Mirko Casagranda

Migrants or Refugees?
The Discursive Representation of Climate-induced Migration
on *BBC News Online*

Abstract: The denomination 'climate' or 'environmental refugee' has been extremely popular in news discourse even though the UN Refugee Convention has not extended the refugee status to people living in deteriorating environmental conditions. As such, the term has been misused and has led to a terminological confusion that strengthens the humanitarian frame through which climate-induced migration is often construed. By adopting a historical-discourse approach, the paper analyses the referential strategies employed in a corpus of 42 articles published between 1999 and 2017 on *BBC News Online* and demonstrates that, by preferring 'refugee' to 'migrant', the Corporation frames social actors from a humanitarian perspective that backgrounds migrants and represents climate-induced migration as an economic opportunity.

Keywords: *climate-induced migration, migrants, refugees, CDA, BBC News Online*

1. Introduction

On 20 August 2015, *Al Jazeera* announced on its website that from that moment the network would stop using the term 'migrant' when talking about the crisis in the Mediterranean and employ the word 'refugee' instead.[1] According to the author of the article, Barry Malone, "[t]he word migrant has become a largely inaccurate umbrella term" and it is "no longer fit for purpose when it comes to describing the horror unfolding in the Mediterranean".[2] In his view, it is an example of reductive terminology that "has evolved from its dictionary definitions into a tool that dehumanises and distances, a blunt pejorative [that] strips suffering people of voice" and reduces them to mere numbers.

By focusing on the denotative and connotative power of words, *Al Jazeera* exposed the epistemological gap and the ontological tension existing between terms and referents, and stirred a response from other media, which were faced with the ethical challenge to (re)define their position on how migration should be addressed in their news coverage. The following day, during a radio broadcasting that was filmed and posted on *BBC News Online*, Jonathan Munro, the Corporation's Head of Newsgathering, commented on the issue as follows:

> I don't think there's anything wrong actually with using the word 'migrant' and the word 'refugee'. The vast majority of people that we're seeing coming through those borders whether on land or by sea are both migrants and refugees. The issue, and Barry touched upon it, is more about the dehumanisation of people and the way we cover it, which isn't just a language issue. When you've seen 40,000 people coming through over a period, a relatively short period of a number of weeks, what we're hearing on our radios and seeing on our screens are images and sounds that portray the volume of people; and the way to dehumanise them is just to do that; and the way to keep them as human beings – and this is a much more important point it seems to me than the vocabulary – is to talk to them, to hear their stories as individuals,

as human beings as opposed to as part of a trend.... It's that humanity, which is actually more important than a sort of, you know, vocabulary boundaries that some broadcasters much used to put in place. We're not in the game of saying certain words aren't appropriate as long as they're accurate and they reflect the story. The more important thing for us is to keep the human beings at the heart of it.[3]

By stressing the importance of humanity – especially its emotional side – in reporting stories of migrants across the Mediterranean, Munro dismisses the power of language and seems to underestimate how the labels used to address and refer to people shape their identity and tell something about what reporters think about them. By saying that it does not matter whether they are called migrants or refugees, Munro implies that the terms can be interchangeably used in news reporting. In other words, he seems to forget that the nomination strategies adopted in news discourse contribute to the dehumanisation of people.

Even though the debate ensuing from *Al Jazeera*'s statement is about migration in general, its terminological implications can be extended to climate-induced migration and considered as the starting point of an analysis of the discursive strategies employed on *BBC News Online* to discursively construe the people that are displaced due to climate change. In order to do so, this paper mainly adopts a discourse-historical approach with the aim of assessing the linguistic realisations of the representations of social actors as refugees or migrants in a corpus of 42 news articles from the years 1999-2017.

2. Setting the Context: Terminology and Climate-induced Migration

Back in the 1960s, Murray Edelman was one of the first scholars to acknowledge the power of political terms, which he labelled as 'condensation symbols'.[4] The lexicon about migration employed in the news media mostly comes from legal and political discourse and often reflects – and magnifies – the ideological stances of policy circles. As recent studies have found, the choice between 'migrant' and 'refugee' in the debate on climate-induced migration is based on terminological confusion.[5] It seems that there is a parallelism between the fact that climate change is a contested science – with often biased representations in the media – and the blurred terminology used to refer to displaced people.

According to the 2010 Introductory Note to the "Convention and Protocol Regarding the Status of Refugees", "[a] refugee … is someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their own country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion".[6] Even though climate change and deteriorating environmental conditions may force people out of a country, from a legal point of view they cannot be considered refugees as environmental persecution is difficult to prove and "it would be impossible to demonstrate a direct causal relationship between the carbon emissions of one state and

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[3] Transcription of an excerpt from a filmed radio broadcasting featuring the *BBC*'s Head of Newsgathering, Jonathan Munro, published on 21 August 2015 with the title "Why the BBC Uses the Word 'Migrant'", https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p030bn5m.

[4] Murray Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985 [1964]), 6.

[5] See Carol Farbotko, "Representation and Misrepresentation of Climate Migrants", in Benoît Mayer and François Crépeau, eds., *Research Handbook on Climate Change, Migration and the Law* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2017), 67-81; Katherine E. Russo, "Climate-induced Migration: The Evaluation of Terms in a European Commission Institutional Genre Network", in Jana Altmanova et al., eds., *Terminology* and *Discourse/ Terminologie et Discours* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2018), 363-390.

[6] UNHCR, "Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees" (Geneva: UNHCR Communications and Public Information Service, 2010), 3, http://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10. Whereas the "Convention" dates back to 1951, the "Protocol" entered into force in 1967.

the specific damage threatened to another because of rising sea levels".[7] Despite the lack of legal protection for climate displaced people who decide to appeal to the refugee designation,[8] the media and several international organisations have persisted in using the term 'refugee'. This may be due to the fact that "the system of migration governance ... is much less institutionalised and has fewer internationally accepted norms and frameworks", which may account for the popular resonance of the term 'climate change refugee'.[9]

The two terminological choices, i.e. 'migrant' and 'refugee', stand for a larger debate on two competing discourses that construe climate policies and the role of migration in two different – and sometimes opposite – ways, which are synthesised by Felli as follows:

> Whereas climate refugees were depicted as (potential) helpless victims of climate change-induced *forced* migration, the language of climate migration as adaptation radically transforms the location of social agency and, consequently, the responsibility for climate change consequences. Rather than understanding 'climate refugees' as victims of climate change produced by industrialised countries and, thus, as in need of justice (which could take the form of funding for adaptation), these individuals are turned, through a 'positive story', into entrepreneurial migrants who not only can lift themselves out of poverty but may also contribute to the 'resilience' of their 'vulnerable' communities. Climate migration is no longer a 'forced' process but becomes a *strategy* of adaptation to climate change, albeit a strategy that requires constant monitoring and management.[10]

Felli postulates a shift in discursive practices and nomination strategies: 'refugees' are seen as a failure of both mitigation and adaptation to climate change, whereas migration is presented as a successful strategy of adaptation. According to the scholar, this is in line with the nature of neoliberal capitalism which fosters a representation of the individual as an entrepreneurial subject who is willing to improve his/her condition by entering the mechanism of capitalist production.[11] Consequently, adaptation itself evolves from a collective transformation of the environment (mainly based on mitigation) to individual resilience.[12]

Recent studies have found that when the term 'refugee' is used, the image that has been construed is that of innocent people from the poor south of the world suffering from the consequences of greenhouse gasses and climate change they have not caused.[13] Even the UN has depicted refugees as helpless victims of climate change who are in need of foreign assistance.[14] Such vulnerability narrations generate a humanitarian imperative that is nevertheless unable to prevent them from being

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[7] Simon Behrman and Avidan Kent, "Overcoming the Legal Impasse? Setting the Scene", in Simon Behrman and Avidan Kent, eds., *Climate Refugees: Beyond the Legal Impasse?* (London: Routledge, 2018), 5.

[8] Maxine Burkett, "Justice and Climate Migration: The Importance of Nomenclature in the Discourse on Twenty-first Century Mobility", in Behrman and Kent, eds., *Climate Refugees*, 74.

[9] Elizabeth Ferris, "Governance and Climate Change-induced Mobility: International and Regional Frameworks", in Dimitra Manou et al., eds., *Climate Change, Migrations and Human Rights: Law and Policy Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2017), 12.

[10] Romain Felli, "Managing Climate Insecurity by Ensuring Continuous Capital Accumulation: 'Climate Refugees' and 'Climate Migrants'", *New Political Economy*, 18.3 (2013), 350.

[11] See also Giovanni Bettini, "Climate Migration as an Adaptation Strategy: De-securitizing Climate-induced Migration or Making the Unruly Governable?", *Critical Studies on Security*, 2.2 (2014), 180-195.

[12] For further details on the debate on the types of climate change adaptation see Jonathan Verschuuren, ed., *Research Handbook on Climate Change Adaptation Law* (Cheltenham: Edward Edgar, 2013).

[13] See, among others, Felli "Managing Climate Insecurity"; Russo, "Floating Signifiers, Transnational Affect Flows: Climate-induced Migrants in Australian News Discourse", in Andrew Baldwin and Bettini, eds., *Life Adrift: Climate Change, Migration, Critique* (New York: Rowland and Littlefield, 2017), 195-210.

[14] See Karen McNamara, "Conceptualising Discourses on Environmental Refugees at the United Nations", *Population and Environment*, 29.1 (2007), 12-24.

transformed into a threat or seen as perpetrators of the environmental degradation they have not contributed to create:

> These narratives suggest that people in the South are not able to preserve their environment or adapt to changes. Once the environment is degraded, they will move to another place and continue the process.... This reinforces the idea that migration should be avoided and sustainable development promoted to keep people in their original locations. Rather than victims, migrants are seen as perpetrators.[15]

The discourse on climate migrants, on the contrary, construes migration as a voluntary adaptation strategy supported by migration management and migrants as active agents rather than victims. Felli claims that migrants are defined as 'adaptable subjects', which means that the burden of adaptation is theirs. As such, adaptation equals local coping mechanisms, which also means that international institutions like the United Nations are relieved of their (moral) duty to develop international mechanisms to protect them. Like a serpent swallowing its own tail, the failure to redefine the term 'refugee' within the UN Refugee Convention is thus justified: being unable to extend it, the UN is also incapable of providing effective solutions to the 'refugee' crisis and is thus 'forced' to leave the burden of adaptation to the people who are directly affected by climate change.

It was only after 2007, when it was finally redefined as an adaptation strategy at the 94th session of the IOM Council, that the concept of 'climate migration' was disseminated through reports, press releases and conferences. The IOM has promoted this terminology since then, even though the UNHCR has framed the issue in humanitarian terms, which has resulted – again – in depicting migration as a failure (and not as a form) of adaptation. Also 2010 proved to be a watershed year when the Cancun Adaptation Framework was adopted and the notion of "climate change induced displacement, migration and planned relocation" introduced. As a consequence, the term 'climate refugee' was replaced in official documents and avoided in all UNCCC subsequent meetings.

According to Felli, the term 'climate migration' is being increasingly used in the English-speaking press and is growing much faster than 'climate refugee'. Such trend was confirmed also in the 2015 report "Press Coverage of the Refugee and Migrant Crisis in the EU" commissioned by the UNHCR, where the data analysed by the Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies show that, unlike in Germany and Sweden, in the UK (and in Italy) 'migrant' is used more often than 'refugee'. This, however, is only apparently neutral since:

> coverage in the United Kingdom was the most negative. Despite the presence of newspapers such as *The Guardian* and *Daily Mirror*, both of which were sympathetic to refugees, the right-wing press in the United Kingdom expressed a hostility towards refugees and migrants which was unique. Whilst newspapers in all countries featured anti-refugee and anti-migrant perspectives, what distinguished the right of centre press in the UK was the degree to which that section of the press campaigned aggressively against refugees and migrants. This could be seen in the preponderance of negative frames and the editorialising in favour of Fortress Europe approaches.[16]

As for responsibility assignation, Felli pinpoints that the term 'refugee' is often associated with the concept of reparative justice, which, as we have already seen, construes migrants as southern victims of climate change "whose voices are least likely to be heard in international debates and negotiations

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[15] Maria Julia Trombetta, "Linking Climate-induced Migration and Security Within the EU: Insights from the Securitization Debate", *Critical Studies on Security*, 2.2 (2014), 134.

[16] UNHCR, "Press Coverage of the Refugee and Migrant Crisis in the EU: A Content Analysis of Five European Countries" (Geneva: UNHCR Communications and Public Information Service, 2015), 10, https://www.unhcr.org/56bb369c9.pdf.

around the impacts of climate change".[17] Hence, the victimisation of migrants is a form of discursive dysphemism that reinforces the dichotomy between 'us' and 'them' and requires humanitarian concepts to represent 'poor' people in need of salvation.[18] Even though such narratives activate empathy, altruism and generosity, 'refugees' are often represented as a burden rather than as vulnerable human beings coping with a potentially catastrophic situation.[19] As a consequence, they are often turned into de-politicised and de-individualised subjects that "disappear into the image of massive movements".[20]

On the other hand, in neoliberal capitalist discourse the term 'migrant' is preferred in order to refer to strategic individuals with an entrepreneurial ethos who refuse being pathologised and victimised. From this perspective, "[m]igration is signified as a positive response to climate stress and the vulnerable are not represented (only) as passive victims in need of international protection, but also as 'agents of adaptations'".[21] Rather than a problem to be solved, migration becomes an adaptation strategy strengthening the resilience of vulnerable populations. Such nomenclature has been fostered by the IOM as well as a way to counterbalance the legal conundrum of the term 'refugee'.

The creation of entrepreneurial migrants, however, is at odds with the humanitarian frame that has been favoured in media discourse, and, just like the term 'refugee', leads to the de-politicisation of climate change since migrants are relegated to a non-political existence where single states are subordinated elements of a larger mechanism within a global apparatus of governance. Hence, according to Felli, instead of victims of climate change, migrants are turned into wage labourers. Such utilitarian vision depicts migrants as economically beneficial to the west, even though the option of free international movement is never tabled. Whereas taking in climate 'refugees' is discursively construed as a form of compensation for the production of climate change, climate migration stands for an alternative narration that naturalises migratory movements.

Both 'refugee' and 'migrant' as 'condensation symbols' have been increasingly framed within the debate on security.[22] As Felli points out, however, refugee discourse is related to international security, while migration discourse is associated with human security, i.e. the "security of the population involved and that of the receiving communities in the South".[23] Here, the term 'refugee' would be redundant because migration usually takes place within national borders. It is especially because of the

[17] Tanja Dreher and Michelle Voyer, "Climate Refugees or Migrants? Contesting Media Frames on Climate Justice in the Pacific", *Environmental Communication*, 9.1 (2015), 58-59.

[18] María Martínez Lirola, "Discursive Legitimation of Criminalization and Victimization of Sub-Saharan Immigrants in Spanish *El País* and *ABC* Newspapers", in Jan Chovanec and Katarzyna Molek-Kozakowska, eds., *Representing the Other in European Media Discourses* (Berlin: John Benjamins, 2017), 135-154; Ruth Wodak, "'Us' and 'Them': Inclusion and Exclusion – Discrimination via Discourse", in Gerard Delanty et al., eds., *Identity, Belonging and Migration* (Liverpool: Liverpool U.P., 2008), 54-77; for a discursive analysis of the victimisation of migrants see, among others, Laura Ma Augustín, "Forget Victimization: Granting Agency to Migrants", *Development*, 46.3 (2003), 30-36; Karina Horsti, "De-ethnicized Victims: Mediatized Advocacy for Asylum Seekers", *Journalism*, 14.1 (2013), 78-95; William F. McDonald, *The Criminal Victimization of Immigrants* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

[19] For the vulnerability of climate-induced migration see, among others, Kate Manzo, "Imagining Vulnerability: The Iconography of Climate Change", *Area*, 42.1 (2010), 96-107; Hajer Maarten and Wytske Versteeg, "Voices of Vulnerability: The Reconfiguration of Policy Discourses", in John S. Dryzek et al, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Climate Change and Society* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2011), 82-95; Michael Brzoska and Christiane Fröhlich, "Climate Change, Migration and Violent Conflict: Vulnerabilities, Pathways and Adaptation Strategies", *Migration and Development*, 5.2 (2016), 190-210.

[20] Bettini, "Climate Barbarians at the Gate? A Critique of Apocalyptic Narratives on 'Climate Refugees'", *Geoforum*, 45 (2013), 70.

[21] Bettini, "Where Next? Climate Change, Migration, and the (Bio)politics of Adaptation", *Global Policy*, 8.S1 (2017), 35.

[22] As for the debate on security, climate change and migration see, among others, Simon Dalby, "Climate Change: New Dimensions of Environmental Security", *The RUSI Journal*, 158.3 (2013), 34-43; Timothy Doyle and Sanjay Chaturvedi, "Climate Refugees and Security: Conceptualizations, Categories, and Contestations", in John S. Dryzek et al., eds., *Oxford Handbook of Climate Change*, 278-291; Rita Floyd, "The Environmental Security Debate and its Significance for Climate Change", *The International Spectator*, 43.3 (2008), 51-65; Maria Julia Trombetta, "Environmental Security and Climate Change: Analysing the Discourse", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 21.4 (2008), 585-602.

[23] Trombetta, "Linking Climate-induced Migration", 134.

debate on securitising climate-induced migration and the need for exceptional measures it entails that the connotations of the terms 'refugee' and 'migrant' have changed over time. Over the last decades, as a matter of fact, 'migrant' has been perceived as negative and unsettling, while 'refugee', albeit more and more 'suspicious', has been deemed more neutral.[24] However, since it leads to victimisation, "there should be no space for the concept of 'climate refugees' [which] is a flawed and noxious concept that, regardless of all the headlines it can gain, can hardly provide any contribution to progressive agendas on climate and migration and in support of those vulnerable to climate change".[25]

This is particularly important for news discourse because journalistic routines "always carry norms as to how the spectator should relate to the sufferer and what we should do about the suffering".[26] Indeed, the way social actors are named or misnamed influences the way people react to climate journalism and share common knowledge on climate change and climate-induced migration.[27] Because of its ethical duty, climate communication "must be more than simply informative; it must also strive to enhance the personal and collective agency of people and communities to act in the face of crisis".[28] In other words, it should strive to promote alternative news discourses and find alternative ways of naming and framing social actors.

3. Theoretical Background and Method

As Reisigl and Wodak theorise in their discourse-historical approach, the strategies that are adopted to create ingroup and outgroup identities in news discourse may be identified by means of a three-level methodology that takes into account the context in which the topic is presented, the discursive strategies used to represent migrants as social actors, and their linguistic means (types) and context-dependent linguistic realisations (tokens).[29] Through the interdisciplinary and multi-methodical combination of historical, political, sociological and/or psychological dimensions, the approach "analyses the historical dimension of discursive actions by exploring the ways in which particular genres of discourse are subject to diachronic change",[30] and "allows a multi-dimensional deconstruction of the way certain *topoi* and arguments are recontextualised and reformulated".[31] It is thus particularly suited to the investigation of the complex historical and socio-economic features of the climate-migration nexus.

In order to evaluate the positive self-presentation or negative othering of social actors, Reisigl and Wodak outline five main strategies, i.e. referential, predicational, argumentation, perspectivation and intensifying/mitigation strategies. Since the case study under investigation deals with the names and labels used to identify climate-induced migrants in the *BBC News Online* corpus, the focus will be mainly on referential (or nomination) strategies, which Reisigl and Wodak adapt from van Leeuwen's

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[24] Ronald Kaye, "Blaming the Victim: An Analysis of Press Representation of Refugees and Asylum-seekers in the United Kingdom in the 1990s", in Russel King and Nancy Wood, eds., *Media and Migration: Constructions of Mobility and Difference* (London: Routledge, 2001), 659-681.

[25] Bettini, "Where Next?", 36.

[26] Lilie Chouliaraki, *The Spectatorship of Suffering* (London: Sage, 2006), 3.

[27] See Carol Farbotko, "Representation and Misrepresentation of Climate Migrants", in Mayer and Crépeau, eds., *Research Handbook on Climate Change*, 67-81.

[28] Shane Gunster, "Engaging Climate Communication: Audiences, Frames, Values and Norms", in Robert A. Hackett et al., *Journalism and Climate Crisis: Public Engagement, Media Alternatives* (London: Routledge, 2017), 53.

[29] Martin Reisigl and Ruth Wodak, *Discourse and Discrimination: Rhetorics of Racism and Antisemitism* (London: Routledge, 2001).

[30] Ibid., 35.

[31] Theo van Leeuwen and Wodak, "Legitimizing Immigration Control: A Discourse-Historical Analysis", *Discourse Studies*, 1.1 (1999), 91.

system network of representation of social actors.[32] Among them, the most relevant here are the 'exclusion' or 'inclusion' of social actors, 'categorisation', 'specification'/'genericisation', and 'impersonalisation'. Exclusion can be total (suppression) or less radical (backgrounding and passivation), while categorisation regards "the representation of social actors by functionalising, identifying or appraising them".[33] Through specification social actors are referred to as concrete individuals, whereas the opposite occurs with genericisation, which can be further divided into collectivisation (the individual is part of a generic group, e.g. family, tribe, etc.) and aggregation (the individual is quantified, becomes a number). With impersonalisation, on the other hand, reference to social actors is made by means of abstract nouns and can be further divided into abstraction and objectivation.[34]

In order to assess to what extent the terms 'refugee' and 'migrant' are employed on *BBC News Online* in relation to climate change, the corpus has been firstly analysed using the *AntConc* concordance tool.[35] Besides the rank and frequency of some keywords related to climate-induced migration, the following terms were considered in the analysis: 'climate refugee', 'climate change refugee', 'environmental refugee', 'climate migrant', 'climate change migrant' and 'environmental migrant'. The findings of this corpus-assisted study were used to integrate and support the subsequent qualitative analysis of the articles.

4. The Corpus

Today online news is becoming a more and more significant part of the overall media coverage,[36] while the imperative of interactivity and the different responses from online readers have led to new forms of knowledge, social roles, identities and interpersonal relations.[37] The international edition of *BBC News Online* is one of the most popular news websites globally and is best known for its cultural authority. The introduction of an online version in the second half of the 1990s forced the *BBC* to modify its forms, practices and epistemologies since traditional broadcast scripts were not suitable anymore and everything had to be written specifically for the web. Online coverage is often criticised for being derivative and for dumbing down online audiences without providing them with a sophisticated range of information. This is not the case of *BBC News Online*:

> The BBC, then as now, is one of the largest news gathering organisations in the world. Where rival sites – both television and newspaper-based – typically relied on copy from the wire service to provide braking news, BBC News Online could draw on the expertise of over 2,000 members of staff and 250 correspondents across the globe. The online news team was composed of some forty journalists in addition

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[32] Van Leeuwen, "The Representation of Social Actors", in Carmen Rosa Caldas-Coulthard and Malcolm Coulthard, eds., *Texts and Practices: Readings in Critical Discourse Analysis* (London: Routledge, 1996), 32-70.

[33] Reisigl and Wodak, *Discourse and Discrimination*, 47.

[34] Besides nomination, also other strategies such as framing will be analysed whenever required.

[35] Even though the use of a concordance tool is one of the distinguishing features of Corpus Linguistics, what has been done in this paper is nothing but a corpus-assisted discourse study at its simplest level. As a matter of fact, the methodological integration of Corpus Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis is beyond the scope of this case study. For further details on such integrated method see, among others, Paul Baker, *Using Corpora in Discourse Analysis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006).

[36] See in particular Stuart Allan, *Online News: Journalism and the Internet* (Maidenhead: Open U.P., 2006); Steve Schifferes and Stephen Coulter, "Downloading Disaster: BBC News Online Coverage of the Global Financial Crisis", *Journalism*, 14.2 (2013), 228-252.

[37] See Scott L. Althaus and David Tewksbury, "Agenda Setting and the 'New' News: Patterns of Issue Importance Among Readers of the Paper and Online Versions of *The New York Times*", *Communication Research*, 29.2 (2002), 180-207; van Leeuwen and Wodak, "Legitimizing Immigration Control", 92.

to technical staff and graphic designers preparing news stories on the basis of reports provided by these correspondents.[38]

Thanks to its online version, the *BBC* has successfully managed to transfer its public service ethos to the 2.0 era and to develop an ecology of online news reporting, which, despite its efforts to represent a broad range of opinions, has not been successful in achieving impartiality yet.[39]

The corpus was created by searching the international version of *BBC News Online* using the query terms 'environmental refugee*', 'climate refugee*', 'climate change refugee*', 'environmental migrant*', 'climate migrant*', and 'climate change migrant*'. It was further narrowed down by excluding the articles not dealing with climate change and/or climate-induced migration, which resulted in 42 articles published between 1999 (two years after the BBC went online) and 2017. The corpus consists of 4,368 word types and 28,039 word tokens. Most articles are reports (32), together with 4 feature stories, 5 op-eds, and 1 editorial. They are evenly distributed over the years, even though 2008 and 2009 represent together more than 25% of the corpus:
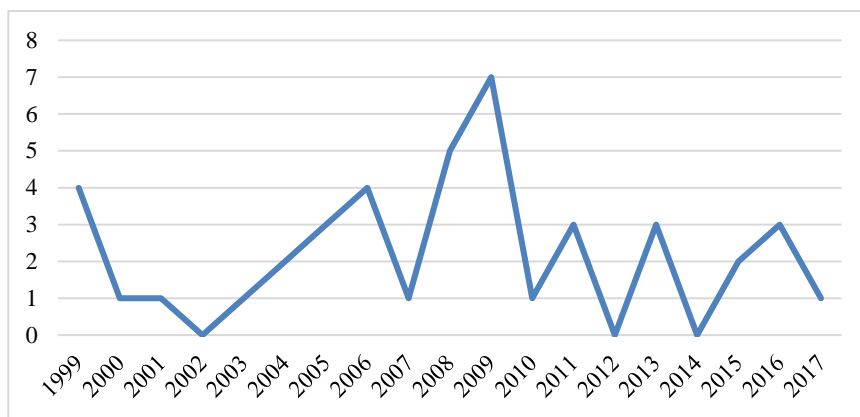

Fig. 1. Distribution of articles per year

As for the distribution of the articles according to their topic, more than a third (16) are devoted to climate change and its consequences, while only 8 deal specifically with migration and refugees/migrants. The remaining articles are about reports and international meetings (5), politics and national policies (7), and other topics (6) such as health and economic issues. Hence, the terms 'climate/environmental refugees/migrants' are mostly employed in articles that do not directly deal with climate-induced migration but are simply mentioned along with other consequences of climate change. Moreover, the articles mainly appear in two types of section, i.e. science (21) – which over the years was renamed as Science and Technology (4 articles), Science and Nature (8) and Science and the Environment (9) – and geographical areas (18), such as South Asia (5), World (3) Africa (2), etc. The remaining three articles were published in other sections.

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[38] Stuart Allan and Einar Thorsen, "Journalism, Public Service and BBC News Online" in Graham Meikle and Guy Redden, eds., *News Online: Transformation and Continuities* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 23-24.
[39] Karin Wahl-Jorgensen et al., "Rethinking Balance and Impartiality in Journalism? How the BBC Attempted and Failed to Change the Paradigm", *Journalism*, 18.7 (2017), 781-800.

5. Analysis

The analysis of the corpus mainly draws on the discourse-historical approach and focuses in particular on the strategies listed in Reisigl and Wodak's *Discourse and Discrimination: Rhetorics of Racism and Antisemitism*.[40] In order to precisely assess how and where the terms 'refugee' and 'migrant' appear in the corpus, the qualitative analysis has been firstly integrated with a quantitative study carried out using the *AntConc* concordance tool. The occurrences of the selected keywords are listed in Table 1.

Keyword	Occurrences	Percentage
refugee*	127	0.45%
climate refugee*	21	0.07%
climate change refugee*	7	0.02%
environmental refugee*	32	0.11%
migrant*	21	0.07%
climate migrant*	4	0.01%
climate change migrant*	-	-
environmental migrant*	1	0.00%

Table 1. Occurrences of selected keywords in the *BBC News Online* corpus

As Table 1. shows, the term 'refugee' is employed five times more often than 'migrant', while the premodifiers 'climate', 'climate change' and 'environmental' appear less frequently and tend to be rarely – if ever – used before 'migrant'. Taking into account the distribution of the terms per year is also revealing as 'environmental refugee' is used throughout the corpus even though it tends to be replaced by 'climate (change) refugee' after 2013. Quite interestingly, when 'climate refugee' is consistently used, i.e. in 2006, 2009, and 2011, 'environmental refugee' is never employed. The years 2013 and 2015 are the only ones in which the three labels are used interchangeably. Moreover, the corpus shows a predominance of 'environmental refugee' only between 1999 and 2006, when the *Stern Review* was published and 'climate refugee' was consistently used for the first time.[41] On the other hand, 'climate migrant' first appears in 2008, while 'environmental migrant' is used only once in 2010. As the following graph in Fig. 2. shows, the years after 2007 present much more varied lexical choices as all terms – with the exception of 'environmental migrant' – are used.

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[40] Reisigl and Wodak, *Discourse and Discrimination*, 45-56.
[41] *The Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change* is a report the Government of the United Kingdom led by Prime Minister Tony Blair commissioned to economist Nicholas Stern in 2006. The document discusses the effects of climate change on global economy and has influenced some of the policies adopted by western governments.
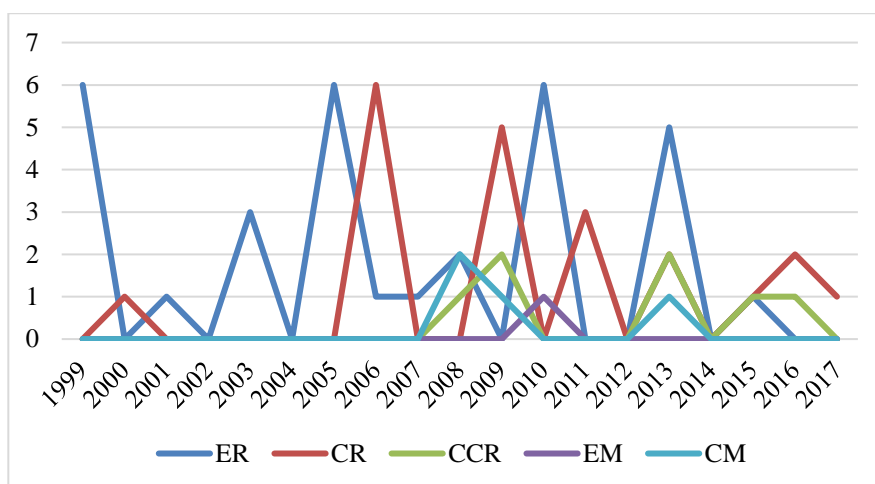
Fig. 2. Terminological variation in the corpus

Such terminological variation may be due to the fact that in 2007 climate migration was defined as an adaptation strategy at the 94th session of the IOM Council. As the term was disseminated through press releases and reports, the usage of 'migrant' in the corpus may depend also on the frequent reference that *BBC News Online* makes to documents issued by international agencies and organisations.

One of the limits of the present study is the fact that the query terms are referential terms. As a consequence, the study has not focussed on the suppression of migrants as social actor.[42] Nevertheless, it has found that they are mostly backgrounded by means of passivation, e.g. "180 million people were affected by floods";[43] the personification of nature, e.g. "nature worsens poverty";[44] and by being turned into the object of clauses, e.g. "This [desertification] exacerbates poverty and creates environmental refugees".[45] There are very few examples in which migrants are foregrounded, namely a 2004 report about an Alaskan village swept away by the sea, where the people of Shishmaref are "the first refugees of global warming";[46] a 2006 feature story about the consequences of rising sea levels in Bangladesh;[47] a 2015 report about Ioane Teitiota, a Kiribati man who has been labelled as "the first climate change refugee".[48]

Even though all articles are about climate change, the environment is usually backgrounded.[49] Foregrounded social actors, on the other hand, usually include politicians, scientists, NGO representatives, together with their statements, reports or legal documents. Indeed, one of the

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[42] In order to assess whether climate-induced migrants as social actors are suppressed, other query terms should have been selected.

[43] Alex Kirby, "The Misery of 98", *BBC News Online*, 24 June 1999, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/375999.stm.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Anon., "World's Dry Regions Set to Expand", *BBC News Online* (17 June 2005), http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/4102780.stm.

[46] David Willis, "Sea Engulfing Alaskan Village", *BBC News Online* (30 July 2004), http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3940399.stm.

[47] Roger Harrabin, "Climate Fears for Bangladesh's Future", *BBC News Online* (14 September 2006), http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/5344002.stm.

[48] Tim McDonald, "The Man Who Would Be the First Climate Change Refugee", *BBC News Online* (5 November 2015), https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-34674374.

[49] Indeed, the *AntConc* concordance tool shows that 'climate' and 'change' are among the most frequent words in the corpus, ranking 10 and 19 respectively.

consequences of this foregrounding strategy, which is very common in the corpus and relies on hedging to construct an impression of impartiality, is the fact that there is often a shift in focus from the topic presented at the beginning of the article to its social actors. In so doing, it seems that the real topic is what authoritative people or documents say rather than climate change or climate-induced migration. Moreover, the text mainly consists of intertextual references that prevent reporters from expressing an opinion.

As for nomination strategies, climate refugees/migrants are often only mentioned as one of the consequences of climate change. Labelling social actors as environmental/climate refugees or migrants is both a form of actionalisation and genericisation. The latter takes the form of collectivisation through deictics and collectives, e.g. "those people"[50] and "many Bangladeshi families escaping floods and droughts",[51] or aggregation, when quantifiers – especially exaggerating numbers – are used to specify the number of people involved, e.g. "300m people",[52] "enormous number of migrants"[53] and "hundreds of millions of people in low-lying areas".[54] Indeed, as previous studies on the discursive representations of migration point out,[55] the media – and *BBC News Online* is no exception – often rely on figures to "give the impression of objective research and scientific credibility", even though what they often aim at is sensationalism.[56] Furthermore, neither somatisation nor explicit dissimilation is found, which means that *BBC News Online* is never overtly racist. In the whole corpus, however, other nomination strategies and frames are employed to create a dichotomy between us (western countries) and them (people in need from countries deteriorated by climate change), thus conveying implicit discrimination against migrants as others. Among them, de-possessivisation is quite common, especially with 'poor', e.g. "the poorest of the poor",[57] and "the world's poorest".[58]

Referential strategies on *BBC News Online* vary also according to the type of article. As a matter of fact, reports tend to focus on climate change in general and mention migrants or refugees merely as part of the problem. On the other hand, op-eds and feature articles deal with individual stories and present other forms of nomination like, for instance, professionalisation: "a banker with a global fan club", "the headmistress and her team", "architect-turned-boat-builder".[59] Furthermore, problematisation is never used in nomination, but is context-dependent since climate-induced migrants are often mentioned as part of the problems caused by climate change.

Predicational strategies are seldom used, mostly because 'refugees' and 'migrants' are simply mentioned as such when talking about climate change. When a predicate is included, we find that migrants are 'vulnerable', 'angry', or 'resilient', 'talented' and 'happy' like in the case of a feature story about Bangladesh in which social actors are described as follows: "Dhaka beggars are gentle and friendly", "the terribly disabled man", "super-adapters", "Bangladeshi being some of the happiest

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[50] Anon., "Copenhagen Climate Deal 'Faces Problems' – Gordon Brown", *BBC News Online* (16 December 2009), http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/8415424.stm.

[51] Harrabin, "Climate Fears".

[52] Alex Kirby, "Water Shortage Threatens Harvests", *BBC News Online* (7 February 1999), http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/274099.stm.

[53] Amitabha Bhattasali, "S Asia in Climate Change 'Crisis'", *BBC News Online* (25 March 2008), http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7313239.stm.

[54] See McDonald, "The Man Who Would Be".

[55] See, among others, Walter Pohl and Ruth Wodak, "The Discursive Construction of 'Migrants and Migration'", in Michi Messer et al., eds., *Migrations: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Vienna: Springer, 2012), 205-212.

[56] Russo, *The Evaluation of Risk in Institutional and Newspaper Discourse: The Case of Climate Change and Migration* (Napoli: Editoriale Scientifica, 2018), 133.

[57] See Harrabin, "Climate Fears".

[58] Pallab Ghosh, "Climate Change Migration Warning Issued Through Report", *BBC News Online* (20 October 2011), https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-15341651.

[59] Paul Rose, "Building a Secure Future in Bangladesh", *BBC News Online* (7 July 2009), http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/8130130.stm.

people in the world", "they have become masters of adaptation and innovation", "these talented, energetic and loved youngsters", "40 women ... tiny and resilient".[60] As the list shows, the examples are not directly linked to climate-induced migrants but to people in Bangladesh who are likely to migrate in the future. It is one of the few articles in the corpus, however, to present them as human beings with positive qualities. Not only are these future migrants gentle and talented, they are resilient and adaptable, i.e. they embody the discourse on migration as a successful strategy of adaptation.

The lack of predication strategies in the corpus is due to the fact that most articles mention future migrants, which means that they are often referred to as an indistinct mass of people with no specific qualities and that most of the time future predictions are part of what Baldwin, Methmann and Rothe call "the futurology of climate-induced migration", i.e. apocalyptic narratives set in a (more or less) distant future.[61] The analysis is confirmed by the result of a concordance search using the keywords 'going to', which is usually employed to make predictions based on existing evidence, and 'will', which is used to make predictions based on personal opinion or intuition: while there are 19 occurrences of the former, the latter is used 170 times. Moreover, 'refugee' and 'migrant' often collocate with the verb 'become', which refers to a shift in status or condition that is supposed to take place in the future. As for argumentation strategies, *BBC News Online* tends to avoid synecdoches, metonymies and metaphors when referring to climate-induced migration. Only once are migrants described as a wave, using a water metaphor that is typical of news discourse,[62] as in the following example: "the South Asian region could face a wave of migrants displaced by the impact of climate change".[63]

As regards frames and framing, a taxonomy has been developed building on previous studies,[64] and adapting them to the types of discourse on climate change.[65] The corpus has thus been analysed according to the following frames:

- economic/capitalist frame;
- scientific frame;
- humanitarian frame;
- radical/activism frame;
- attribution of responsibility frame;
- security /protection frame.

The findings show that two or more frames coexist in almost two-thirds of the texts and that most of them adopt a humanitarian frame. Whereas the latter is evenly distributed over the years (32 articles) and is thus almost a universal perspective from which climate-induced migration is seen in the corpus, the scientific frame is used until 2008-2009 only (12 articles). This coincides with the appearance of the term 'climate/environmental migrant' in the corpus after the redefinition of migration as an

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[60] Rose, "Building a Secure Future".

[61] Andrew Baldwin et al., "Securitizing 'Climate Refugees': The Futurology of Climate-Induced Migration", *Critical Studies on Security*, 2.2 (2014), 121-130.

[62] See Reisigl and Wodak, *Discourse and Discrimination*, 59.

[63] See Bhattasali, "S Asia".

[64] See, in particular, Reisigl and Wodak, *Discourse and Discrimination*, 82; Vivien Benert and Anne Beier, "Influx of Migrants versus People in Need – A Combined Analysis of Framing and Connotation in the Lampedusa News Coverage", *Global Media Journal – German Edition*, 6.1 (2016), 8-9; Arran Stibbe, *Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology and the Stories We Live By* (London: Routledge, 2015).

[65] According to Bettini, there are four main discourses on climate change, namely capitalist, scientific, humanitarian and radical. For further details see Bettini, "Climate Barbarians", 64.

adaptation strategy by the IOM Council in 2007. On the other hand, the economic frame is consistently used in the period between 2006 and 2011 (16 articles). Such a short time span may be related to the publication of the Stern Review in 2006 and the shift in the international scene after the 2009 UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen and the introduction of the Cancun Adaptation Framework in 2010. The remaining frames are seldom adopted, which does not mean that *BBC News Online* avoids security or responsibility issues. Such topics, on the contrary, are subtly introduced through argumentation strategies. As Bettini points out, as a matter of fact, when we speak of climate-induced migration there are conflicting discourses that require a 'discursive coalition', i.e. different points of view within the same frame.[66]

When the economic and humanitarian frames are combined, the argumentation strategies mainly rely on the former, i.e. costs are pointed out, the financial loss is foregrounded and economic gain as the main reason for action is fostered. However, the utilitarian stance is often mitigated by *topoi* of responsibility, humanitarianism and authority in a textual arrangement that usually follows this pattern: economic factors are first mentioned; 'poor' countries have done nothing to deteriorate the environment, but now they have to pay for what 'rich' countries have done; this causes anger; common (international) action is required and has to be taken in order to succeed in saving lives and achieve a profit.[67] Moreover, even though the responsibility of western countries is recognised (or at least mentioned), the overall framing of such reports omits the actors, i.e. the perpetrators, of climate change and distances readers through strategies of detachment such as nominalisation, indirect speech, distancing personal deictics and abstractive passive voice.[68]

6. Discussion

The debate on climate-induced migration and the depiction of social actors as refugees or migrants on *BBC News Online* is informed by a complex web of frames which combine several layers of discourse like humanitarianism and capitalist neoliberalism, victimisation and securitisation. This discursive conflation results in the semantic ambiguity of the two terms, which echoes the fluidity of the concept of climate-induced migration itself.[69] 'Migrant' and 'refugee' are turned into desemanticised and deferentialised floating signifiers,[70] and ultimately reinforce the economic and socio-political status quo endorsed by the *BBC*. The term 'environmental' or 'climate refugee', in particular, is an example of what Russo calls "terminological catachresis",[71] which is related to lexical remediation in the communication to non-expert readers and to the newsworthiness of 'climate refugees', i.e. "the framing of news stories according to shared typifications and schemata".[72] As the findings show, 'refugee' has been preferred to 'migrant' also in the *BBC News Online* corpus, especially until 2013, when the use of both terms significantly drops.

The lexical choices of *BBC News Online* are confusing on both terminological and discursive levels. On the one hand, 'climate/environmental refugee' is employed notwithstanding its legal inconsistencies, while 'climate/environmental migrant' is avoided (almost) tout court. This may be due to the newsworthiness of humanitarian narratives, even though "the physical evidence of climate

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[66] Bettini, "Climate Barbarians", 65.
[67] The *topoi* have been selected from the comprehensive list in Reisigl and Wodak, *Discourse and Discrimination*, 75-80.
[68] Ibid., 82.
[69] See Calum T. M. Nicholson, "'Climate-induced Migration': Ways Forward in the Face of an Intrinsically Equivocal Concept", in Mayer and Crépeau, eds., *Research Handbook on Climate Change*, 49-66.
[70] Russo, "Floating Signifiers", 205.
[71] Russo, *The Evaluation of Risk*, 112.
[72] Russo, "Floating Signifiers", 205.

change ... is newsworthy, yet the wider human rights implications are rarely addressed".[73] However, the dismissal of 'climate/environmental migrant' by the *BBC* may come as a surprise given the importance of the concept of entrepreneurial adaptation in migration discourse. The findings seem to suggest that the growing concern over national and international security may be one of the causes of such lexical choices: *BBC News Online* never overtly poses the climate-induced migration question in terms of security issues as other types of journalism do, but from time to time draws on the semantics of fear and threat to speak of the economic, scientific and humanitarian consequences of climate change. By framing migrants as 'refugees', *BBC News Online* diminishes the idea of positive migration and cashes in on the reiteration of climate-induced migration as a problem. It is no surprise, then, that the term 'problem' is mentioned four times more often than 'solution' since framing it as a problem is more newsworthy than discussing solutions.

The distribution of the query terms is also genre-related, i.e. it depends on the proportion between reports, where migrants are often backgrounded and improperly named 'refugees', and feature stories or op-eds, where migration is positively construed and migrants are seen as adapters. Furthermore, the findings show that after 2013 there was a significant decrease in the number of articles dealing with climate/environmental refugees and migrants. If we take a look at the international context, this may be related to the shifting positions of organisations like the IOM and the UNHCR towards a positive redefinition of migration as an adaptation strategy. The *BBC*'s attitude on this shift has been quite ambiguous because it seems that climate migrants are not as newsworthy as refugees and because, by avoiding the term, *BBC News Online* has failed to create a counter-discourse in which climate-induced migration is not represented as an apocalyptic threat, but as an opportunity for the people that live in deteriorating environmental conditions. Quite on the contrary, the only frame left is that of economic potential and/or problems for western societies, which can be found also in other news coverage of environmental issues on *BBC News Online*.[74]

7. Conclusion

The discursive ambiguity of *BBC News Online* is best exemplified by the story of Ioane Teitiota, a Kiribati man who moved to New Zealand to flee the rising seas threatening his island and was labelled by news media as the world's first climate change refugee. In 2015, however, he was denied the status of refugee and repatriated. *BBC News Online* extensively covered the story and published a video interview in which he explains in the Kiribati language why he wants to go back to New Zealand:

> My name is Ioane Teitiota. I wanted to stay in New Zealand because it's a better life, and my three children were born there, and I'm looking out for their future too. It's nothing like what we had in New Zealand. Back here [Kiribati] there's nothing. Especially with climate change, the country could disappear within thirty years.... Yes, I'm the same as people who are fleeing war. Those who are afraid of dying, it's the same as me. The sea level is coming up, and I will die, like them. It will affect my life when the sea takes over my land. It will kill me and my family.[75]

The coverage of Teitiota's case is one of the few examples in the *BBC News Online* corpus in which migrants are foregrounded. Quite paradoxically, however, he is defined as a 'climate change refugee' in spite of the fact that the denomination is not recognised under international law yet. In so doing,

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[73] Dreher and Voyer, "Climate Refugees", 68.
[74] See, for instance, Mirko Casagranda, "E-waste: An Ecocritical Discourse Analysis", *Anglistica AION*, 19.2 (2015), 103-116.
[75] Transcription of the subtitles provided by *BBC News Online* to a video interview to Ioane Teitiota published on 6 November 2015 under the title "My Life is in Danger in Kiribati", https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-asia-34723760/my-life-is-in-danger-in-kiribati.

BBC News Online construes him as a victim of climate change and activates a humanitarian frame that echoes colonial subordination and power relations. Indeed, as Baldwin and Bettini point out, "[c]olonial tropes, such as remoteness, smallness and victimhood, are partly the reason so many Pacific islanders refuse the label 'climate refugee'".[76]

It seems quite perverse that *BBC News Online* grants climate migrants a voice and at the same time avoids the very nomination strategy that allows migrants to reclaim a "role as active agents of change".[77] Indeed, such a choice is likely to reflect the neoliberal and possibly neo-colonial attitudes of western mainstream media. Going back to Ionae Teitiola and his video interview, it is no coincidence that the only words he says in English are 'climate change', clearly a culture-bound term in the Kiribati language that otherwise would know nothing about it. Climate change did not exist on/in Kiribati; as a concept – and as a life-threatening condition – it was unfortunately brought by and borrowed from the west.

[76] Baldwin and Bettini, "Introduction: Life Adrift", in Baldwin and Bettini, eds., *Life Adrift*, 14.
[77] Russo, "Floating Signifiers", 196.