

# Conceptualisation of Sustainability

## A Theoretical and Methodological Framework for Understanding Metaphors and Narratives of Sustainability

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### Abstract

Metaphors are language phenomena commonly used as tools of persuasion, as evident in different kinds of public discourses, most notably in political addresses. They are particularly potent in this respect because they function on the principle of connecting the logical with the emotional. This persuasive role has also been attested in media reports, usually employed for the purposes of framing and the creation of a specific narrative. The purpose of this paper is to outline a theoretical and methodological account of metaphor choices related to sustainability and restoration, as issues related to climate change, made by the contemporary media and the

perceptions formed by repetition and reinforcements of certain kinds of imagery present in their choice. An additional purpose is to understand which information sources, and possible instances of influence and leverage, could be of importance in terms of the media reporting on sustainability-related issues. Therefore, the paper offers novel conceptual and analytical guidelines for future research in the field of sustainability communication.

Keywords: *Framing, Sustainability, Conceptual metaphors, Climate change, Media, Narratives*

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## 1 Introduction

Sustainability is at its core a narrative enterprise (Herrick and Pratt 2013), stimulating public discourses in many ways. It is directly related to climate change, focusing on a variety of problematic social issues like species extinction, violation of human rights or diminished biodiversity. As such, it is communicated to the general public in two ways. On one side, the media operate at a “peak negativity” (Atanasova and Flottum 2019), with a strong problematisation angle. This is evident, for example, in their use of war-related metaphors such as “carbon tax proposal battles” or “eco-warriors”. On the other side, in corporate and political discourses, sustainability is used to present potential solutions to reach a ‘better’ future.

Linguistic scholars, literary theorists, and philosophers of language analyse the ways in which language constructs and, by extension, enables social representations and practices. The constitutive role of language opens up a pathway to sustainability, which Herrick and Pratt (2013, 4433) term as depending “upon acceptance of a transformative or constitutive narrative”. The assumption is that any kind of a narrative construct is subject to review, critique, deconstruction, and reconstruction or to rigorous (re)formulation. In this paper, the idea is to combine the complementary perspectives of linguistic and communication studies to deconstruct sustainability communication in public communication, concretely ‘the media’, from a content perspective. In essence, we take stories and narratives as the foundation of meaning and sense making processes (van der Leeuw 2019, Weder et al. 2019, Eisenstein 2013), and focus on metaphors at the core of the sustainability narratives, bending via scientific reasoning as one part of the sustainability story (Frank 2017) to consumer centred, emotive communication and empty “buzz-wording” (Krainer and Weder 2011). This is embedded in a narrative approach to sustainability as an ‘emergent quality’ in relation to the ecological crisis (Sahinidou 2016) and the wider story of climate change

Metaphors are widely used in public communication, influencing the shape and twist of a narrative. One of the major aims of metaphors in general is to connect the logical (logos) with the emotional (pathos) (Mio 1997, 122). For example, if we observe Extinction Rebellion’s ‘fighting’ climate change, and by the same time being described as ‘Eco-Warriors’, then the intention to resonate with the audience on an emotional level is quite clear from the idiomatic nature of the statement. By introducing a concept of WAR (‘Eco-warriors’) into the related public discourse, a certain course of action is advocated for, for example fighting against climate change<sup>1</sup>. Thus, when people repeatedly hear that

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly enough, ‘fighting against climate change’ is another case of a metaphor built on the concept of WAR.

we have to fight climate change rather than calmly ponder on solutions, they are likely to incorporate this very specific ideological model in their mind and, presumably, take a more active approach in this respect.

Viewing the use of language in general and metaphors in particular for manipulating public perception and opinion via political discourse, where their role has long been recognised as crucial, as parallel to the way media present different issues, one is drawn away from cognitive linguistics towards the theoretical concepts of *agenda setting* and *framing* research, within the field of media studies. For instance, when writing about climate change, Fox News chooses to run the story under the following headline: “Let’s chill out about global warming” (January 12, 2017). If we focus on the idiomatic ‘chill out’, the attempt by this media outlet to ‘frame’ climate change as a segment of someone’s irrational behaviour becomes rather evident. The imagery evoked by the conceptual mapping (‘LACK OF MOTION IS COOL TEMPERATURE’) and the associated word play (grounded in the semantic contrast between cool and warm) illustrated by the given headline is meant to evoke an ideological model of climate change being false and nothing to be excited about. Agenda setting research tries to account for such behaviour of media outlets by linking it to the process of thematisation related to the effect media coverage can have in defining the relevance of an issue (Lang and Lang 1959, McCombs and Shaw 1972), while it also seeks to identify interdependencies of issues between different systems of relating information. Here, we can turn to the concept of framing as second-level agenda setting (McCombs and Shaw 1972, McCombs et al. 1997, Weaver 2007) as it is often more accurate to speak of *intermedia agenda setting* (defined as the influence between different types of media and sources of information (Roberts and McCombs 1994, McCombs 2005)). For example, if we look at intermedia agenda setting in the field of health and illness communication and the related news coverage, we can see that government and official sources rank amongst the most reliable and most commonly used information subsidies, most likely due to their perceived credibility and authority (Lacy and Coulson 2000, Sweetser and Brown 2008, Dobrić and Weder 2015). In fact, we can say that that government and official sources ‘organise’ (Weder 2012) and hereby influence the media agenda in health communication and, more importantly and by extent, the public perception of the issue at hand in a broader sense.

## 2 Theoretical Background

From a core scientific point of view, anthropogenic climate change is mainly debated and studied in environmental sciences, natural sciences, and economics. Sustainability communication is at the core of the intersections between the named disciplines and has an interdisciplinary as well as transdisciplinary character (Godemann and Michelsen 2011). On an interdisciplinary plane, however, media and communication studies and linguistics (among many other scientific disciplines) offer a valuable additional perspective, both theoretical and methodological. From a conceptual theoretical perspective, the link between sustainability and metaphors can be located at the intersection of intermedia agenda setting, framing, and cognitive linguistics, and gets its theoretical, as well as conceptual, inspiration from the current state of the art in environmental communication studies and linguistics.

The theoretical concept offered here, aimed to aid in understanding and researching sustainability communication, is embedded in a critical perspective that is typical for environmental communication studies, which has the character of an ‘activist discipline’. Environmental communication as a research field goes beyond the information or transfer of knowledge approach; the potential to shape environmental and societal development and change is a constitutional element of environmental communication studies. Therefore, the field is also described as ‘ecological discourse’, “with the sustainability concept being the most recent communicative framework” from a media and communication perspective (Adomßent and Godemann 2013, 28). The related theoretical concept is further elaborated in the following subsections and is additionally linked to a relevant methodological framework, all in the effort to reflect on the communication about, of, and for sustainability that potentially complements current environmental communication research. Thus, from our perspective, sustainability communication is influenced by the critical character of environmental communication research and scholarship. This is further highlighted by its focus on social representations of nature, human-nature relationships, resource-related behaviour, and public interest issues (such as climate change).

### 2.1 (Intermedia) Agenda Setting and Framing of Sustainability

The concept of agenda setting refers to the capability of the mass news media to not only influence how people think about certain topics but, more importantly, what they perceive as an issue in the first place (McCombs 2004). The suggestion is that within a modern society the mass news media constitute the public agenda, comprising of all issues that at least achieved awareness within the majority of the public (Cobb et al. 1976). It can be argued that the mass news media help to structure and impart the most relevant

information to the public (see Tab. 1), which could more critically also be perceived as manipulation (Rössler 1997). For example, early studies by Parlour and Schatzow (1978) have shown that there is a direct correlation between environmental concerns and the relative amount of news media coverage of them. More drastically, they have found no evidence for public concerns about environmental issues which were not covered by the news media. Therefore, it can be argued that it is through the social orientation function of the media that resonance for the relevance of sustainability can be created in a society (de Witt 2011, Ziemann 2011).

Within the field of sustainability communication, climate change (and now increasingly climate crisis or climate emergency) has been the flagship of environmental and societal (public interest) issues among politics, media, and scientists alike since the late 1980s (Moser 2010, Nerlich et al. 2010). Numerous published articles and extensive mass news media coverage enabled climate change to become a salient issue on the public agenda (Newig 2011). However, the studies are limited to analysing only the structuration and relevance of a certain issue. A research paradigm focusing on framing as a possibility to investigate the creation and character of the meaning of related transmitted messages is needed to complement the current approaches.

Therefore, as Table 1 breaks it down, we introduce frames as persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, presentation, selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers (such as the media) routinely organise public issues (Gitlin 1980). Frames as an organising principle of communication (Weder 2012) have to be linked to the process of framing, a process which “symbolically to meaningfully structure[s] the social world” (Reese, 2001, 5). Despite studies focusing on holistic or generic frames (Gerhards and Rucht 1992, Snow and Benford 1992), our paradigm connects with the majority of approaches working with issue-specific frames (de Vreese 2005), whereby it is assumed that each subject has different thematic frames (Shah et al. 2002). An issue-specific frame can be interpreted as a position or argument based on an opinion. In this respect, issue-specific frames are at the heart of narratives, they are the essence of an issue (Gamson and Modigliani 1989, 3).

	Definition	Sustainability communication
(Public) Discourse	conversations about a certain (public) issue	economic discourse about the changing climate and the transition to renewable energy (with various narratives driving the discourse)
Agenda Setting	mass news media help to structure and impart the most relevant information to the public	The bushfires in Australia did not affect people in Europe directly; however, it was on the media agenda and people were talking about it all over the globe.
Narrative	storyline of an issue, structuring the agenda	There were two narratives about the bushfires: 1) The extent of the fires was related to climate change (natural hazard); 2) The extent of the fires was not related to climate change but to unsustainable management of bush, forests and agriculture.
Frame	position or argument based on an opinion, at the heart of narratives, the essence, constitutive and organising element of an issue; organising principles of a narrative	i.e. ecological disaster, protection of resources, economic threat; restoration; fight against climate change
Conceptual Metaphor	communicative moments employed to transfer a specific meaning, to organise and emphasise it, and to create larger sets of related meaning	i.e. war (we have to fight the fires, fight climate change, eco-warriors); sick ecosystem (lungs of the planet)

Table 1: Narratives, frames and metaphors, theoretical background and definitions

At this point, we can introduce *narratives* as the storylines that lay above frames and that express the issues or cover certain topics. At the same time, a narrative is always set in a particular cultural context (Abbott 2008); a narrative represents a cultural framework and offers a specific understanding of the issue at hand. Frames, subsequently, are the *organising principles of a narrative* (Fig. 1). Therefore, in their turn, they help to identify the nature of the narrative from an analytical point of view.

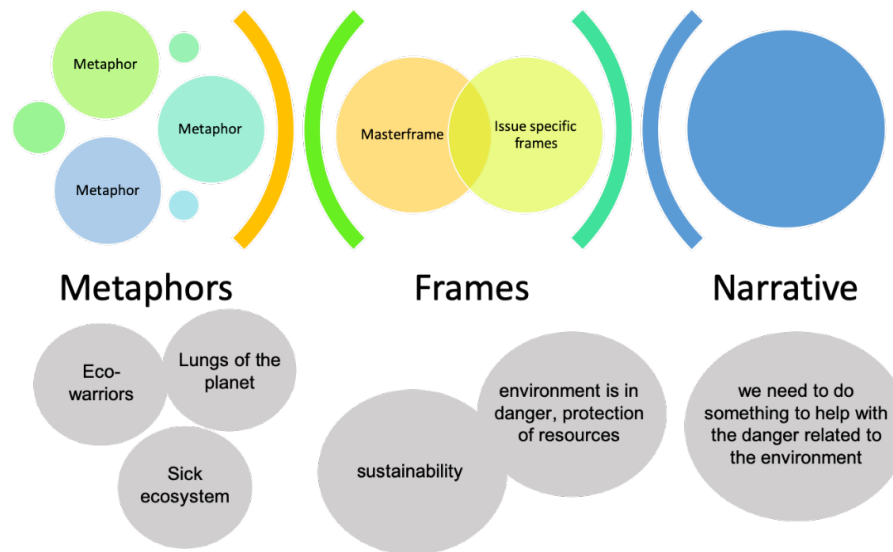


Figure 1: Narratives, frames, and metaphors; framework adapted from Weder (2012).

The narrative of restoration and care about resources needed to meet problems related to climate change and to solve them is represented in public communication. The related frame is *sustainability as normative framework* or, to be more issue-specific, that our environment is in danger and resources have to be protected. There are other issue-specific frames regarding conversations about nature that include protection or the necessity to *fight* against climate change. However, our approach takes this an additional, innovative step further, introducing a yet insufficiently investigated concept of the ‘metaphor’ as a major ‘part’ of frames (and, subsequently, public agendas and narratives structuring the agenda). In other words, our focus is on metaphors as *communicative moments* employed to transfer a specific meaning, to organise and emphasise it, and to create larger sets of related meaning (see again Fig. 1).

Here, the potential of metaphors to express and emphasise frames becomes obvious. The concept of WAR introduced in the beginning as grounds of metaphorical expressions, showed us that the terminology of war can be used in communicating the narrative of our natural habitat being threatened and as humans us having to fight against our annihilation. This will be further elaborated in the following section, which complements the already established concepts of media and communication studies through a cognitive linguistic perspective.

## 2.2 Cognitive Linguistics and Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Studies focusing on metaphors in general and on conceptual metaphors in particular, constitute the major strand of cognitive linguistics research (Johnson and Lakoff 1980; Lakoff 1993, Ortony 1993; Steen 1999; Kövecses 2002, 2005; Evans 2004; Gibbs 2006, 2008; Glucksberg and Haught 2006; Glucksberg 2008; to name a few). In short, cognitive linguistics, or more precisely conceptual metaphor theory (CMT), examines metaphors as cognitive phenomena rather than only as lexical ones (or stylistic, as understood in literary terms) (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 31-50). Metaphors are considered as means of shaping not only the way we speak but the way we think and perceive the world around us, since most of the time we preconsciously use and understand metaphorical language. The process of constructing meaning using metaphorical concepts is called *metaphorisation* and is “founded on association [and it] constructs systems based on prototypical notions and meanings which are used to classify the real world” (Grković–Mejdžor 2008, 54). Metaphors are constructed out of patterns that transcend the individual lexical item, where metaphorical concepts are open-ended sets. The patterns themselves can be grasped as a *mapping* between two domains of experientially grounded knowledge (Evans 2005), the mapping taking the form of a conceptualising of a *target conceptual domain* in terms of the *source conceptual domain* as an alignment between aspects of both source and target (Dobrić 2011). Most commonly, the structure of ‘concrete’ source domains is mapped (Johnson and Lakeoff 1980 252) onto more ‘abstract’ target domains, where the meaning retains the semantic markings of the target domain. For example, in ‘Scott Morrison shot down all the arguments of the bushfires being a consequence of climate change.’ (BBC 2019) we can see an instance of ‘ARGUMENT (target) IS war (source)’ mapping. The underlined expression ‘shot down all the arguments’ here represents one possible lexicalisation of that conceptual mapping, others being ‘his claims are indefensible’, ‘she attacked each of my arguments’, and more.

Metaphors as semantic and cognitive phenomena are often purposefully utilised in persuasion-aimed discourses, such as political, organisational or more specific corporate communication, in order to create a specific frame, a convincing belief structure by subliminally activating our preconscious evaluation systems (Charteris-Black 2005, 2). The cross-domain pairing evident in metaphors is important in image construction, which is in turn crucial in forming and presenting desired ideas to a given public (Dobrić 2009). Speakers, lecturers, writers, and journalists utilise metaphors, along with other rhetorical ploys, to legitimise or delegitimise certain stances (Chilton 2004, 23-47). All metaphors used for a persuasive purpose on the most basic level of cognition (Dobrić and Weder 2015), both in an issue-positive and an issue-negative way, add up to what we termed



framing and create an evaluative framework whose structure represents the basis firstly for frames and then, cumulatively, for specific narratives.

The given cognitive, and by extension semantic, transparency and image-evoking quality of metaphors is what makes them prime candidates for investigating the representations of sustainability of resources within the framework of anthropogenic climate change, as delivered by and represented in the media.

### **3 Expanding the Framework to Deconstruct Sustainability Communication - A Methodological Perspective**

Having accounted for the theoretical foundations of the proposed research, the question remains of how we can identify issues and the most prevalent ‘narratives’, before going deeper and thus pinpoint frames as the interpretative packages that give meaning to the issue (Gamson and Modigliani 1989) and metaphors as communicative moments of framing processes. The innovative character of our theoretical as well as following methodological concept is that we understand metaphors as representations or building-blocks of a specific frame which, again, is the organising principle of a wider narrative. In other words, identification of metaphors unveils the related frames and, by extension, related narratives. Therefore, investigating the conceptualisation of sustainability done through metaphors is the key for reconstructing a wider understanding of the existing narratives of sustainability. A possible methodological framework for doing so is offered in the following sections.

#### **3.1 Understanding Nature by Studying Frames and Metaphors**

Framing the environment and nature is an established area of study in environmental communication research. For instance, Miyase et al. (2018) deal with the use and construction of the environment and environmental themes in different spheres such as literature, media, film, social movements, and politics. Beckmann et al. (2001) describe how news media and journalists construct and frame environmental issues (on the example of climate change). Brüggemann contributes to this research field with his studies on journalistic framing and the construction of climate change in the media (2014). Similarly, Lidström’s (2018) work on framing the rise of the sea-level is of significance for a possible study (and it is based on Nisbet and Newman’s (2015) review of framing research and understanding public discourses and debates regarding the environment). There are also a few studies focusing on metaphors of nature or metaphors in environmental communication in general. Norgaard deals with the metaphor of nature as a “fixed stock of capitalism [...] that provides a flow of services, which is insufficient for the difficulties we

are in or the task ahead” (2010, 2417), in conjunction with the concepts of ‘ecosystem services’ and ‘environmental governance’. Deigan, Semino, and Paul (2019) give an in-depth account on metaphors found in climate-related scientific discourse, focusing on research articles, educational texts, and secondary school students’ utterances. Finally, Romaine evaluated with “Greenspeak” the “role metaphorical thought plays in the scientific as well as popular discussion of key environmental issues such as global warming and loss of biodiversity” (1996, 175). Her discussion of conceptual metaphors used in environmental discourse and in how they are ideologically loaded (*ibid*, 176) makes her article one of the core inspirations for our project. However, she mainly focuses on “clean” and “green” as synonyms for being morally good (*ibid*, 176), following up from Harré et al. (1999), while the study-concept offered here wants to go one step further and operate with cognitive heuristics (Mio, 1997) and possible clusters (linked to the previously described framing approach) of “nature as economy”, “nature as home”, “nature as music”, “nature as living being”, “nature as miracle”, “nature as agricultural crop”, and more (Meisner 1995).

There are also the descriptions of enemy-victim metaphors, outlining the destructive relationship between humans and nature; here, ‘war’, ‘cancer’, ‘parasite’, and ‘predator’ conceptualisations can be found as used (Marshall and Toffel 2005). Keulartz dealt with metaphors for nature originating from the domains of engineering, cybernetics, art and aesthetics, medicine and health care, and geography (2007, 29ff). Another related study comes from Brown (2013), who in his analysis of NGOs and Green businesses and the corresponding framing processes finds lexical representations of a system of concern and frames for biodiversity (including ‘degradation’, ‘resources’, ‘habitats’, ‘impact’, and more). He discusses frames of ‘responsibility’, frames of ‘risk management’, and frames of ‘perception of the damage’, though he does not venture beyond the lexical level of analysis. An interesting study from Renzi et al. (2017) focuses on the problem of nuclear power in social discourses, language, and public choice, and works with three categories in which metaphors can be classified, namely ‘rebirth’ (renaissance), ‘devastation’ (apocalypse, inferno, genie, and bomb) and ‘sickness’ (addiction). Additionally, Atanasova and Koteyko’s study on conceptual metaphors points out their potential to communicate the urgency to act on climate change in two online newspapers (2015); the same was done in Grevsmühl’s study on the ‘ozone hole’ metaphors (2018). While agenda setting sits as a special research area within media studies dealing with how the media paint particular images of a given issue for the consumption by their audiences and what sources of information and streams of influence can affect the manner in which they construct the given representations, framing is about how certain aspects of an intended message (in the media) can be made more visible in order to communicate a particular issue (as,

perhaps, part of an intended agenda). Following this approach and interest in ‘how’ the message is transferred and not just in ‘what’ is communicated, we went one step further in our theoretical framework and complemented the media and communication perspective with a linguistic perspective, bringing in *conceptual metaphor theory*, as the arguably most salient sub-field of cognitive linguistics. Conceptual metaphors have only rarely been studied in the field of environmental communication and this has not been appropriately applied to sustainability communication in particular. In this respect, the following section offers a potentially useful methodology for future research in this field.

### 3.2 A Research Methodology to Understand Sustainability

Following from the previous argumentation that metaphors break up phenomena which are hard to grasp and play a major role in any attempt to frame and set an agenda (whether in political, media, or any other type of discourse), the proposition is that therefore they may also play an important role in environmental and sustainability communication. In order to explore this proposition, any appropriate research approach would have three research questions to answer at its core:

1. How is the sustainability of resources (with all of its climate change- and climate crisis-related subdomains) conceptualised in the media in general?
2. What are the possible emotions (fear, anxiety, relief, indifference, ridicule, and more) mirrored in the discovered conceptualisations?
3. What hypothetically influences the choice of conceptualisation the daily media adopt when reporting, i.e. what are the prospective sources (scientific community, governments, industry) the media could tap in terms of conceptualisation patterns employed in their own framing and agenda setting activities?

In order to answer the stated research questions, there are several practical steps that need to be undertaken. They include data collection (the compilation of the relevant corpora), metaphor (and conceptualisation pattern) identification, and frames and agenda delineation. The data collection highly depends on the focus of the study as well as the accessibility of data and is a consideration for each individual study. Therefore, we can only focus here on the overarching element of the procedure of metaphor identification. The flow of the metaphor identification is intended to follow the standard Pragglejaz Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) (Steen 1999a, Pragglejaz Group 2007, Steen 2007, Steen et al. 2010). After reading the entire text in question to gain a general understanding of the overarching discourse (Dobrić 2014, 145) as step 1, step 2 involves carefully reading the entire text a second time, looking for lexical items of interest (potential metaphors related to the research at hand) and accurately establishing their basic

(prototypical) and immediate (contextual) readings. The meanings of the discovered relevant lexical items (metaphors) are to be weighted in terms of their contextual readings by comparing them with the first listed general readings in a referential dictionary, which can be taken as a benchmark of basic prototypical meanings of the given expressions. In step 3, the lexical units at hand are then marked as metaphorical (in a corpus) if their immediate readings are related to their basic meanings through some form of a similarity relationship, as previously indicated. Step 4 involves the understanding of the similarity of the comparison salient in the identified metaphor. Finally, step 5 of any such analysis involves the identification of the conceptual metaphors, or rather the conceptual mappings, after the metaphorical expressions discovered in the previous steps get to be grouped by similarity of meaning. Depending on the focus of the research, both the targets and the sources in the conceptual mappings are of potential interest. Additionally, given that most conceptual mappings encompass a concrete-to-abstract transfer (Dobrić 2010, 33–35), the identification of the domains involved is additionally guided by this principle. Figure 2 below illustrates the entire procedure.

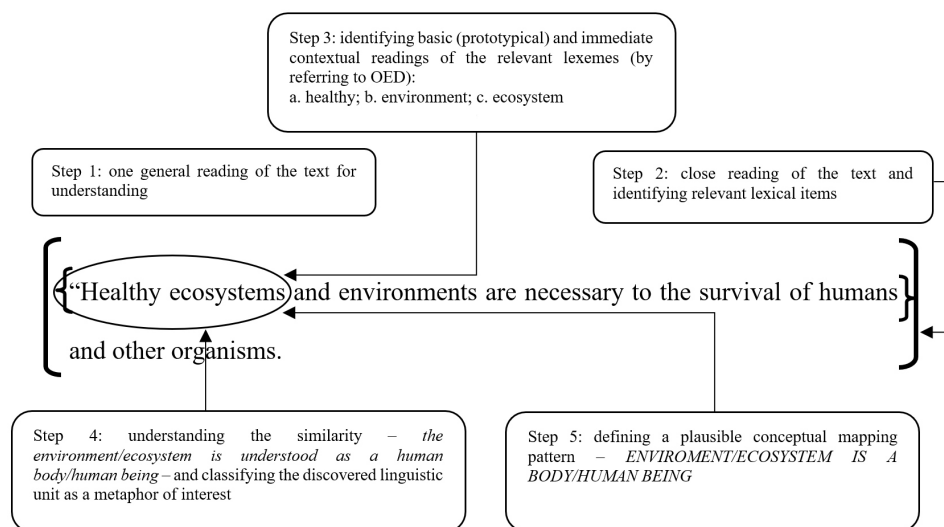


Figure 2: An example of the MIP being applied to a hypothetical example.

Once identified, the metaphors can be (electronically) marked in the corpus representing the relevant data set. Once all of the gathered texts of interest are processed in this manner, all of the marked metaphors can be extracted and their mappings once more reviewed (and, if needed, corrected). This procedure not only helps in understanding the conceptualisation patterns but also allows for a creation of an annotation scheme which can be used further on in processing any related corpora in the future. The main purpose of such a research endeavour would be, as indicated, to use the discovered conceptualisation pat-

terns for identifying any occurring frames in the processed texts and, by extension, in the related discourse.

### 3.3 Outlining Frames and Agenda(s) by Using Identified Metaphors

The identification of metaphors in texts is a crucial part of any similar study, but it is only the first step towards a full understanding of the manner in which sustainability and resources are presented and subsequently perceived. They are to represent the smallest meaningful (conceptual) parts making up frames and it is by identifying their possible groupings according to domain(s), both source and target, that frames themselves can be identified. It is a common practice to look at the imagery expressed by a number of metaphors and to try and cluster them by similarity (as for example with the STRICT FATHER vs. NURTURANT PARENT conceptualisation patterns identified in political discourse in the United States by Lakoff (2002)). It is important here to point out the criteria via which a cluster signified by similarly conceptualised metaphors is to be considered a frame:

1. semantic similarity of the lexicalisation of the metaphors at hand
2. lexical, semantic and/or conceptual similarity of the mapping domains (source or target or both); and
3. sufficient frequency of occurrence relative to the size of the corpus.

Once different clusters are identified to a sufficient degree of confidence in terms of the similarity of conceptualisation and in terms of frequency of appearance for us to claim the pattern to constitute a frame, the next step is to group frames according to similarity and reinforcement (repetition) and thusly identify agendas as wider sets of messages presented to the public. As an extra step, because of the intermedial nature of journalistic reporting, links to similar agendas (as well as frames and metaphors) in other, possibly 'organising,' texts could additionally be sought, including industry, government, and scientific texts (compiled into the said cross-reference corpora). The entire methodology is summed up briefly in Figure 3.

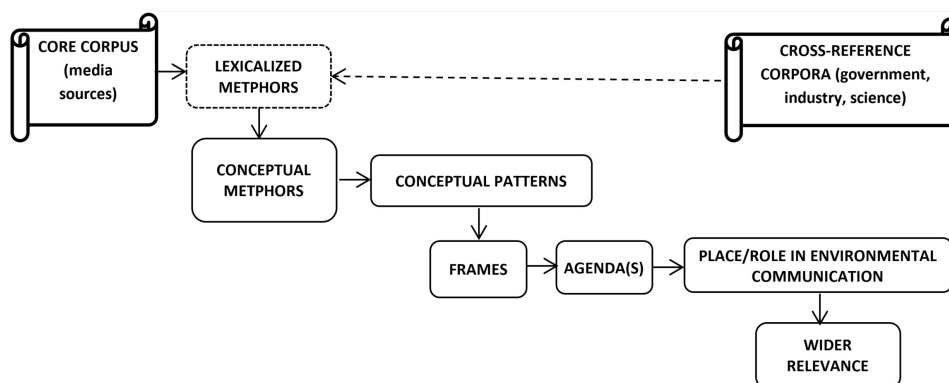


Figure 3: A graphical representation of the methodological steps planned for the project implementation, obtainable results, and the relevant sources of data.

However, embedded in a framework of narratives and framing, our concept focuses on metaphors. Likewise, the transition of metaphors from one media discourse to another is captured with the model at hand which allows for further conclusions about narratives and framing processes. In the final discussion, we will give an outlook for future studies and possible applications of the concept.

#### 4 Discussion

While there is a long history of thinking about how people perceive their environment and how much this influences their knowledge and their awareness of problems (as well as their engagement), there are few and only limited studies dealing with sustainability communication, and even fewer dealing with meaning-making processes in relevant communicative contexts (e.g. corporate, political, or science communication) and specific countries or cultural settings. However, seeing that ‘concern’ is the variable that stimulates people to move from the first stage of simple recognition of the environment to information-seeking behaviour and, finally engagement (Schiff 1980), the relevant meaning-making processes are extremely important for us to understand, especially assuming that there is a strong link between media, communication, and environment on one side and language and rhetoric and discourse in public communication on the other (Peeples 2015). With the perception of narratives and framing presented here as a dynamic process of opinion-formation that is circumstantially-bound and in which the prevailing modes of presentation in elite rhetoric and news media coverage shape mass opinion (Iyengar 1991, 67), it is important to not only focus on what is being communicated, but also on the variations in how a given piece of information is being presented in the sense of organised and publicly-shaped discourse and how metaphors play a role in this

process. Being challenged by a situation where it is hard to deconstruct ‘sustainability’ as ‘masterframe’, here, in this contribution, we offer a framework to work with metaphors as the ‘smallest units’ in communication and the wider transition of metaphors in the sense of an agenda-setting process, seeing them as very specific and intentionally used tools employed to create an explicit meaning, and thus something where the process of sensemaking originally concentrates. For the application of the framework and methodological approach at hand, the data collection has to be elaborated carefully, acknowledging language barriers (metaphors might vary between different languages and time lapses (metaphors might change over time, comparisons and longitudinal studies might be fruitful), as well as it not being possible to ‘just’ translate metaphors from one language into another (see Dobrić 2011). In a wider sense, with this concept, we want to stimulate further research in this area and confirm and stimulate the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary character of sustainability communication.

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