OIL COMPANIES' CLIMATE CHANGE DISCOURSE. CASE STUDY: EXXONMOBIL'S DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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Actions for both adapting and mitigating climate change (CC) are fewer and smaller than it is necessary. A possible explanation for this is that CC cannot be perceived directly and the reaction to it depends on how it is communicated.

Our paper aims to demonstrate that important CC stakeholders construe misleading messages and to identify their persuasion means. In doing so we analyzed how CC relates to its non-discursive support (the physical process), pinpointed the subjects of CC debate and analyzed the rhetoric of CC discourse used by one of the most important private oil companies, and that is ExxonMobil.

Keywords: climate change, discourse analysis, ExxonMobil

JEL Classification: M10, M14, M16.

1. Non-discursive Climate Change

"Climate change" is a code through which scientists have attempted to represent that *global temperature is rising because of human activities.* "Climate change" refers to more and less than it can be derived from the meaning of the component words. It means more because the human causation and global scale are presumed, and it is less because only temperature and rising are understood.

Thus, by recontextualizing "climate change" in a scientific paper that describes the shift from one geological era to another, the phrase refers only to the physical process. The cause of this process is not represented. Than the phrase is used in a regional study, it means a change at that level, not a change at global level. Nevertheless, this meaning could be misleading because climate is determined by three elements – solar radiation, general circulation of air masses and terrain. Only terrain's change will transpose in a regional climate change. If this is not the case, solar radiation or air circulation changes are the causes and these processes undergo at global level.

We note than that "climate change" is enriched with additional meanings that cannot be derived entirely from the meaning of the component words. This could explain why the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) uses "climate change" than it presumes a human causation and "climate variability" than non-human caused variations are meant.

Climate is defined as the state, including a statistical description, of the climate system, using surface variables such as temperature, precipitation, and wind (IPCC, 2007). Meanwhile "climate change" represents the rise in average surface temperature. Thus, "climate change" represents less than the physical process. On the other hand, climate variables are not discrete. A change in temperature will indicate that other variables are changed too. Moreover, among the three surface variables mentioned above, temperature is the most constant one. Therefore, the change in temperature could be interpreted as an observable symptom of a changing climate. In addition, "change" could be interpreted as an increase or decrease of a climate variable (temperature in this case), but the phrase only indicates "a rise in average surface temperature".

The same reality – the global process and its causation – is represented by other codes. These could be divided according to their relation with "climate change" in two categories: derived and not derived codes.

In the first case, we note that the same representation is intended than an explanatory adverb is used or than the phrase is simplified. In order to emphasis the causes there are instances than "*anthropogenic* climate change" is used, while there is also a "*climate*" policy that addresses the same reality. One possible explanation for avoiding the explanatory adverb could be the state of scientific certainty at different moments. The occurrence of the physical process was the one confirmed firstly by science, while the human cause of this process was acknowledged latter by the scientific community (IPCC, 2007).

In the second case, we bring in attention other two phrases used to represent the same reality – "greenhouse effect" and "global warming". Although all three are in use today, there are differences both in their content (meaning) and in their usage in different periods.

"Greenhouse effect" describes the process of warm retention in the atmosphere, while "global warming" refers to the rise in surface temperatures. Both presume that human activities are the causes.

Looking back, we could also describe an evolution. "Greenhouse effect" was the denomination proposed by Swante Arrhenius in the nineteenth century. This was picked up in 1980 to "point out a possible human influence on climate. Soon one has realized that this could be confused with the natural greenhouse effect and proposed another phrase – "global warming". This phrase has lasted until the 1990" when it was replaced by climate change. The second shift could be explained in two ways: 1. related to the physical process - global warming presumes that the climate will be warmer everywhere and will remain as such for a while, but performing models forecasted regions/periods with cooler climate/seasons than today, and also a possible global cooling after a while; 2. related to the social perception of the process - was proposed by Poole (2006) who claimed that "global warming" was replaced on purpose by US government officials because it has suggested a change that will make inhabitable the Earth, while "climate change" represents future very similar to present, with places more or less favourable for living.

2. Climate Change Debate

CC is a strongly debated subject. But the debate was not always the focused on the same issue. Firstly, the focus was on the process itself – does or does not happening, then it shifted to the human agency, and now it is about the consequences and actions needed. Thus, Crist (2007) suggests that since climate change is now a fact, it is worth focusing more on consequences where uncertainty is legion.

"Climate change" is beyond its physical dimension an invitation for action. Firstly, by assuming that humans are the causes, and not a natural process beyond their power and will, it results that they has to be the ones who do something to prevent the process. Secondly, if a change takes place in the environment humans will need to adapt to it. These also could be considered as reaction stages. Thus, Huq (2006) argue that two and a half decades ago the focus was on preventing CC through mitigating emissions, while now adaptation has to be twined with mitigation, because some effects of climate are inevitable.

The scientific debate is not entirely settled (since the "climate consensus" was already criticized by Corcoran (2006), but it has given a consistent explanation of the processes and also provided indications on what is to be done. In addition, CC information is now a mighty flow that reaches far in society.

Despite these premises, appropriate action is lagged, a strong emphasis being on the need to be more active. Since developed countries already have a climate policy, there is a global market for greenhouse gas emissions, renewable energies have stronger support as ever, businesses disclose their contribution to climate change mitigation we could say that society is already active. Thus, the issue is not to be active, but to be more active. What more active means could be approximated by looking to the gap between what is needed and what is achieved? Research done in this respect has revealed that the difference between active and more active is huge.

What prevent an appropriate reaction to climate science's findings is therefore considered an issue of communication and is researched as such using semiotics and discourse analysis. Some of the outcomes are contradictory. Gare (2007) explores the semiotics of global warming and finds that market, as a field defined by Bordieu, has overlapped all facet of life and this transferred the debate to individuals or institutions that do not have the expertise needed to handle it. Therefore, the blend of CC messages that often contradict themselves is not convincing enough to change behaviour. Discourse analysis of CC related articles, web pages and ads in UK has brought Ereaut and Segnit (2006) to the conclusion that climate change discourse "looks confusing, contradictory and chaotic". Nevertheless, solutions are viewed differently. Gare (2007) considers that in order to have more meaningful climate change messages it is necessary to restrain market's field by heavily taxing advertising. Thus transnational corporations will have less power to corrupt semiotics through rhetoric that undermines people's capacity to think rationally. Ereaut and Segnit (2006) consider that the most effective way of stimulating climate-friendly behaviour is to treat this activity as a brand to be sold, thus expanding again market's field.

3. Oil Companies' Climate Change Rhetoric. Case Study: ExxonMobil's Discourse Analysis

One possible cause for unconvincing CC messages is considered businesses that construe misleading statements. Therefore we will try to: (1) demonstrate that important stakeholders in CC use misleading messages; and (2) identify their means of persuasion.

As stakeholders we considered oil companies since their main product is an important carbon dioxide source. Only private oil companies that act at global scale were envisaged because they are comprised in the category of transnational corporations.

The text to be analysed is comprised in the 2007 sustainability report issued by the largest private oil company – ExxonMobil (PIW, 2008). In this report the company has included a climate change chapter in which it presents scenarios, policy, statements, actions, research done and others. Moreover, ExxonMobil was involved in disinformation campaigns on climate change.

ExxonMobil addresses CC in the Environmental Performance chapter of the Corporate Citizenship Report issued in 2007. The chapter comprises four themes: environmental management, CC risks management, environmental impact, and biodiversity protection. CC and biodiversity protection are pointed as *priority issues*. CC accounts for five of the twelve pages and is addressed using four "Closer look" frames and two sections. The "Closer look" frames comprise CEO's (Rex W. Tillerson's) statement, summary of actions to reduce GHG emissions, GHG reporting, and help for Canadian consumers, while the sections present in detail how GHG are reduced in energy production and how consumers' use of energy is improved, both having an outlook of solutions toward 2030.

We focused mainly on the CEO's statement because in Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) (2002) guidelines such statements are subject of evaluation, as an indicator of the credibility with internal and external users.

The first paragraph aims to persuade the reader that the focus of public policy debate on the company should be large, but it is too large. This is supported by a reasoning based on asserted facts. These facts construe two images: 1. they represent the size of public debate considered acceptable and suggest that it is a large one; and 2. they represent a tiny company against the issues of public policy concern. In this way a twofold goal is reached: justifying the intense public debate regarding ExxonMobil (it is not because ExxonMobil have done something that attracted public attention, but because there is a general problem, beyond the company's capacity to influence it) and downplaying the debate actors (efforts invested in such debates are wasted, or

could be used for something else). Nevertheless from the reasoning some facts are left out (perhaps on purpose): the 1989 oil spill from the Exxon Valdez tanker that is considered one of the most devastating man-made environmental disaster ever to occur at sea and the funding of CC denial research (ExxonSecret, 2007). These could explain at some extent the part of debate considered by the company larger than it should be.

The large size of public policy debate is construed by asserting that three public policy concerns are merging (energy security, economic growth, and environmental protection), evaluating the state of public policy issues as "unusual confluence", and by using a metaphor that creates a spatial image of the position occupied by energy companies ("three-way intersection"). The contrast of these large problems with the scale at that the company operates is created by stating the company's account in world energy needs, by using a figure instead of text, and by evaluating it ("no more than 2 percent").

The second paragraph reveals that the pressure of legitimate concerns alters the objectivity of estimations regarding CC variables. This is based on the assumption that more legitimate the concerns are more they create a pressure on estimations. The legitimacy of concerns is reasoned using both facts (rising greenhouse gas emissions) and assumptions (global economic growth is desirable and continuous). Thus, the legitimacy of CC concerns is construed as an immutable fact that will create a pressure on estimation. Than are asserted as facts several tendencies in estimating CC variables (energy demand, alternative energy, petroleum based technologies). The alteration is emphasised by an evaluation of these tendencies ("there is all too often also a tendency").

Further, the CEO prepares the reader to not expect something spectacular on short run and/or to over appreciate the results of CC mitigating actions undertaken by ExxonMobil. This is putted as a reasoning to support the claim that managing climate change will take decades. In reasoning there are used facts ("climate change challenge has been decades in making") and it is assumed that CC is so complex that it is difficult to demonstrate it even if there are available facts which are evaluated as "without question" (warming of earth's average temperature, ecosystems showing signs of warming, emissions and concentration of carbon dioxide).

Oil companies' contribution to CC is downplayed by truncating or misrepresenting facts. Thus, carbon dioxide is "one of the several greenhouse gases" like it has the same role to play in CC with other gases. In fact, carbon dioxide is the most important greenhouse gas (it accounts for more than half - 64% – in global warming). As significant sources of carbon dioxide there are presented fossil fuel burning and changes in land use. This not contradicts real facts but it distorts them. Indeed this is the order, but fossil fuels have a lot more contribution than land use change. Nevertheless, in low developed countries land use change has a larger contribution, and in general, data on this source are uncertain.

The need to take action is responded in the next paragraph. According to this ExxonMobil already took actions and these are based on risk management principles. The actions are augmented by emphasising that they are "several" and by evaluating them – "substantive". Following the recommended link we have found that in 2007 GHG emission were reduced with 5 million metric tones, of which 3 millions are reduced by efficiency actions and 2 millions by changes in activity and improving measurement. In the second case there is no indication which is the relative contribution, despite the fact that improving measurement means reduction only in records. Nevertheless it is pointed out that the 5 million tone reduction is equivalent to removing 1 million cars form US streets. Using risk management principles is a "must" for ExxonMobil and it is supported by playing on the readers economic rational – "...actions most likely to achieve benefits at the lowest cost."

Finally, Rex W. Tillerson construe as good collective implication and opinion diversity. The engagement of all, including the company, is a "must" and therefore the different views, such as the support of CC denial research, become justifiable.

We could conclude that CEO's statement comprises several misleading messages and uses as main means of persuasion *logos*. Reasoning is based on facts and assumptions; in some instances facts are truncated and/or distorted, possibly on purpose; there are construed immutable facts that will justify uncertainty, and immutable goods that indicate what is valued by the company and that justify its highly criticized involvement in denying CC and its human agency.

It is to mention that the company is using images related to renewable energy (e.g. photo: CEO attending a speech; graphs: greenhouse gas emissions (absolute and normalized), greenhouse gas emissions reduction from ExxonMobil action in 2006 and 2007, hydrocarbon flaring from upstream oil and gas production, distribution of greenhouse gas emissions from use of petroleum). This suggest that ExxonMobil has a right to expand its activity so that to include renewable energy generation. This "right" is given by the company's concern with climate change and its efforts to change the situation.

The colours used in the text of the report are also suggestive. The colours assigned to the text become meaningful for the sense of the discourse. These colours could be sense-making devices, working at different levels of abstraction according to the individual's perception capacity. Each colour signifies and induces a different emotion and feeling, and is associated with diverse common things. ExxonMobil's text is partly written with green colour. The most common associations of green are found in nature, meaning hope, growth, spring and regeneration. Lately, the green colour became the symbol of environmentalism. Therefore, companies often use green to indicate that they are environmentally friendly.

4. Conclusions

Climate change represents a reality that escapes direct perception. Although a simple phrase it could be misleading itself since it refers to more and less than it can be derived from the meaning of the component words. In addition, there are several phrases used to represent the same reality. Climate change debate has undergone several stages and now it settled on the need for more action. The delay in acting is explained by several studies which are focusing on communication and which reveal that CC messages come from many sources and crush in an inconclusive and endless public debate.

Messages construed by important CC stakeholders could be evaluated as misleading since they use truncated or distorted information, and construe immutable facts and goods that justify both uncertainty and slowness in action. On the other hand, these companies invest a lot in "greening" their image and preparing their future role as energy providers.

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