medicine in America:

> The sinking of the Titanic is a powerful metaphor for the potential collapse of medicine. Like the Titanic, the medical system is fragile, and it is becoming increasingly clear that it is doomed to fail without proper attention and vigilance. With an influx of more complex patients and staffing shortages, medicine cannot keep up with the demands being placed upon it. To prevent further decline and ultimate failure, *we* must take proactive steps to address the many

> challenges that face the industry today. It's time to change course! (Morgenstein et al. 2023).

Here again, the generic reference to "*Ø* medicine", or "*the* medical system", combined with the use of the first-person plural pronoun "*we*" and impersonal, non-finite clauses such as "It's time to change course", lays bare the ambiguity of the sense of collectivity at stake. On the one hand, the resort to "we" instead of "they" suggests a collective call for action, which reasserts the importance of individual responsibility within the group, regardless of social hierarchy. On the other hand, loose reference to abstract notions such as climate change, "impending environmental doom", medicine, Covid-19, etc. which transpires through the use of the zero article or the definite article THE, whose extralinguistic reference is however obvious and unclear – lays bare the chaotic nature of this so-called collectivity/society.

The evils at stake – which take the shape of the iceberg in the metaphorical process – are hardly delineated, and responsibility remains unclear. This is everyone and no one's responsibility at the same time, for want of clear, definite reference (to that extent, cartoons featuring recognizable world leaders are less equivocal). The metaphor creates a gap between the passive, non-conscious iceberg and the political, human-made decisions responsible for said crises, but this gap remains hidden. This might be one of the shortcomings of metaphorical awareness-raising: while veering towards universality, and striving to include everyone, it fails to trigger effective, individual response. As a result, we remain on the metaphorical level, or surface, while concrete action is needed.

Still, metaphor is popular in commercial advertising as well as in non-profit awareness campaigns; it often serves as a rhetorical tool to call for (collective) action, thus reasserting its performative value:

> (28) By working together, we can create a better future for our local families. We can be that life *raft* ("Titanic task facing society in the wake of Covid").

In this last example, the Titanic-Covid analogy rests on a play on words: the literal shortage of lifeboats – or life rafts - for third-class passengers echoes the metaphorical use of the nominal *life raft* meaning social help, in an attempt to foster local initiative and incite donations.

In contrast with the limitations we have just raised, ongoing programs in cognitive therapy recently put forward the therapeutic dimension of the Titanic

metaphor to boost self-esteem and resilience during Covid. The Therapeutic Fanfiction project, presented in *We Will Go Down With This Ship: What the Titanic can teach us about facing hard truths* (Mastin/Garski 2020), encourages people who experience difficulty coping with the challenges brought by the pandemic to immerse themselves in a fictitious journey onboard the Titanic to reflect upon their role in society:

> Pause for a moment and consider where you are on the metaphorical Titanic. Are you a first, second, or third class passenger? Or are you a member of the crew or staff? Consider the ways your race, class, and gender impact your social standing on the ship. Wherever you are on the ship and whatever your role, there is one thing that you all have in common, you are on a sinking ship (Mastin/Garski 2020).

The metaphor takes on another function here, as it goes beyond the didactic and rhetorical – which dominate our corpus – to achieve performative, and even curative power: "Once you've created this image in your mind, decide how you will use this knowledge to *enact* change on the SS 2020" (Mastin/Garski 2020). Meanwhile, it reasserts the social function of metaphor (Jamet/Terry 2017), which is to bring people together and create a sense of "ingroupness".

> Will *you* scramble to reach a lifeboat, or help others aboard? Will *you* dress in your finery and await your fate? Will *you* hold loved ones close? Will *you* offer words of kindness to others? Will *you* play music to help calm the nerves of the others around you? (Mastin/Garski 2020).

By fostering empathy and collective resilience through individual action (note the use of the second-person pronoun *you*), the Titanic metaphor in this context comes as a positive counterpoint to a rather sterile, generalizing debate over collective responsibility towards climate change.

To conclude this panorama of recent applications of the Titanic metaphor, it is worth mentioning this unexpected parallel with entrepreneurship, with an analogy that interestingly "*highlights*" an aspect of the Titanic story that has seldom been picked up:

> Expert opinion on the topic varies, but had Titanic hit the berg head-on, it might well have withstood the impact. In life, and in business, there is often a tendency to avert our problems. We avoid difficult conversations or we skirt around the issues that bother us. But in the long run this can cause even greater damage, so be assertive and take your challenges head-on (Saunders 2020).

The nature of the impact has indeed been widely discussed after the loss of the RMS Titanic, as state-of-the-art engineering had been deployed to prevent flooding in the lower compartments of the boat. However, due to late spotting of the iceberg and to a belated attempt to dodge it sideways, much greater damage was caused by a very long cut that allowed several compartments to be flooded simultaneously.

Similarly in entrepreneurship, according to this coach, it might be less painful and detrimental to the business to take blows "head-on" from time to time, rather than letting difficult situations fester by trying to avoid them. This last metaphorical use of the Titanic offers a recipe for individual success, without exploiting the notions of class or hubris that have been widely utilized in the precedent examples, thus reasserting the polysemy of the Titanic story as analogical material.

4.5 A parable and a modern myth

The extensive use of the Titanic metaphor in a variety of topical contexts over the past decade shows that the Titanic narrative – in a broad sense, including the original event and fictional features that were later added to it – is both universal, that is, accessible to a worldwide audience, and elastic, in the sense that it can unfold in multiple settings depending on the target domain (COVID-19, CLIMATE CHANGE, ECONOMIC CRISIS, PSYCHOLOGY, ENTREPREUNEURSHIP, etc.). In the wake of the typology developed by Turner in *The Literary Mind* (1998), we would like to argue that the advent of this potent Titanic metaphor was made possible by turning the Titanic *story* into a *generic narrative* or *skeletal pattern*, featuring certain tropes (the iceberg, the boat, the band, etc.). This generic narrative, a *parable* for Turner (1996, 2011: 7), may then serve as a basis for various analogies:

> I will use the word *parable* more narrowly than its Greek root but much more widely than the common English term: *Parable is the projection of story*. Parable, defined this way, refers to a general and indispensable instrument of everyday thought that shows up everywhere, from telling time to reading Proust.

To be reassigned to other domains, it has to be fully referential and sufficiently abstract at the same time. In other words, it has to be part of shared knowledge, as a reference that can be identified by the greatest number, while being

sufficiently stripped from its particular circumstances to be reused in other contexts. Or, to use another metaphor, the story has to be devoid of some particulars to become a nutshell ("generic space" for Turner, "form" for Barthes), that can itself contain other stories (or "meanings"), to the point where the original story is eclipsed by the new one.

This process is described by Barthes in the making of the modern myth: "When it becomes form, the meaning leaves its contingency behind; it empties itself, it becomes impoverished, history evaporates, only the letter remains." (Barthes 1957, 1972: 116). To that extent, our suggestion is that the Titanic metaphor has become a *parable* from a cognitive linguistics perspective, as well as a *modern myth* (in Barthes's sense) that enables us to structure new collective experiences and challenges.

We may also notice that, according to the degree of metaphorization, the *shadow* of the original Titanic story has almost disappeared from certain occurrences. This is the case with the highly conventional, universal idiom *it is only the tip of the iceberg*, identified as a Titanic metaphor by Piirainen (2012: 386), in the sense that the reference to the original Titanic story is not reactivated in modern speakers' minds when the idiom is used. However, as is made evident by recent cartoons presented in this paper, the original Titanic story is still very vivid in fresh, multimodal occurrences and in our contemporaries' cultural repertoire. The reference is "on hold", ready to be reassigned as a *skeletal pattern* to new domains: "the form does not suppress the meaning, it only impoverishes it, it puts it at a distance, it holds it at one's disposal" (Barthes 1957, 1972: 117). The exact nature of its reference is unclear – the historical event, Cameron's movie, a combination of both – but it does not matter as it has already become parabolic, analogic, or to conclude on Barthes' proposal: it has been *mythologized*.

Going over the occurrences sampled in this study, it is possible to make out the criteria that shape the Titanic narrative as a *skeletal pattern*. Table 3 lists the traditional elements/ingredients expected in any abstract narrative-structure: protagonists, in a locus (place), facing an incident, which might include some aggravating factors, and possibly emotions and attitudes attached to the event.[4]

[4] This is also evocative of the narrative functions developed by Vladimir Propp in *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928).

The obvious absent parameter is TIME, as the story (especially in the case of a true historical event) has to be extirpated from its original setting to be reapplied to different circumstances, or *modern shipwrecks*, as we chose to label them.

Metaphorical entailments		
Iceberg	Covid, global warming, inflation…	**INCIDENT**
Insufficient lifeboats	Shortage of masks, vaccines, financial safety net…	**AGGRAVATING FACTORS**
1st class passengers vs. 2nd & 3rd class passengers	Social elites vs. the middle class & the lower classes, the 3rd World	**PROTAGONISTS (ALL VICTIMS)**
Band playing	Accepting fate, ineluctability, defeat	**ATTITUDE**
Captain White Star Line	World leaders (Trump, Boris Johnson, Theresa May…)	**CULPRITS**
Unsinkable ship	The Planet, Our Western Societies	**SYSTEM, WORLD**
Cold Atlantic Waters	Distress, despair, loss…	**EMOTION**

Table 3: The Titanic metaphor as a skeletal pattern

The Titanic narrative thus re-emerges – as it were – as a generic narrative staging a *dramatis personae* including influent and vulnerable characters facing a common ordeal, materialized in the iceberg, which form a kind of microcosm in a given context. What brings unity to this diverse group is precisely the fact that they are all contained in the same vessel, the same way humans all inhabit the same planet. For that reason, the Titanic metaphor is favored to refer to collectivity or humanity as a whole: it stages a microsociety of people who are faced with the same obstacle but do not have the same chances and the same equipment to overcome them.

There is no surprise with the outcome of the Titanic story: everyone knows how it ends before the analogical journey even starts. Hence the predominant idea of doom and failure, but more interestingly, as seen in the previous examples,

with Titanic analogies emphasis is laid on the protagonists' roles and attitudes towards the event: resilience, despair, arguments over responsibility, arrogance, delusion, etc. To that extent, the Titanic metaphor is mostly, if not exclusively, concerned with humans and human attitudes – vulnerable, powerful, (under)privileged, stereotyped, well-equipped, unconscious, and so many other things – which accounts for its wide appeal and productivity.

The Titanic metaphor speaks to us as human beings, as we find echoes of our own voices somewhere in/on that boat, a hundred years later, as we are all faced with new collective challenges we may well go down with. But more importantly, as a parable, it speaks to our "literary mind", that feeds on pre-existing narratives to find the right words to tell new stories, as mentioned by Turner (1996, 2011: 169): "Parable is the root of the human mind—of thinking, knowing, acting, creating, and plausibly even of speaking."

5. Conclusion

To conclude on the emergence and development of the Titanic metaphor since the 2010s, it is worth mentioning a psycholinguistic factor that is at the heart of any human enterprise: *fascination*, which often reflects our paradoxical attitude towards mystery, oscillating between appeal and fear. The unwavering fascination for the Titanic story over the past century has prompted numerous debates, theories, film adaptations and scientific expeditions to recover the wreck. Far from putting an end to over seventy years of mystery, the discovery of the wreck by Robert Ballard in 1985 only served to spark renewed interest in the lost vessel, culminating with James Cameron's cult Titanic film in 1997, which, by mixing real footage of the wreck with historical drama and purely fictitious characters, augmented its potential for mythification and metaphorization.

From a darker standpoint, accessibility to the wreck along with some form of fetichism attached to the movie have also given way to debatable "dives" to visit the remains of the RMS Titanic, turning this place of death and remembrance into something close to an amusement park. And, as if to add another layer of mystery and gloom to the whole experience, morbid curiosity for the site cost the lives of five passengers of the Titan submersible on 18 June 2023, creating yet another Titanic tragedy.

As far as metaphor use is concerned – and on a more positive note – we would like to conclude by noting that speakers are more likely to favor analogies that resonate with their culture and interests. To that extent, by inviting us to question our individual and collective attitudes, the Titanic narrative serves as a potent, polysemous basis for analogies with the modern challenges we are faced with; it is therefore believed that fascination with its linguistic and cathartic power will go on, as brilliantly summed up by James Cameron:

> I think that's why this story will always *fascinate* people. Because it's a perfect little encapsulation of the world, and all social spectra, but until our lives are really put at risk, the moment of truth, we don't know what we would do ("Titanic: The Final Word with James Cameron").

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DOI: 10.17185/duepublico/84573
URN: urn:nbn:de:hbz:465-20251107-075323-3

Published in: metaphorik.de No. 36 (2025): Special issue: Waterphors, pp. 13-43