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Human Source Domain in Metaphorizing Corporate Terminology

Abstract

This study attempts to apply the theory of conceptual metaphor to investigate the cognitive mechanism of metaphorisation in corporate terminology mapped from the human source domain. The corpus comprising 299 metaphorical corporate terms collected from business dictionaries, books and authentic business discourses was analysed with the Metaphor Identification Procedure Vrije Universiteit in this qualitative research. The study grouped the collected metaphorical terms into four metaphors, namely CORPORATE LIFE CYCLE IS HUMAN LIFE CYCLE, CORPORATE CHARACTERISTICS ARE HUMAN CHARACTERISTICS, CORPORATE ACTIVITIES ARE HUMAN ACTIVITIES, and CORPORATE RELATIONSHIPS ARE HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS. Numerous human attributes transfer to those of companies via detailed mappings: the progress or development of corporations corresponds to the natural growth of human beings; companies are identified as citizens; corporate personality is viewed as human personality; corporate strength is described as human physical strength; corporate competence is considered as human competence; corporate activities are understood by means of human activities; corporations are conceptualised as families; merger and acquisition are similar to a marriage, while divestitures are comprehended as divorces; the relationship between a company and its stakeholders is identified as human social relationships. The findings strengthen metaphorisation as a productive way of enriching specialised vocabulary.

Keywords: corporate term; human source domain; metaphorical term; metaphorisation

1 Introduction

As a cognitive phenomenon, metaphors have been the subject of extensive scholarly investigation since the early 1980s. The significant shift in our comprehension of metaphor precipitated by the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980/2003) has resulted in metaphor being characterised not merely as an ornamental part of language, but a foundational framework through which people conceptualise the world and their own activities (Denroche, 2024; Gibbs, 2008; Ptiček & Dobša, 2023). Metaphor helps to explain abstract phenomena and concepts in a more familiar and concrete way (Kövecses, 2010; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980/2003). Frequent metaphorical name transfer is observed within terminological systems, reflecting the ongoing formulation of new terms and their meanings through scientific re-evaluation of existing words (Celiešienė & Juzelėnienė, 2019; Gkalitsiou & Kotsopoulos, 2023; Khachmafova et al., 2021). This helps experts explain, simplify and transform complex scientific discourses into information that non-experts can understand (Silaški & Đurović, 2024). In certain situations the metaphorical method can allow to create terminological names that contain semantic expression elements (Sherizatova, 2019).

Previous work on metaphor from a discourse perspective has identified cognitive models mapped from the human source domain, like AN ABSTRACT COMPLEX SYSTEM IS THE HUMAN BODY, A BUILDING IS THE HUMAN BODY, SOCIETY IS A PERSON, COMPANY IS A PERSON (Kövecses, 2010), BRANDS ARE PEOPLE (Koller, 2009; Sun & Jiang, 2014), ECONOMY IS A PERSON (Silaški & Đurović, 2010), ECONOMY IS HUMAN (Xu et al., 2023), etc. Abstract complex systems, buildings, brands and economy are not humans; they are, however, endowed with human qualities such as a similar body,

physiological function and social attributes. The human source domain, in which human qualities are ascribed to nonhuman entities, is also known as personification. The human domain has been a significant source of models, metaphors, and analogies utilised to describe organisations (Kövecses, 2010). Educators and scholars frequently employ this metaphor in both subtle and overt ways.

Allred et al. (2005) discover that diversified corporations closely resemble human stepfamilies, stepfamily theory could offer novel managerial insights and recommendations. While Néron and Norman's (2008) study considers corporations as citizens, Dooley and Zimmerman (2003) conceptualise merger as marriage when analysing communication issues in post-merger integration within health care organisations. When comparing metaphors in reports of financial crisis in the English and Serbian press, Silaški and Đurović (2010) find that an economy is frequently compared to an individual who is afflicted with a range of ailments, from "catching flu" or "catching pneumonia" to being "in cardiac arrest". In addition, other research has explored the metaphor of corporate reputation (Davies et al., 2001), or corporate identity (Cornelissen & Harris, 2001), which sheds light on our theoretical understanding of corporate characteristics based on direct embodiment of our human experience of the real world.

A review of the literature has made it clear that existing studies have discovered a great variety of cognitive models as well as attributes projected from the human domain onto the corporate target domain. Prior research, however, paid less attention to specialised terminology and was more concerned with corporate discourses. The present paper is an attempt to fill this gap in the literature by drawing on the results of the cognitive mechanism of metaphorisation in corporate terms. The aim is to show how complex corporate terms can be represented through attributes of the human domain. In order to fulfil the aim of the study, the following two research questions are addressed:

1. What are the mapping principles between the human source domain and corporate target domain?
2. How frequent are corporate terms metaphorically nominated according to the attributes projected from the human source domain?

2 Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Metaphor Theory

In a conceptual system, specific concepts that emerge during world cognition and represent information about the surrounding world are distinguished (Terniievska, 2023). The theory of conceptual metaphor views metaphors as a cognitive process known as *mappings* – the conceptualisation of one conceptual domain in terms of another domain (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980/2003). The definition is further improved by Kövecses (2010), who claimed conceptual metaphor to be a systematic set of correspondences, or *mapping*, between the abstract domain (target) and a more concrete or well-understood domain (source). The most used convention for identifying conceptual metaphors is a formula signified in capitals in the form TARGET DOMAIN IS SOURCE DOMAIN or TARGET DOMAIN AS SOURCE DOMAIN (Kövecses, 2010; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980/2003), exemplifying the semantic practice of capitalizing terms to differentiate their meanings from language elements. There is no linguistic or conceptual constraint to stipulate that a specific domain can only be used as either the source or target domain (Zhao et al., 2022). It has also been clearly demonstrated that one concept can serve as the source or target domain in different image schemas (Ahrens, 2010). For example, the target domain of life is metaphorically conceptualised through several metaphorical source domains, including struggle/war, rollercoaster, game, treadmill, adventure, challenge, opportunity, gift, journey, theater, dream, and weather (Benczes et al., 2024).

2.2 Conceptual Metaphor in Terminology

Terminology is a general word referring to a collection of specialised words or meanings used in a given field (Ciobanu, 1997). Antia (2000, p. 6) refers to terms as "information and knowledge centers". Kageura (2002) states that a term is a lexical unit made up of one or more words that expresses a concept inside a certain domain. Common methods of term formation include creating new forms (derivation/ affixation,

compounding, abbreviated forms); using existing forms (conversion, terminologisation through metaphorisation or metonymisation), or translingual borrowings.

Metaphorisation in terminology refers to the process of verbally representing scientific knowledge in a way that reflects the mindset, professional expertise, language and cultural abilities of professionals. Metaphorisation helps to convey new concepts within a specific domain of expertise utilizing existing linguistic resources (Gorokhova & Kubyshko, 2020). Comprehending the significance of metaphorical interpretations in term nomination improves our comprehension of language and cognitive processes implicated in meaning creation (Zibin et al., 2024). As a result, metaphorical terms are chosen in specific discourses based on the similarity between two distinct subjects. This allows the features of one subject to be understood through the lens of another.

Previous studies on term nomination have provided valuable insights into the role of metaphorisation as a productive way to extend and enrich specialised vocabulary. Researchers have developed multiple models to better explain and enhance the process of term-nomination taking into consideration its characteristics. Studying computer networking terminology, Lombard (2005) discovers several metaphorical entailments such as *COMPUTER NETWORKS ARE BATTLEFIELDS*, *COMPUTER NETWORKS ARE WELL-ORGANIZED COMMUNITIES*, *COMPUTER NETWORKS ARE SECURED STRUCTURES*, etc. Alekseeva et al. (2020) investigate the metaphor cycle in a term-formation process related to the acquisition and development of professional knowledge. The authors conclude that it is possible to explain every phase of the “living knowledge” paradigm and highlight the quirks in how people conceptualise things. Furthermore, Khachmafova et al. (2021) identify several cognitive source domains for metaphorical terminology used in the oil-and-gas industry, including human beings, animals, spatial orientation, plants and insects, the sea, natural and physical occurrences, colors and shades, and weapons. When investigating the source domain of journey in forming business terminology, Hanh (2024a) identifies the derivative metaphor *COMPANIES ARE TRAVELERS* with numerous terms nominated from this metaphor (*industry leader*, *market pioneer*, *first mover advantages*, etc). In a similar vein, Hanh’s (2024b) study reveals that a great number of corporate terms are designated by mapping characteristics of buildings and military affairs onto business-related ones in the metaphors *COMPANIES ARE MILITARY FORCES* and *COMPANIES ARE BUILDINGS*. The findings in these studies strengthen the role of metaphorisation as a crucial part in creating specialised terms.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The present work followed the line of qualitative research and was mainly a descriptive study. The research methodology is grounded in the theory of conceptual metaphor proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980/2003). This methodology involves the technique of elucidating the cognitive mechanisms underlying corporate terms. We adopted the methodology of *lexical approach* proposed in Kövecses et al. (2024) to the analysis of conceptual metaphors in the collected corporate terms. In addition, statistical analysis and categorisation are employed in this study to achieve the set objectives. Categorisation helps to classify the primary metaphor into sub-groups according to its mappings while the statistical analysis helps to identify metaphorical salience in the corpus. The processing of concrete and abstract senses relies on their prominence in usage, which is determined by factors such as their frequency, familiarity, conventionality, and prototypicality (Giora, 1997).

The research procedure is as follows: First, the metaphorical corporate terms will be identified. Second, the selected corporate terms with human metaphors will be classified into categories or subcategories according to different correspondences between the two domains, and then underlying major themes and mappings will be discussed. Third, statistical analysis is carried out to identify metaphorical salience based on the quantity of correspondences as well as the frequency of metaphorical elements and metaphorical terms in the collected corpus. The study adheres to cognitive linguistics norms by using small capitals for the statement of conceptual metaphors, and italics for metaphorical terms. For example, in the metaphor *CORPORATE CHARACTERISTICS ARE HUMAN CHARACTERISTICS*, metaphorical terms like

corporate entity, *corporate greed*, *brand health check-up* are nominated from human attributes with such metaphorical elements as “entity”, “greed”, “health”.

3.2 Research Corpus

The study is based on a corpus of 299 metaphorical corporate terms, the compilation of which follows the purposeful sampling technique. To avoid ambiguity and intuitive judgments while assessing the basic meaning of terms, the research utilised several business dictionaries to acquire the corpus for analysis, specifically *A Dictionary of Business and Management* (Law, 2009), *Cambridge Business English Dictionary* (Combley, 2011), *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English* (Hornby, 2015). Nevertheless, these dictionaries still contain a relatively small number of metaphorical corporate terms. Thus, the present study gathers more data from other business textbooks (see, e.g., David, 2014; Gaughan, 2018; Moeller & Brady, 2014; to name but a few), and realistic business discourses to ensure contextual richness and real-world relevance of the findings. The explanations of certain corporate terms are derived from websites like Investopedia.com, financestrategists.com, etc.

3.3 Metaphor Identification Procedure

In order to assure the research’s standardisation and comprehensiveness, the basis of the identification procedure of the present study is MIPVU (Steen et al., 2010). MIPVU – a commonly recognised and employed method – consists of a set of rules for identifying all metaphorical terms connected to cross-domain mapping. This helps to explain the process of recognizing metaphors at the language level.

The adaptive metaphor identification procedure in the present study is as follows: (1) looking up terms in business dictionaries, books, discourses and identifying terms with potential metaphorical nomination; (2) determining whether there is contrast and comparison between the corporate meaning and a more basic meaning denoting human beings (3) determining metaphorical words and phrases, and identifying if they fit in the source and target domains; (4) naming *metaphorical terms* – those that consist of one or more *metaphorical elements* (or metaphor-related words). The contextual meaning employed in the study is the *minimal context*, which means that the contextual meaning is derived solely from the corporate terms themselves.

4 Results and Discussion

Corporate terms with human metaphors can be classified into categories in terms of different attributes mapped from the human domain onto the corporate target domain, which can be visualised through the mapping scheme between source domain and target domain in Table 1.

Table 1. Mapping scheme from human source domain onto corporate target domain.

Source domain’s attributes (human being)	Target domain’s attributes (Company)	Number of terms	Frequency (%)
Human life cycle	→ Corporate life cycle	36	12.04
Human characteristics	→ Corporate characteristics	125	41.81
Human activities	→ Corporate activities	46	15.38
Human relationships	→ Corporate relationships	92	30.77
Total		299	100

Table 1 presents the mapping scheme from human source domain onto corporate target domain. The collected corpus demonstrates a set of correspondences between the source and target domain. Accordingly, human characteristics are the most salient attribute to be mapped onto corporate concepts, with 125 corporate terms built from this source, accounting for 41.81% of the total metaphorical terms. This mapping

scheme makes up more than four times as many metaphorical terms projected from the human life cycle attribute, which only accounts for 36 metaphorical terms, or 12.04%. Human relationships fill the second slot in metaphorizing corporate terms, with 92 terms created from this mapping. The human activity sphere comes in third with 46 metaphorical terms, making up 15.38% of the total corpus. We will now take a closer look at each metaphor.

4.1 Conceptual metaphor CORPORATE LIFE CYCLE IS HUMAN LIFE CYCLE

The vast amount of rich knowledge we have about the human life cycle is one basic constituent mapping from the human domain onto the corporate domain. Life cycle refers to “the series of forms into which a living thing changes as it develops” (Hornby, 2015, p. 873). The *organisational life cycle* is the life cycle of an organisation from its creation to its termination (“Organisational life cycle”, 2025). The abstract concept of corporate life cycle can be comprehended via the concrete ideas of human life cycle. Let us see the perceived structural similarities between the two spheres.

Individuals progress through many phases of growth and maturation within the human life cycle. Over time, people undergo growth and experience bodily change. The human body experiences several changes and developments over the course of its life span. Like the human life cycle, a corporate life cycle includes several stages of growth and development that take place from its start-up to its end, and these can happen in various ways. The stages of a business life cycle are start-up, young growth, high growth, mature growth to decline stage. We can find examples of direct transfer of the human life cycle concept onto the corporate life cycle, such as *organisational life cycle*, *organisational development process*, *brand life cycle*, *embryonic company*, etc.

Because the corporate life cycle is largely comprehended via human metaphors, it is not surprising that, etymologically, the terms *mature corporation*, *mature growth company*, *mature corporate governance* derive from the word “mature” which is defined as “the stage when a person is fully grown and developed, or when a child or young person behaves in a sensible way, like an adult” (Hornby, 2015, p. 932). The natural growth of human beings is like the abstract progress or development of corporations. Consequently, terms like “grow”, “growth”, “growing”, “mature”, literally used to explain human growth, are utilised to describe corporate development in such terms as *growing corporation*, *corporate growth strategy*, *organic growth*, *inorganic growth*, *centralised growth strategy*, etc. Knowledge of an organisation’s current position or stage of development can assist top managers in comprehending the connections between organisational life cycle, competitive strategy, and performance. It is worth noting that the comparison of the lifecycle of a company to the human lifecycle, comes with the important distinction that a company does not have to die but can instead be revitalised.

These metaphorical terms demonstrate that many elements of corporate concepts come from the source domain of human beings and are not preexisting. Table 2 presents the frequency of the metaphorical corporate terms mapped from the human life cycle attribute, as below:

Table 2. Metaphorical elements activated in the conceptual model CORPORATE LIFE CYCLE IS HUMAN LIFE CYCLE.

Source domain	Metaphorical element	Number of terms	Metaphorical element	Number of terms	Target domain
Human life cycle	development	5	growth	15	Corporate life cycle
	embryonic	2	life cycle	5	
	grow	1	mature	4	
	growing	3	mature growth	1	
Total		36			

As can be seen in Table 2, we have a great deal of rich knowledge about the stages in the human life cycle, and, consequently, we can use this knowledge to develop corporate terminology with 36 metaphorical terms denoting the corporate life cycle. What stands out in the table is that the metaphorical element “growth”

is the most salient, appearing in 15 corporate terms, while the least salient elements are the verb “grow” appearing only once and the adjective “embryonic” appearing twice. Other metaphorical elements like “development”, “life cycle”, “mature”, are found to have quite low frequency in metaphorisation, being utilised in three to five corporate terms.

4.2 Conceptual metaphor CORPORATE CHARACTERISTICS ARE HUMAN CHARACTERISTICS

Our knowledge of human characteristics serves as a natural and logical foundation for the comprehension of the more abstract domain of the corporate features. The correspondence of the aspects of companies and human beings is achieved via detailed mappings.

Firstly, when projecting human features onto the target corporate domain, companies are often identified as citizens. Referring to corporations as citizens does not imply that corporations possess legal citizenship but rather suggests that their nature or behaviour can be analogously compared to that of citizens or citizenship. The term “*corporate citizenship*” is a metaphor for business participation in society, employed in the examination of organisational life and the portrayal of business images and brands. “Name”, “identity”, “identification”, “responsibility”, “citizen”, “look”, “sovereignty”, ... are metaphorically used to describe companies as citizens, which can be found in corporate terms like *corporate identity*, *corporate look*, *corporate moral responsibility*, *corporate identification*, *corporate sovereignty*, *corporate personhood*, and so on. In addition to profit maximisation, companies prioritise their *corporate social responsibility* initiatives to enhance their *corporate image* and *reputation* (Hung, 2025).

Secondly, *corporate personality* is conventionally viewed as human personality. The word “personality” is defined in Hornby (2015, p. 1110) as “the various aspects of a person’s character that combine to make them different from other people”. In business, *corporate personality* is the fact stated by the law that gives a corporate entity personhood distinct from its members. Adjectives literally used to describe human personalities or qualities such as “closed”, “dormant”, “defensive”, “greedy”, “rich”, “visionary”, ... are utilised in enriching corporate vocabulary, resulting in new metaphorical terms like *visionary company*, *greedy corporation*, *defensive company*, etc. Additionally, many nouns that originally explain human personalities, like “intelligence”, “reputation”, “vision”, “character”, “experience”, “personality”, “loyalty”, “hospitality”, “attitude”, “greed”, etc. are utilised in building corporate terminology. As a result, a large number of corporate terms are formed due to this metaphorical mechanism, for instance, *corporate greed*, *corporate morale*, *corporate experience repository*, *corporate hospitality*, *corporate social responsibility*, *trust corporation*, etc.

Thirdly, *corporate strength* is metaphorically described as human physical strength. Analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of an organisation is essential for managers and strategists to evaluate their corporate comparative advantages, from which they will decide on implementing the most appropriate strategies for the organisations to fulfil their objectives. Basically, strength is defined as “the quality of being physically strong, or the ability that something has to resist force or hold heavy weights without breaking or being damaged” (Hornby, 2015, p. 1496) while weakness refers to the “lack of physical strength, or lack of power, influence or strength of character” (Hornby, 2015, p. 1703). Thinking about the abstract concept of *corporate strength* is facilitated by the more concrete concept of human physical strength. In this case, certain properties of human physical strength reflected in their strengths, weaknesses, health, power, etc. are mapped onto companies as a target domain. Some corporate terms built according to this metaphorisation are *corporate health ethic*, *corporate strength*, *organisational health management*, *brand health check-up*, *brand health index*, *corporate power*, etc. For example, organisational health is the efficacy of an organisation in rallying around a common vision and adapting to change in order to achieve a company’s objectives. Put simply, it refers to a company’s ability to adjust to an environment that is ever changing. A *healthy organisation* operates effectively in all internal processes until an internal or external incident affects one or more organisational processes. *Healthy companies* dramatically outperform their competitors. When a person gets illnesses or injuries, he or she may need to see a doctor, likewise, when a company is in weak condition, it may need to find a “*company doctor*” – a person who is employed by a company that

is in difficulty to help it solve its problems and become successful again (Combley, 2011). The etymologically original meaning of the word “anorexia” is “a serious mental illness causing somebody to control the amount of food they eat in an extreme way that leads to dangerous weight loss” (Hornby, 2015, p. 52). This word is utilised in the metaphorical term *corporate anorexia* implying a malaise that affects businesses after a severe cost-cutting phase (Law, 2009). The firm’s capacity to expand production in order to sustain its competitive position in the market could potentially be hindered by an inappropriate emphasis on cost reduction through downsizing, leading to the removal of workers who have made significant long-term contributions to the company’s sustainability.

Fourthly, corporate competence is often understood in terms of human competence. Common ways of comprehending human competence involve the concepts of “competence”, “competency”, “capability”, “agility”. These words are then used metaphorically to describe the competence of organisations with the emergence of corporate terms like *corporate core competency*, *corporate capacity*, *organisational capability model*, etc. *Organisational agility* refers to the capacity of an organisation to swiftly and effectively navigate, adjust, and transform in the face of a volatile or rapidly changing environment. “Competency” is defined as “the ability to do something well; or a skill that you need in a particular job or for a particular task” (Hornby, 2015, p. 298). The metaphorisation of this word helps to form such term as *corporate core competencies* – which are the resources and capabilities that comprise the strategic advantages of a business (Twin, 2024).

As demonstrated in the above mapping and examples, our knowledge of human characteristics helps us understand the concept of corporate characteristics. The frequency of the metaphorical terms belonging to the conceptual model CORPORATE CHARACTERISTICS ARE HUMAN CHARACTERISTICS can be observed in Table 3.

As clearly shown in Table 3, our central knowledge is captured in the mappings that characterise the metaphor CORPORATE CHARACTERISTICS ARE HUMAN CHARACTERISTICS which helps to generate 125 corporate terms. The most salient feature to be mapped onto the target domain is “corporate personality”, with the utilisation of 25 metaphorical elements in forming 52 metaphorical terms, twice as many as those mapped from the human strength sphere. The aspect of citizens takes second place with the designation of 38 corporate terms. In contrast, human competence is found to be the least significant source of nominating corporate terms, with only nine terms metaphorically nominated from this feature.

4.3 Conceptual metaphor CORPORATE ACTIVITIES ARE HUMAN ACTIVITIES

Another metaphor identified in the collected corpus is CORPORATE ACTIVITIES ARE HUMAN ACTIVITIES. When mapping this attribute onto the target domain, a number of metaphorical expressions view corporate activities as human activities. The concept of corporate activities is structuralised as the activities of people, as realised by expressions basically used to explain human beings. The verbs “imitate”, “protect”, “defend”, “attack”, “control”, “hold”, “react”, “operate”, “share”, etc. literally indicate human actions, which are also utilised to describe actions of companies. Similarly, nouns denoting human activities like “protection”, “imitation”, “agreement”, “reaction”, “action” are used metaphorically to enrich corporate vocabulary (Hornby, 2015, p. 1496). Good examples for this mapping are metaphorical terms like *inter-organisational imitation*, *organisation agreement*, *corporation agreement*, *corporate takeover defence*, *antitakeover defence*, *kamikaze defence*, *white knight defence*, *corporate takeover*, *hostile takeover*, *takeover tactic*, *antitakeover measure*, etc. These terms suggest that, somehow, corporate activities are conceptually equated with the activities in the human domain.

As illustrated by these examples, our understanding of corporate activities is further clarified by the explanation of the concept of human activities. The frequency of metaphorical elements in the conceptual model CORPORATE ACTIVITIES ARE HUMAN ACTIVITIES is shown in Table 4.

As can be observed in Table 4, the abstract concept of corporate activities can be comprehended via the concrete concept of human activities. The correspondences between the two domains lay the foundations for the use of this metaphor in creating 46 new corporate terms. Overall, the metaphorisation from the attribute of “activity” between the two domains is quite a rich source of corporate term generation.

Table 3. Metaphorical elements activated in the conceptual model CORPORATE CHARACTERISTICS ARE HUMAN CHARACTERISTICS.

Source domain	Metaphorical element	Number of terms	Metaphorical element	Number of terms	Target domain
Citizen	backbone	2	individual	1	Company
	body	1	knight	5	
	citizen	1	look	1	
	citizenship	2	name	4	
	democracy	2	persona	2	
	entity	2	personhood	1	
	identification	4	sovereignty	1	
	identity	5	voice	2	
	image	2			
Total			38		
Human personality	aesthetic	2	hospitality	1	Corporate personality
	closed	2	intelligence	2	
	defensive	2	interest	1	
	dormant	1	loyalty	3	
	greed	1	morale	1	
	greedy	1	performance	3	
	rich	2	personality	4	
	visionary	1	philosophy	2	
	attitude	1	reputation	4	
	behaviour	2	responsibility	3	
	characteristics	2	trust	2	
	disloyalty	2	vision	4	
	experience	3			
Total			52		
Human strength	anorexia	1	power	3	Corporate strength
	anorexic	1	recovery	2	
	doctor	1	slenderness	1	
	health	7	strength	5	
	healthy	2	weakness	3	
Total			26		
Human competence	ability	1	competence	2	Corporate competence
	agility	1	competency	2	
	capability	3			
Total			9		
Total			125		

4.4 Conceptual metaphor CORPORATE RELATIONSHIPS ARE HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

The extensive everyday knowledge we have about a variety of human relationships becomes a source of naming relationships among companies, generating a great deal of corporate jargon. This seems to be characterised by the following set of correspondences between constituent elements of the source and those of the target.

Firstly, corporations are conceptualised as families. We possess a great amount of rich knowledge concerning families. As a result of projecting this human attribute onto the target domain, corporations can be perceived as being made up of individuals that are equivalent to members of a family. Families and corporations exhibit numerous analogous traits and confront comparable tasks and issues. Corporations are not commonly seen as individuals. Instead, they are perceived as a collective of individuals with hierarchical and reciprocal interconnections, like a family. Similar to human families, the connection between a *parent company* and its divisions and subsidiaries (children) can be established through several means, such as internal formation or acquisition.

Expressions that literally describe the hierarchy in a family such as “parent”, “family”, “member”, etc. are employed to denote corporations in metaphorical terms like *parent brand*, *parent company*, *family brand*, *family brand name*, *corporate membership*, etc. *Parent companies* can adopt either a proactive or

Table 4. Metaphorical elements activated in the conceptual model CORPORATE ACTIVITIES ARE HUMAN ACTIVITIES.

Source domain	Metaphorical element	Number of terms	Metaphorical element	Number of terms	Target domain
Human activities	acquire	3	progress	1	Corporate activities
	acquisition	1	protect	1	
	action	1	protection	1	
	agreement	1	provide	1	
	attack	1	react	1	
	control	2	reaction	1	
	defence	10	return	1	
	distribute	1	run	1	
	driven	3	share	1	
	hold	1	sponsor	1	
	holding	1	start-up	3	
	imitate	1	supply	1	
	imitation	2	support	1	
	learning	1	takeover	1	
	operating	2			
Total		125			

a passive approach in managing their subsidiaries, depending on the extent of managerial autonomy granted to subsidiary managers. However, they will always retain a certain degree of active control.

Another piece of evidence for the metaphor CORPORATE RELATIONSHIPS ARE HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS is that merger and acquisition (M&A) is similar to a marriage, while divestitures are conventionally viewed as divorces. The correlation between business mergers and acquisitions, divestitures, marriages and stepfamilies is fascinating. The underlying premise of this metaphor is that there is a transfer of semantic properties linked with marriage to refer to a *merger and acquisition*, which is an occasion when two or more companies or organisations join together to make one bigger company, or the process of a larger company buying a smaller company (Combley, 2011). In a merger and acquisition scenario, the bidder and target corporations typically assume the role of parent entities. The acquired firm takes on a subordinate position, with its subsidiaries and employees playing the role of stepchildren.

Additionally, we know that mergers and acquisitions undergo distinct phases, each characterised by unique expectations from top-level executives and varying apprehensions among employees, which become apparent at different points in time. Both marriages and mergers go through several stages, including partner selection, planning, the actual event, the honeymoon period, and the subsequent need to address any emerging issues. Following a merger or acquisition, a divestiture may take place if a business unit is considered unnecessary, if selling off the unit enhances the firm's sale value, or if a court mandates the sale of a business unit to enhance market competition. Consequently, divestitures are conceptualised as divorces.

Words that literally explain a human relationship, like “break-up”, “consolidation”, “separate”, “separation”, “split up” are employed in metaphorizing corporate terms like *corporate consolidation*, *corporate separation*, *break-up*, *split-up*, etc. For example, the term “split up” is defined as “to leave somebody and stop having a relationship with them” (Hornby, 2015, p. 1457). *Split-up* is a term denoting “a corporate action in which a single company splits into two or more independent, separately run companies” (Bloomenthal, 2024). Upon the completion of such events, shareholders have the option to exchange their shares in the original firm for shares in one of the new corporations. Similarly, the term *break-up* is used to describe a division of a company into smaller parts, or the end of a business or a relationship (Combley, 2011).

Last but not least, regarding metaphorical conceptualisation, the relationship between a company and its external stakeholders is often identified as human social relationships. Stakeholders can be internal or external to an organisation. Internal stakeholders are individuals who have a direct link with a firm and hence have a vested interest in its activities. External stakeholders refer to individuals or groups who are not directly affiliated with the firm but are typically affected by the company's activities. Suppliers, creditors, distributors, competitors, the government and public groups are all considered external stakeholders.

Our knowledge of human social relationships enriches what we understand about corporate stakeholders, since human relationships are mapped onto the relationships of corporations. Accordingly, literal expressions that explain relationships among people are utilised in metaphorisation of corporate terminology. Good examples of terms built according to this sub-model are *global strategic alliance*, *external cooperation*, *strategic partnership*, *tactical supplier*, *corporate partnership*, *corporate-startup collaboration*, *corporate partner*, etc. For example, a *corporate alliance* is a strategic partnership between companies to achieve a defined set of objectives or address a crucial economic requirement, while maintaining their own identities as independent organisations. We interpret the term *competing organisations* as being two rival organisations engaged in fierce competition to protect their respective market positions and gain market share by undermining each other.

As the preceding examples indicate, the full and coherent entailment potential of human relationships is projected onto the target domain of corporate concepts. The metaphorical elements forming corporate terms activated from the human relationship attribute are shown in Table 5 below:

Table 5. Metaphorical elements activated in the conceptual model CORPORATE RELATIONSHIPS ARE HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS.

Source domain	Metaphorical element	Number of terms	Metaphorical element	Number of terms	Target domain
Family	family	4	membership	3	Corporation
	member	1	parent	4	
	Total	12			
Marriage/ divorce	break-up	1	joint	1	Merger and acquisition/ divestiture
	consolidation	3	separate	1	
	hug	1	separation	2	
	incorporate	1	separateness	1	
	incorporation	1	split-up	2	
	Total	14			
Human social relationship	acquirer	1	counterpart	2	Corporate relationship with stakeholders
	competing	3	follower	3	
	competitive	3	leader	6	
	conflict	2	nominee	3	
	cooperative	3	partner	1	
	countervailing	2	predecessor	2	
	hostile	2	rival	2	
	leading	4	collaboration	2	
	partnering	1	competition	2	
	rivalry	1	cooperation	3	
	compete	1	coordination	3	
	cooperate	1	co-partnership	1	
	dispute	2	leadership	3	
	alliance	3	partnership	4	
	challenger	1	relation	1	
	competitor	1	relationship	3	
	coordinator	2			
	Total	66			
Total			92		

As pointed out in Table 5, the metaphorical mappings in this conceptual metaphor constitute a large portion of corporate terminology, with 92 metaphorical terms. Specifically, the correspondence between human social relationships and corporate relationships with stakeholders is the most significant source, with the creation of 66 metaphorical terms from 33 metaphorical elements. In contrast, “corporations are families” is the least salient with only 12 corporate terms metaphorically nominated from this sub-model. A similar small number goes with the mapping from the marriage and divorce attribute onto corporate merger and acquisition or divestiture, which nominates 14 terms. By mapping the relationship attribute of the human domain onto that of the corporate target domain, the abstract concepts become more concrete and

well-understood. From this discussion, it can be concluded that abstract corporate terms are comprehended by terms denoting the concrete human domain because there were preexisting similarities between elements in the two domains, which are drawn from people's experiences in the physical world.

5 Conclusion

In light of the discussion so far, the study's findings are metaphors grouped into four categories: human life cycle, human characteristics, human activities, and human relationships. These attributes are mapped onto those of companies and nominate corporate terms describing the corporate life cycle, corporate characteristics, corporate activities and corporate relationships, respectively. The study discovers that the richest source of term nomination is the metaphor CORPORATE CHARACTERISTICS ARE HUMAN CHARACTERISTICS, while the metaphor CORPORATE LIFE CYCLE IS HUMAN LIFE CYCLE makes the least contribution to the metaphorisation of corporate terms.

Although companies are not living entities, they are attributed with human-like characteristics. The human source domain is also referred to as personification, a process in which nonhuman entities are attributed with human attributes. These features from the human source domain are activated and mapped onto the corporate target domain, leading the target domain to bear certain attributes of the source domain. The notion of human beings is such a good and natural source domain for the target concepts of companies through multiple detailed mappings: the abstract development of corporations is similar to the natural growth of human beings; corporate condition corresponds to human condition, companies are often conventionally viewed as citizens; corporate personality is often understood in terms of human personality; corporate strength is metaphorically described as human physical strength; corporate competence is conventionally viewed as human competence; corporate activities are largely understood by means of human activities; corporations are conceptualised as families; merger and acquisition is similar to a marriage, while divestitures are viewed as divorces; the relationship between a company and its external stakeholders is often identified as human social relationships. It is also worth noting that the human domain owns some typical attributes such as life cycle, activities, social relationships, the human body like the respiratory system, organ system, reproductive system, nervous system, etc. but not all these attributes are mapped onto the corporate target domain. This exemplifies the nature of partial mapping that has been documented in the theory of conceptual metaphors (Kövecses, 2010), as previously discussed.

The ubiquity of human-domain metaphors in corporate terminology indicates a cultural propensity to humanise companies by portraying them as social actors with moral responsibilities, personalities, and life cycles. By making abstract corporate organisations relatable and ethically responsible, much like individuals within a community, this framing aligns with a human-centered worldview. While building, military or journey metaphors place businesses in contexts of construction, warfare (Hanh, 2024b) or travel (Hanh, 2024a), the human metaphor places them in a relational and moral framework, influencing expectations for long-term corporate responsibility, behaviour, and longevity. When combined, these source domains provide a more thorough conceptual map of the metaphorical resources that underlie the naming and framing of corporate terms, showing how each source domain provides a unique cultural lens that is used to interpret the corporate life cycle, identity and activities. These findings solidify earlier conclusions which highlighted metaphorisation as an effective method for creating new terms and enriching specialised vocabulary, by Alekseeva et al. (2020), Hanh (2024a, 2024b), and Lombard (2005), to name but a few.

There are some limitations in the present study. Firstly, the study of metaphors in corporate terminology is only restricted to a small number of terms. Additionally, there are many other source domains in nominating corporate terms, such as plants, animals, ... which are extremely rich in metaphors. Therefore, we suggest that, accordingly, future researchers can benefit by focusing on the cognitive mechanisms of mapping domains onto the nomination of corporate metaphorical terms, which seems very promising.

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The publication was financed at the author's expense.

The author declares that she has no competing interests.

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Publisher: Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw, Poland
Publishing history: Received 2024-08-01; Accepted 2025-07-26; Published 2025-12-31.