

The Role of Absences in Framing Environmental Refugees in *The New York Times*

Abstract: In examining the framing of ‘environmental refugees’ in *The New York Times* (1985-2015), I argue that patterns of absence may provide insights into how elite newspapers might be silent; or, may mute discussions on complementary constructs of restorative justice and moral opprobrium. Even counter-discourses offered by leaders of the low-lying nations that frames paradigms of resilience, adaptation and sustainability are seen to foreclose non-state conceptions of alternative futures. A full line of absences that include masks, void and traces – as identified by Arran Stibbe in *Ecolinguistics* (2015) – is seen as a necessary way to explain what gets lost in the chain of signification. This study suggests that both these conceptual tools (i.e., framing and patterns of absence(s)) should be merged together, if, we are to show that when an issue is framed in a certain manner it also structures what is (dis)advantageous to certain groups. Without the application of this approach, we are unwittingly participating in selectively silencing the evidence for the projection of the frame.

Keywords: *climate-induced migration, environmental refugees, discourse, framing, patterns of silence*

1. Introduction: Ecolinguistics and Environmental Refugees

Previous studies in the field of Ecolinguistics have addressed the unequal ecological impact of language use and see the study of climate change as a means of understanding how interconnections between the social and environmental spheres are developed or broken based on ecological considerations and scientific conclusions. By placing ecology and language as its central normative framework, the present article will build upon findings in the field of Critical Discourse Analysis to focus on “discourses that have (or potentially have) a significant impact not only on how people treat other people but also on how they treat the larger ecological systems”.¹

The term ‘environmental refugee(s)’ is often used interchangeably with ‘climate refugee(s)’. It is a controversial construct, not accepted legally, yet the term is used by journalists and opinion-makers alike to refer to people who have had to leave their home due to the consequences of climate change, be it sudden and violent or slow and gradual. Biermann and Boas define environmental refugees as “people who have to leave their habitats (and home territory) immediately or in the near future because of sudden or gradual alterations in their natural environment related to at least one of three impacts of climate change: sea-level rise, extreme weather events, and drought and water scarcity”.²

Since the term has no legal basis, it is debated to this day in academic circles.³ The legal description often serves to differentiate refugees of war and civil strife who escape tangible persecuting agents from those who try and escape climate change which cannot be rightly classified as a persecuting agent. An environmental refugee may, therefore, be defined as an exceptional case of refugee because the term frames the environment as a persecuting agent from which people seek refuge. Moreover, new

¹ Arran Stibbe, *Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology and the Stories We Live By* (London: Routledge, 2015), 118.

² Frank Biermann and Ingrid Boas, “Preparing for a Warmer World: Toward a Global Governance System to Protect Climate Refugees”, *Global Environmental Politics*, 10.1 (2010), 60-88, 67.

³ Katherine E. Russo, *The Evaluation of Risk in Institutional and Newspaper Discourse: The Case of Climate Change and Migration* (Napoli: Editoriale Scientifica, 2018), 56.

reports frame environmental refugees as the threatening risk of climate change often showcasing sudden, violent or dramatic events in apocalyptic tones.⁴ Yet even though climate change can be seen to ‘affect’ people who move to escape, they are not granted refugee status.

The essay argues that one of the most noticeable characteristics of the representation of environmental refugees in *The New York Times* (henceforth *NYT*) is the lack of column space dedicated to the specific exigencies of their movement and their varied motivations, the impossibility of refugee status, and the possibility of positive outcomes which may follow mobility. Instead, articles are often constructed in the linear manner of cause-problem-solution format, cause-effect format or event-analysis format, highlighting the threats and risks of climate change and the consequential movement. The *topos* of numbers⁵ is especially salient: reporters routinely stress a ‘huge number’ of migrants may be the greatest consequence of climate change – the fear for the “large swatches of humanity” and the risk associated with accepting them is layered in the reports.⁶ As a consequence, despite the pervasive diffusion of modern-day communications, the lay reader knows very little about environmental refugees. Accordingly, the aim of the essay is to examine the role of absence in the reportage of environmental refugees in *NYT* within the ecolinguistic tradition of questioning our ecological conceptions of humans, species and the environment. The study will focus on discursive “absence”,⁷ not merely as a set of tools to categorize certain lexico-grammatical or discourse features that are not framed in the text, but rather as a reflection on what kinds of meanings are ignored or absent from the discussion.

2. Methodology and Operational Definitions

A corpus was designed by selecting texts from *NYT* covering a thirty-year time span (1985-2015).⁸ The articles were retrieved from the Lexis Nexis database. *NYT* was chosen for the analysis, as it enjoys the status of being an elite newspaper that sets the political agenda and frames the terms of political debate.⁹

The orientation towards the absences in the texts was based on deconstruction, according to which no reading of a text is fixed or autonomous as it consists of nodes of signification where ‘traces of difference’ can be detected between presence and absence.¹⁰ The analysis of absences also aided the interpretation of the validation by *NYT* of certain topics which are present in the texts. Yet, the essay focuses on the examination of how absences communicate through the unsaid. Examples have been provided only if a pattern (i.e., repeated absences of the same kind) have been noticed in more than 0.36 % of the total population of texts.¹¹

⁴ See 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.

⁵ Ruth Wodak, “Us and Them: Inclusion and Exclusion – Discrimination via Discourse”, in Gerhard Delanty et al., eds., *Identity, Belonging and Migration* (Liverpool: Liverpool U.P., 2008), 55.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁷ See Melani Schroeter and Charlotte Taylor, eds., *Exploring Silence and Absence in Discourse, Empirical Approaches* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

⁸ The choice of the rather long-time span ensures that the results are not distorted by specific climatic events such as the Tsunami of 2009 or the 2010 earthquake in Haiti.

⁹ See David Tewksbury and Dietram A. Scheufele, “Special Issue on Framing, Agenda Setting, and Priming: Agendas for Theory and Research”, *Journal of Communication*, 57.1 (2007), 1-8.

¹⁰ See Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, edited by John D. Caputo (New York: Fordham U.P., 1997); Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (New York: Longman, 1995); Wodak et al., eds., *The Discursive Construction of National Identity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh U.P. 1999); Teun A. van Dijk, *Society in Discourse: How Context Controls Text and Talk* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2009).

¹¹ See Adam Jaworski, *The Power of Silence: Social and Pragmatic Perspectives* (Newbury Park, CA.: Sage, 1993); Jaworski, ed., *Silence: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997).

Two patterns of textual and thematic absence are the focus of this essay:¹²

1) *Thematic Absences*: Thematic silences ignore a topic, theme, or subject altogether,¹³ and are also referred to as “void”.¹⁴ What distinguishes these absences from others is that such missing topics or actors constitute an important part of the issue, yet they are not mentioned at all in the discussion. They are not traceable or missing as a consequence of low newsworthiness, the journalists’ value judgments or the agenda/political leanings of the information source.

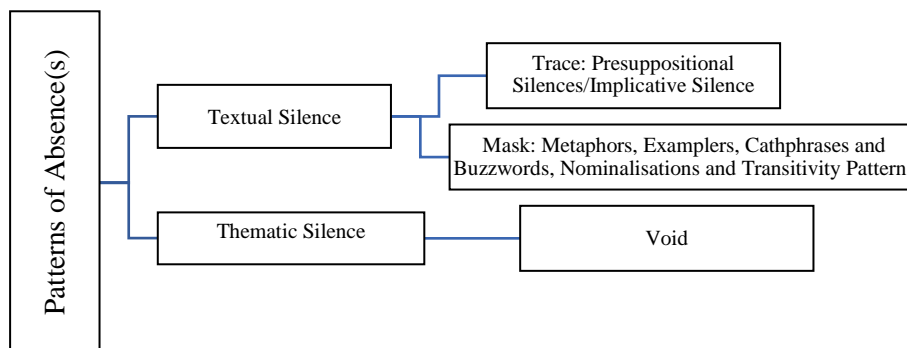


Figure 1. Overview of the patterns of absences

2) *Textual Absences*: In textual silence there is an omission of some piece of information that is pertinent to the topic at hand. Textual silences leave a trace in the text that is retrievable either at the clausal, sentential, or textual level.¹⁵ Textual silences can further be grouped as ‘traces’ or ‘masks’. A ‘trace’ is “something that is erased but still present”, whereas a ‘mask’ is erased and “replaced by a distorted version of itself”.¹⁶

The category of traces includes: presuppositions, probable estimates and implications. In a presupposition the writer assumes, prior to writing.¹⁷ The analysis of presupposition is, therefore, a powerful instrument to: 1) detect what writers believe (or know) that recipients believe; or 2) trace strategic moves through which reporters suggest that specific (presupposed) beliefs are true, although that may not be so.¹⁸ Fairclough suggests that presuppositions generate assumptions that may be existential (assumptions about what exists); propositional (assumptions about what is, can or will be the case); or value (assumptions about what is good and desirable).¹⁹

¹² Van Dijk’s notion of context is foregrounded knowledge in this research. Context refers either to what is important and relevant and what may be left implicit in discussing the full complexity of a social situation. Context helps understanding the professional or social domain, genre, purpose, location, date, time, circumstances, participants’ role in the construction of a piece of news, that may be left implicit or not. See van Dijk, *Society*.

¹³ See Dennis Kurzon, “Toward a Typology of Silences”, *Journal of Pragmatics*, 39.10 (2007), 1673-1688.

¹⁴ See Stibbe, *Ecolinguistics*.

¹⁵ Thomas Huckin, “Textual Silence and the Discourse of Homelessness”, *Discourse and Society*, 13.3 (2002), 347-372, 348.

¹⁶ Stibbe, *Ecolinguistics*, 149.

¹⁷ Presuppositions are of two kinds: existential and logical. Since existential presupposition are fundamental to the way language works, they are often not obviously manipulative. See Lesley Jeffries and Daniel McIntyre, *Stylistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2010). This research, for the moment, focuses on logical presuppositions.

¹⁸ Van Dijk, *Ideology: A Multidisciplinary Approach* (London: Sage, 1998).

¹⁹ Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research* (London: Routledge, 2003), 55-58.

For their part, implicatures are violations of the ‘cooperation principle’ of conversation.²⁰ They are the suggestions connoted by the text that are not stated explicitly by exploiting the cooperation principle. Each reader will construct implied information suggested by the implications differently.

Probable estimates encoded as numerals and used with hedges also fit the category of traces as they suggest estimates regarding future scenarios that allow the writer to magnify the issue in terms of numbers.

Masks help project a distorted version of reality through the repetitive use of suggestive catchphrases and buzzwords, metaphors, nominalizations, and exemplars. This essay will only detail the use of metaphors, catchphrases and buzzwords, exemplars and nominalized forms, since much has already been said about passive voice and transitivity patterns.²¹ Nominalizations express actions or processes as nouns, thus making processes and participants less explicit.²² Metaphors, catchphrases and buzzwords are ways in which the information of a certain aspect of the issue is masked in a different fashion and often silences the reality. While metaphors are used to compare different concepts, catchphrases and buzzwords are phrases employed by the media so often that a systemic association of a theme with the repeated usage of specific buzzwords and catchphrases is created. Finally, exemplars are examples, projected as personal stories or testimonials.

The research results and the discussion that follows provide an overview of the entire gamut of absences that are observed as patterns in our corpus. The flaw in this methodology is that some absences are indeed truly silent, as they do not form a pattern. Still, there may be singular occurrences of them over the thirty-year period.

3. Results and Discussion: Constructing the Discourse of Absence

3.1 Thematic Absences

Two significant absences that deal with the ‘legal’ aspect of this issue were found in the corpus: the lack of legal status for environmental refugees; and, the strategies through which this lack can be solved. These themes form a ‘void’ in the reportage.

3.1.1 Lack of Legal Status

In legal terms, environmental refugees do not exist. Yet, evidence that people move in response to climate change exists. At present, the refugee system is deficient as it does not recognize climate change and its consequences on human displacement. ‘Environmental refugees’ are absent from the 1951 “United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees”, and the subsequent 1967 “Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees”.²³ The scope for further development and expansion of existing refugee laws to cater for people who have been displaced as a consequence of climate change is at hand, but it rests on the political will and consent of many states. Given this background, *NYT* reports do not discuss this lack of status with the exception of one case, which will be discussed later. The lack of legal status prevents the access of environmental refugees to the protection measures

²⁰ Grice’s cooperation principle of conversation depends on four maxims: quantity, quality, relevance, and manner (see Herbert Paul Grice, “Logic and Conversation”, in Peter Cole and Jerry L. Morgan, eds., *Syntax and Semantics, Vol. 3: Speech Acts* (Waltham: Academic Press, 1975), 22-40).

²¹ See Michael A. K. Halliday and James R. Martin, *Writing Science: Literacy and Discursive Power* (London: Falmer Press, 1993).

²² *Ibid.*

²³ UNHCR, “Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees” (1951, 1967), <http://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10.pdf>.

provided, for example, by a global organization like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

The only mention regarding the clause in U.S. immigration laws that grants ‘special protected status’ to people from countries that have “suffered a catastrophic war or an environmental disaster” (37)²⁴ is found in the context of a discussion regarding Haitians, who were given an extension of their status for a few months after the 2010 earthquake. The article does not dig into the legal status of environmental refugees, but portrays the U.S. as a benevolent host: “Haitians who receive the temporary status will be able to obtain documents allowing them to live here and work legally” (37).

In another report, the U.S. is said to revoke this special status to people escaping a volcano eruption in Montserrat, because the volcanic activity would not cease “in the foreseeable future” (4). In the latter case, *TNYT* functions as a guard-dog, questioning the Homeland Security’s rationale for deporting people who settled in the U.S. after a disaster on humanitarian grounds. Both these examples in the data shed some light on the fact that the U.S. can accommodate people who have been displaced due to climate change, yet the reporter does not investigate the politics of reframing a refugee as someone who has fled due to the effects of climate change.

The recognition that a “legal gap exists with regard to cross-border movements in the context of disasters and the effects of climate change” (2) is discussed in the conclusions of one report. However, despite the acknowledgement, the report does not address the ‘legal gap’ regarding the lack of refugee status for environmental refugees. Instead, in choosing to use the phrase “cross-border movement”, the reporter seems to mask the fact that these people are ‘forced’ to move, representing their action as a voluntary one; Moreover, the ‘legal gap’ addressed by two countries in Europe (i.e., Sweden and Norway) are projected as recommending action in the hotspots where human displacement takes place: Central America, the Horn of Africa, Southeast Asia and the islands of the South Pacific. A little known fact is that both Sweden and Norway have created a system that allows immigration of women and children because of climate change affecting their countries. Moreover, the article focuses on climate change causing mass migrations as a means of warning rather than addressing the legal gap *per se*. The three points above validate the claim that there is a thematic silence or void where the legal status of being an environmental refugee is not discussed in the newspaper.

Another thematic absence is represented by the disappearance of small nation islands (SIDS), which presents a unique case of being a synecdoche for the effects of climate change on human displacement. In *NYT* the attention of the reader is diverted towards the Maldives’ attempt to buy land elsewhere to accommodate the nation. None of the articles feature the legal status of a nation that sinks under water. The legal apparatus to tackle statelessness and relocation is thematically silent.

Finally, lawsuits are mentioned in *NYT* as a means of persuasion to “force the United States or corporations to reduce emissions of heat-trapping greenhouse gases” (43). Here too the legal path seems to be foreclosed even for discussion as, “[t]hey will have a real hard time proving causation, that the United States government has caused sea levels to rise” (43). The very idea that legal suits against the U.S. could be brought forward in order to contain the effects of global warming and that this process might help people elsewhere is defined as “nuts”. Despite the fact that the article discussed legalizing international relations regarding climate change, there was a void in addressing the legality of displaced people or refugees.

To substantiate the fact that this is indeed a void is to understand that this information is in some way less important than what is framed in *NYT*. Framing studies suggest that frames are powerful units of discourse, thus what is said, made salient and discussed is deemed more important than what is not.²⁵

²⁴ Hereafter the selected articles from *The New York Times* will refer to the list in numerical order in the Appendix provided at the end of this essay.

²⁵ See Paul D’Angelo, “News Framing as a Multiparadigmatic Research Program: A Response to Entman”, *Journal of Communication* (2002), 870-888.

Even if we were to accept the idea that a writer is allowed not to be aware of all aspects of an issue, it is hard to believe that for over thirty years *NYT* reporters have not considered it important to discuss the lack of a legal status for these people, which is what makes this a controversial construct to begin with.

3.1.2 Addressing Movement with Dignity

Another void in this issue is to frame human movement in more positive terms. From an ecolinguist perspective, it is relevant to find that the whole issue of people seeking refuge is framed in relation to ‘risk’ rather than as a humanitarian problem. Also, climate change is framed as a threatening force having an impact on lives, in more than one way. *NYT* evaluates the movement of people in alarming tones by denominating it “mass migration” (10) of “large swatches of humanity” (29).

The void in the newspaper comes from not even addressing this movement as an adaptive strategy in positive terms. On the contrary, the movement is discussed as a cause of concern, drain of resources and a human security risk (28). Implicit then is the suggestion that these people do not have the ability to adapt to change.²⁶

Thus, the void of a positive and dignified representation of the movement of people allows *NYT* to frame the issue as a risk or threat. This discourse of absence is instead framed as the opposite, i.e. mass migration is a security threat. This focus gains trust, allowing for the void or absence to be subjugated knowledge and ensuring the frame of movement as a security risk to be entrenched in the media.

3.2 Textual Absences

Traces and masks have been retrieved at the lexical, clausal and textual level in *NYT* news articles.

3.2.1 Traces

Amongst the traces listed in Ecolinguistic literature, the focus in this essay is on presuppositions, probable estimates, and implicatures.²⁷

1) *Presuppositions*: presuppositions have assumptions built into the text, that is their meanings remain elusive to the news, as they are not directly encoded into the text but are the background upon which certain themes are built. One repeated example in *TNYT* is the assumption that climate change is indeed “the problem” that causes human displacement. Collapsing the triggers of human migration into one external agent of climate change called “the problem” triggers the presupposition that there are no other problems that confront these people who want to relocate. The following example validates the point: “Despite growing efforts in many countries to tackle the problem, the global situation is becoming more acute as developing countries join the West in burning huge amounts of fossil fuels” (25).

In *NYT* there were four other kinds of presuppositions. The first is signalled by change-of-state verbs which encode a presupposition because the earlier state-of-affairs have changed by the process of the verbs and this is presumed. In *NYT*, the physical changes seen on Earth are encoded as a

²⁶ One of the counter-arguments made against the movement of refugees comes from the fact that these people still have the ability to move, thus they have made a conscious decision to move. Those who cannot move are seen as the genuine victims of climate change in that they stay still and do not move. In this light, migration is considered as conscious choice for betterment which explains why there is some resistance in calling these people ‘refugees’. If this logic were to be applied, the movement of people displaced by civil strife and war should suffer the same logic. Similarly, the true victims should be the ones who stay, not the ones who undertake a journey in order to escape. Based on the same logic, they should not be protected by a ‘refugee’ status.

²⁷ Stibbe, *Ecolinguistics*.

presupposition. The terrifying climate change as an agent of destruction is placed outside of human actions and their interactions with other humans. When climate change is presented as separate or affecting the lives of people, then the nature of the problem is presented purely in scientific terms or in terms of immigration issues. Table 1 shows a few examples to validate the point.

Verb	Example	Explanation
Externally caused change – “Stop” Existential presupposition	“We can do nothing to stop climate change on our own, and so we have to buy land elsewhere,” Nasheed said in November (42).	The verb “stop” presupposes that there was a state of affairs that was happening before it ceased. The verb presupposes a different state of affairs; the effect is that the hidden nature of the meaning is less amenable to comment, or debate.
Externally caused change – “Start” Propositional Presupposition	... Jean-Claude Juncker, the president of the European Commission told world leaders on Nov 30th that climate change could “destabilise entire regions and start massive forced migrations and conflict over natural resources” (10).	The use of the verb “start” presupposes that there was a different state of affairs preceding this one. This presupposed information is not detailed, it could be one way by which further questions need not be raised about the present/future state of affairs.
Internally caused change – “Wither” Value presupposition	Maybe we have decided that the deficits are too large and the money too scarce and that it is better just to look the other way until the city withers and disappears (18).	Despite the fact, that wither is a verb that is an internally caused change of state verb. The presupposed information here is a conscious allowing of this process that is again human controlled. Humans enable the process.

Table 1. Examples of change-of-state verbs encoding presuppositions

The presuppositions observed in this research were varied: the presumed knowledge of what exists, could exist and encoded presuppositions about what is valuable and good. This trace, then, allows the reader to focus on what is being said in the text, that climate change is a destructive force, which then allows for responsibility to be encoded as a global phenomenon external to us. Descriptions focus on the nature of migration or the physical changes being made to the warming planet.

Next, a small group of factive verbs encode presuppositions, as the clausal complements are presupposed. Factive verbs in English like ‘realize’, ‘understand’, ‘regret’, ‘discover’ and some uses of ‘know’ allow for the clausal complement to be presupposed.

Factive Verb - Presupposition	Comment
Lawmakers need to understand that for New Orleans the words "pending in Congress" are a death warrant requiring no signature (18).	- The presupposed knowledge here is that New Orleans is suffering due to bureaucratic delays. - Value presupposition.
Although military and intelligence planners have been aware of the challenge posed by climate changes for some years, the Obama administration has made it a central policy focus (7).	- The presumed knowledge held by the military and intelligence planners is that climate change has challenges. - Existential presupposition.

Table 2. Selected examples of factive verbs encoding presuppositions

While the newspaper does explicitly frame the problems and issues surrounding climate change, the traces suggested by the use of factive verbs presupposes knowledge of a state of affairs that is consequential to the movement of environmental refugees. The trace seen in the article is about climate change, which draws the attention away from environmental refugees. This allows the news articles on environmental refugees to be more about climate change than human displacement.

The third type of presupposition observed is the use of cleft and pseudo-cleft sentences. The focus of the sentence changes so that important pieces of information shift to the post-modifying relative clausal complement. With the dummy subject ‘it’ heading the sentences, the actual content of the sentence is placed within the presupposed subordinate clause.

Clefts and Pseudo-Clefts-Presuppositions	Explanation
It is also said that rising temperatures would change the nature of US military missions, increasing the demands for resources in the Arctic and the coastal regions that would be affected by higher sea levels... (17).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The presupposed knowledge is presented in the subordinate clause which details what could change. It is not just the physical changes, but the nature of US military missions too. - Propositional Presupposition.
It's not just the actual disasters that might rise, it is the accumulating stress that are placed on a lot of different countries and the possibility of war, conflict, refugees, displacement that arise from climate change (22).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The most important information, that “climate change” has been attributed the cause of these events/processes is placed at the very end. - Propositional Presupposition.
It is also worth noting that the panel's scientists – acting in good faith on the best information then available to them – probably underestimated the range of sea-level rise in this century, the speed with which the Arctic ice cap is disappearing and the speed with which some of the large glacial flows in Antarctica and Greenland are melting and racing to the sea (28).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The actual physical changes detailed at the end of the sentence are presupposed to be true. Yet the focus of the sentence is on the scientists of IPCC. - Propositional Presuppositions.

Table 3. Selected examples of clefts and pseudo-cleft sentences encoding presuppositions

The details provided in the subordinated clauses allow a trace of the information about the consequences of climate change to be visible. Most of the traces seem to point at the effects of climate change, thus the environmental refugees are ‘just’ one of the effects of climate change.

The next category is that of the iteratives where the earlier and later occurrences of the process is presupposed. The presupposed information directs the attention in *NYT* towards the outcome of ‘reports’, ‘treaties’ and ‘defence reviews’ rather than on presumed knowledge of earlier and later state of affairs.

Examples		
But even before the current <u>reassessment</u> , parties to the 1992 treaty had agreed that these steps were inadequate and had opened talks aimed at stronger measures. (46)	The panel's draft report has yet to undergo <u>review</u> by governments, but its members say they expect few if any substantial changes in the findings. (46)	There's a reason why the quadrennial defence <u>review</u> – [which] the secretary of defence and the Joints Chiefs of Staff work on – identified climate change as one of our most significant national security problems. (22)
Even with all that pain, can it yet be called the nation's worst environmental disaster? (27)	... People like me don't want to work on the land anymore,” Mr Ren said. “It's backbreaking work. I've tried it. The land is not fertile, and it is far from any water. It's just not worth it.” (48)	A system already burdened by a large Iraqi refugee population may not be able to absorb another influx of displaced persons. (23)

Table 4. Selected examples of comparatives encoding presuppositions

The iterative triggers of adverbs (e.g., yet, anymore) and determiners (e.g., another) allow for the subjugated knowledge of the state of affairs of the victims of climate change to be alluded to. Yet the trace only hints at the troubles that the migrants face. The lack of access to the details of their condition leads to broad brush strokes of the suffering reported without actual detailing how lives have changed.

In conclusion, presuppositions are ways through which the discourse of absence is weaved into the text, alongside salient information. The assumptions made are powerful and not highlighted as the main proposition in the texts. The traces show that environmental refugees are constructed primarily in ways which promote generalisations about human movement due to climate change. In *NYT* the reportage on environmental refugees is subordinated to climate change.

2) *Probability Estimates*: the next set of traces with regard to this issue is seen in the repetitive use of probability estimates.²⁸ Probability estimates may be defined as stating that an event/process is likely to happen with differing amounts of certainty. Consider the following example: “The United Nations estimates the costs of global warming at *more* than \$300 billion a year” (43 [emphasis mine]). In this case, lower bounds of the probability estimates are indicated by the use of “more than” (also “above”, in other cases), while upper bounds could be indicated by “less than” or “lower than” a certain percentage.²⁹ Classified as hedges, these terms along with others allow for a proposition to be magnified or its value to be diminished with relation to the numerical value stated. Linguistically, a hedge is a word or phrase that modifies the force or accuracy of a statement.³⁰ A hedge, used along with a numerical value, allows the reportage to express approximates when the information is made more or less precise than the corresponding value of numeral value used alone. This is evident from the extract below: “A continuing rise in average global sea level ... is likely to amount to *more than* a foot and a half by the year 2100” (47 [emphasis mine]). Here the use of “more than” allows the writer to be less precise than the corresponding “A continuing rise in average global sea level ... is likely to amount to a foot and a half by the year 2100”. the lack of a probable estimate makes the statement more accurate. Since climate change deals with an unpredictable future, the reporter cannot be accused of non-factual reportage with probability estimates.³¹

Predicting climate change and its effects on human beings is an inherently uncertain activity.³² The probability estimates help quantify that climate change is indeed affecting the lives of humans, yet the readers can also infer other information not explicitly stated in the propositions.

An overview of the probability estimates used by *NYT* is shown below in Table 5. The estimates with regards to climate change predictions and environmental human displacement convey nuances of uncertainty.

²⁸ See Russo, “Speculations about the Future: Populism and Climate Change in News Discourse”, in Encarnación Hidalgo-Tenorio et al., eds., *Populist Discourse: Critical Approaches to Contemporary Politics* (London: Routledge, 2019), 190-206.

²⁹ See Sigrid M. Hohle and Karl H. Teigen, “More than 50% or Less than 70% Chance: Pragmatic Implications of Single-Bound Probability Estimates”, *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making*, 31.1 (2018), 138-150.

³⁰ George Lakoff, “Hedges: A study in Meaning Criteria and the Logic of Fuzzy Concepts”, *Journal of Philosophical Logic*, 2.4 (1973), 458-508, 458.

³¹ See Russo, “Speculations about the Future”.

³² As stated earlier, environmental migration is complicated by the fact that triggers can be as varied as a single disaster (such as a hurricane or earthquake) or multiple triggers like changing climate patterns effecting livelihoods along with operating governments and states being unable to support these people and their needs.

Approximates	Climate change	The effects of climate change on human displacement
Almost	The Bush administration says it is spending almost \$3 billion a year on energy technology research as its major contribution to combating climate change. (2)	The United Nations resident coordinator for Mozambique, Ndolamb Ngokwey, said in a telephone interview from Maputo, the capital, that almost 27,000 flood refugees had been placed in 53 camps and that nearly 42,000 more had fled rising waters and sought refuge elsewhere. (51)
Nearly	This summer, Lake Mead fell to its lowest level since it was initially filled. It has dropped nearly 150 feet in the last 14 years. (19)	In a worse-case projection, a Vietnamese government report released last month says that more than one-third of the delta, where 17 million people live and nearly half the country's rice is grown, could be submerged if sea levels rise by three feet in the decades to come. (36)
Or so	At the very least, sea level rises of a foot or so could wipe out island ecosystems. (33)	If such a program were to start in 2010, the United States, for example, would have to be prepared to accept 150,000 to a half-million immigrants a year for the next 70 years or so. (9)

Table 5. Examples of probable estimates

Hence, the use of probability estimates expresses uncertainties that can be due to natural variability in the data accounted for in different locations, including space for possible measurement errors and incomplete knowledge of future and present scenarios. These probability estimates imply that we cannot predict future scenarios pertaining to the health of different eco-systems accurately.

Despite climate change science being considered an unpredictable science, there is still overwhelming evidence that eco-systems have had to adapt and mitigate the effects of climate change. Yet, when discussions include human displacement, the traces suggested by the use of probability estimates also hide the actual issue. What the traces in the form of probability estimates hide is the actual number of people moving, enumerating the trigger points having caused outward movements and whether it was primarily climate change that caused this movement.

Probability estimates also imply that the effects of climate change on human displacement are primarily based on conjectures, save observations that accounted for after specific disasters and those areas where one can observe the movement of people. The specific reported disaster is arranged into a recognisable pattern where the report focuses on people movement, thereafter receiving help. This helps to frame the issue in a familiar pattern of disaster-aftermath-help. The articles direct attention to the deluge and swathes of humanity moving due to climate change. The probability estimates build up a problem of huge numbers: the implication is that there are vast numbers of people on the move due to climate change.

Furthermore, research shows that probable estimates were also used without hedges that build up the image of many people on the move:

- “Another study, the Stern Report, released last December by the British government, projected *hundreds of millions* of ‘environmental refugees’ by 2050” (39 [emphasis mine]);
- “This dark situation underlies the thorny debate over the world's responsibilities to the *millions of people* likely to be displaced by climate change” (35 [emphasis mine]);

- “... the displacement of *hundreds of millions* of climates refugees, civil unrest, chaos and the collapse of governance in many developing countries, large-scale crop failures and the spread of deadly diseases” (28 [emphasis mine]).

The use of non-specific probable estimates like “millions” and “hundreds” allows the writer to attribute a certain magnitude to the disaster and/or subsequent human displacement. The use of generic references like these implies that the issue is a serious one and warrants attention. What is interesting about this trace is that it also functions as a mask in that a different version of reality is presented to the reading audience. The actual number moving due to climate change is far removed from what is reported.³³ This trace also erases the grim reality of the individual realities and moves the focus to a large-scale movement suggested by these probable estimates.

To conclude, probability estimates serve to build uncertainty, yet they leave traces of information that do not project the reality as it is. The probability estimates then help claim-makers and elite social actors to manage the quantification to suit the purpose of making salient issues of climate change’s effects or negative impact of large movements of people.

3) *Implicatures*: the last set of traces observed in the research is the implicatures suggested by the repeated use of certain propositions. Scalar implicatures violate the maxim of quantity with the use of “some”, “many” and “few”.³⁴ The argument made here reiterates the argument already made in the section on probable estimates.

Examples	
Scientists trying to predict the consequences of climate change say that they see <u>few</u> safe havens from the storms, floods and droughts that are sure to intensify over the coming decades. (30)	That is surely because the area is desert scrubland, and <u>few</u> people were inconvenienced by the spill. (27)
The proposition implies not many safe havens will survive the effects of climate change.	The proposition implies that not many people were affected oil spill. This makes absent that other non-human species also could have been affected by the same.

Table 6. Examples of scalar implicatures

The use of scalar implicatures allows for climate change’s effects to be couched in the message. The implied message carries the weight of the magnitude of the problem depending on the argument. When it comes to climate change the implied information presents some space for hope, yet when it comes to affecting the lives of human and non-human species in less populated regions, the implicature is that their lives are not as important as those living in other places.

In conclusion, implicatures leave a trace of the information suggested by the proposition. Only context dependent research makes the trace visible. Sentences in isolation may be otherwise unwittingly overanalysed.

³³ Richard Black et al., “Migration and Climate Change: Toward an Integrated Assessment of Sensitivity”, in Thomas Faist and Jeanette Schade, eds., *Disentangling Migration and Climate Change: Methodologies, Political Discourses, and Human Rights* (Berlin: Springer, 2013), 29-53.

³⁴ Implicatures found in the research were varied and many, but because of space constraints the focus will only be on scalar implicatures that flout the maxim of quantity. See Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1989).

3.2.2 Masks

1) *Metaphors*: metaphors help mask the lived reality of the people suffering anthropogenic climate change. Metaphors are implied comparison between two things, where one is experienced through the other. As they make abstract concepts more relatable, they anchor the discourse by framing a particular understanding over other possible interpretations.³⁵

The overarching metaphor employed is encoded in the lexical compound “environmental refugee”. The metaphor very clearly masks the reality, for “environmental refugee” is a complex meeting of various comparisons. The refugee is one who seeks refuge, this is a mask by itself, for environmental refugees are not even acknowledged as refugees, they are being compared to refugees who seek the assistance of global organizations like the UNICEF, UNHCR and governing bodies of host nations. Also, to call these people environmental refugees means that they are escaping the environment much like “war refugees” or “civil refugees”, in which cases the refugees are escaping war or civil strife. The environment or climate cannot be an active agent alone, consciously causing displacement. In the use of the term, the future for these people is recast into the present. Thus, the use of the lexical compound allows us to mask perspectives that fit into the discussion of war against climate change; yet this is different from the reality of these victims. The term environmental refugee still retains the core essence of “refugee” in its literal sense (i.e., a person who has legitimate reasons to leave their home-state, having necessity to seek refuge, or a person who wishes to be resettled by receiving states); yet, as *NYT* promotes good climate behaviour and protection, there is a promotion of fear from the sheer pressure of hosting the overwhelming numbers of humans displaced as well. In such a metaphoric presentation, the environmental refugee becomes part of the perspective that climate change is the security threat. The environmental refugee then is a metaphoric representation of people at the mercy of host countries.

Many of the identified conceptual metaphors are commonly used in other discourses too.³⁶ ‘Battle against climate change’ is often used, but there are also other metaphors commonly associated with migration. The table below categorises metaphoric source domains, and examples of their occurrences.

The battle against climate change was the most pervasive metaphor used. While the metaphor was effective in enabling better descriptions of our fight against climate change, the environmental refugees were only classified as the victims in the battle. This masks the reality of SIDS who resist being called refugees as they do have operating governments that work for their people. The metaphor also negates the efforts of these people who are doing much to mitigate the effects of climate change without moving.

³⁵ Brigitte Nerlich and Nelya Koteyko, “Compounds, Creativity and Complexity in Climate Change Communication: the Case of ‘Carbon Indulgences’”, *Global Environmental Change*, 19.3 (2009), 345-353.

³⁶ A conceptual metaphor refers to the understanding of one idea or conceptual domain in terms of the other. See Lakoff and Mark Johnson, “Conceptual Metaphors in Everyday Language”, *The Journal of Philosophy*, 77.8 (1980), 453-486.

Metaphor: War	
Metaphor Occurrence	Examples
Threat	In 2007 the report also described climate change as a ‘threat multiplier’ or a problem that could enhance or contribute to already resisting causes of global disruption (16)
Dangerous	The president argued that climate change had set off dangerous domino effects around the world, prompting a severe drought in Nigeria that was exploited by the terrorist group Boko Haram.... (17)
Fight	What makes the approach of this environmental fight extraordinary is that the plaintiffs would not just be people who live near a source of pollution but those who are thousands even many thousands of miles away. (43)
Conflict	Those plans include attempts to integrate environmental concerns into the development plans of ministries and enterprises, modifications that could conflict with their ambitions for growth, he said. (36)
Combat	The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification – like the climate talks, it grew out of the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992-.... (10)
Unleash	Otherwise we will bust through the limit of a 2-degree Celsius rise in average temperature that climate scientist will believe will unleash truly disruptive ice melt sea level rise and weather extremes. (22)
Death	So Syria as a whole is slowly bleeding to death of self-inflicted gunshot wounds. (24)
Ravage	It is not the first time the United States has faced a mass internal migration: think of the “okies” who fled the drought-ravaged Dust Bowl for fertile California.... (16)
Victims	We may not pollute the world, yet we are victims of extreme weather and climate change. (6)
Negotiate	The panel, a United Nations group of 2500 scientists from around the world, advises parties to a 1992 treaty that are negotiating reductions in heat trapping greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide. (47)
Portocols	They say they were inspired by the Bush administration’s refusal to go along with the Kyoto Protocol, the internationally negotiated framework for reducing green-house-gas emissions. (43)

Table 7. Examples of the conceptual metaphor War

In the next table, the conceptual metaphor of pressure masks the reality of climate change and environmental refugees. Pressure is actualised in two ways, the first being the pressure of mitigating the effects of climate change, and the second being the pressure of tackling the problem of human displacement.

Metaphor: Pressure	
Metaphor Occurrence	Examples
Pressure	He cited the prospects of waves of ‘environmental refugees’ fleeing ravaged third world economies or low-lying areas and causing destabilizing pressures’ for industrialised countries. (46)
Strain	a study of alternative fuels and a look at how major power relations could be strained by a changing climate. (7)
Stretch	Forecasters predicted heavy rains ... Cahora Bassa hydroelectric dam, the largest in southern Africa, for signs that it was being stretched to capacity. (51)
Squeeze	Mali one of the world’s poorest countries is being squeezed by what farmers herders. Government officials and Western donors say may be the worst drought in its history. (41)
Tension	If there is any tension between science and Maldivians’ conservative religious values, Nasheed said he hoped to dampen it before the Italians arrived. (42)
Force	People forced to leave their homes because of climate change are not easily classified under existing human rights, refugee or asylum law. (10)
Stress	but recently our researchers came across a WikiLeaks cable that brilliantly foreshadowed how environmental stresses would fuel the uprising. (23)

Table 8. Examples of the conceptual metaphor Pressure

The use of the conceptual metaphor of pressure in the above examples suggests that environmental refugees are more often associated with negative, rather than positive connotations of the metaphor. Be it the suffering they are facing, or the possibility of prospective trouble they will give the host nations, the conceptual metaphor of pressure masks the reality of the person who is forced to move.

Metaphor: Water	
Metaphor Occurrence	Examples
Drown	But a policy paper called “Our drowning neighbours” by the now governing Labour Party, said Australia should help meld an international coalition to address it. (35)
Influx Absorb	A system already burdened by a large Iraqi refugee population may not be able to absorb another influx of displaced people. (23)
Outflow	In Jiangxi Province, the outflow of farmers leaped from 200,000 in 1991 to more than 3 million last year. (48)
Pour	The West poured in aid without helping to find a key to greater food production.... (41)
Surge	The president said the conditions could create a global surge of climate change refugees.... (17)
Swell	The urban-dwellers with meagre but stable incomes send cash ... or the relatives move to the cities, swelling households and stretching overburdened resources. (41)
Tide	30-year-old Ren Jen drifted into Beijing this month, part of the migrant tide of 50 million peasants.... (48)
Wave	The grim alternative affects all nations – more severe storms, more famine and floods, new wave of refugees, coastlines that vanish, oceans that rise.... (7)

Table 8. Examples of the conceptual metaphor Water

Above, the metaphor of the elemental force of water is actualised in the texts with the news reports only focussing on the negative aspects of the movement of water.³⁷

Yet again, the metaphor of water allows the reportage of environmental refugee to build the narrative of humans moving in large numbers. The potent power of water is a scaffold with which negative imagery is built of environmental refugees having no choice but to move. What the metaphors mask is the nature of the movement. Human suffering is masked by the numbers of people moving, thus the attention is garnered for the argument against restraining these movements.

In comparing the metaphoric usage of war, pressure and water one understands that there are significantly more metaphors that refer to the problems of climate change than to human displacement itself. The difference came in the way the two topics masked the issues. There is no doubt that climate change is a battle that everyone has to fight, with the act of fighting the battle resulting in loss, damage and negotiations, but the metaphor of a war accentuates the North-South divide by developing an argument for the “winners and losers” adapting to climate change. In fact, the articles in *NYT* tend to include the voice of climate change sceptics by positing that the North is able to adapt to climatic change (46; 29) and therefore wins the battle through the financial resources used to mitigate and adapt to climate change. Consequently, in the battle against climate change, victims are inevitable. Treaties, summits and talks require the two sides of the opposing camps to sit and negotiate good climate behaviour. Thus, deals were reported, and claims were made about how much was achieved through treaties. The use of a war metaphor was accentuated the attempt by *NYT* to show the reading public how much or how little was done to tackle climate change.

The development of a conceptual metaphor allows us to understand how one conceptual domain was understood in connection to another.³⁸ The use of metaphors associated with water and pressure,

³⁷ See Paul Baker and Tony McNery, “A Corpus-based Approach to Discourses of Refugees and Asylum Seekers in UN and Newspaper Texts”, *Journal of Language and Politics*, 4.2 (2005), 197-226; Baker et al., “A Useful Methodological Synergy? Combining Critical Discourse Analysis and Corpus Linguistics to Examine Discourses of Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the UK Press”, *Discourse & Society*, 19.3 (2008), 273-306.

³⁸ See Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

for instance, push the readers towards an understanding of human displacement in negative terms. Thus, when employing metaphors that show the characteristics associated with water and pressure,³⁹ the journalists suggest tacitly how their readers should see and interpret the phenomenon of human displacement. However, since human displacement has been framed in negative ways, the phenomenon is not associated to any solutions, either expressed directly or implicitly. Thus, when policymakers are confronted with ‘a global surge of climate change refugees’ (17) or relationships are ‘strained’ (7) *NYT* seems to develop a description of the issue in familiar terms of unplanned and unwanted immigration, rather than positing solutions or suggesting remedies.

2) *Catchphrases and Buzz Words*: when used repeatedly, catchphrases allow the reader to associate people, actions, events and states with a specific phenomenon. The point of a catchphrase is the ubiquitous usage of the term in the media. US former President Barack Obama, for example, used the catchphrase ‘threat- multiplier’ (17), to describe climate change, suggesting that this was a dangerous dimension which threatened the very sovereignty of the US. The catchphrase collapses the causal reasoning linking climate change to security threats, by suggesting that the warming climate will have a severe impact on the lives of people: agricultural yields will decline, hurricanes and tropical storms will occur more often, sea-levels will rise; but these phenomena will affect people in different ways. People in developing and least developed countries (in Asia and Africa for example) will suffer from these effects as well as from uneasy access to clean drinking water and extreme climatic events. This means that many ‘weak’ countries will face additional stress coming from environmental issues. This will lead to conflict and unrest. Also, climate change could be seen as triggering and intensifying wars and armed conflicts, wherever special security engagements and military interventions are undertaken to ensure national security. The catchphrase ‘threat-multiplier’ suggests, then, that climate change will affect the underdeveloped South which in turn will pose a security risk to the more prosperous North as populations that suffer in the South will possibly migrate to the North; or, resource scarcity will lead to conflicts of interest which could only be solved through military intervention. The ‘threat-multiplier’ or the synonymous use of ‘domino-effect’ (17) or ‘catalyst for conflict’ (17) suggest that climate change is to blame for human displacement issues. These catchphrases force the reader to essentially make a link between environment and security, masking the reality of the clausal chain of probable consequences. Yet, it is evident that the ‘threat-multiplier’ catchphrase can be politically instrumentalised when used to augment military interventions to ensure land security against ‘mass migration’ (10) or for abating unrest where “climate change is an active, driving force in starting a conflict” (16).

Another catchphrase that was found repeatedly across the 30-year period is ‘waves of environmental refugees’ (7; 26; 46). The noun ‘waves’ is very common in immigration discourses.⁴⁰ The catchphrase helps develop themes associated with risk. A common pattern is the use of the catchphrase occurring with numbers, often ‘millions’ (24 occurrences) referred to the number of people seeking refuge. By reiterating that ‘large swathes of humanity’ will be affected (29), the pattern builds an argument against hosting such large numbers.

The point of these catchphrases is that since they are applied universally across the decades, there is a misleading premium placed on their ability to evoke common assumptions on a subject. These

³⁹ CHANGES ARE MOVEMENT is the underlying metaphor that supports the water metaphor, whereas PEOPLE ARE CONTAINERS supports the pressure metaphor.

⁴⁰ See Jonathan Charteris-Black, “Britain as a Container: Immigration Metaphors in the 2005 Election Campaign”, *Discourse and Society*, 17.5 (2006), 563-581; Sanjay Chaturvedi and Timothy Doyle, eds., *Climate Terror: A Critical Geopolitics of Climate Change* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Paul A. Chilton and Mikhail Ilyin, “Metaphor in Political Discourse: The Case of Common European House”, *Discourse and Society*, 4.1 (1993), 7-31; Gerald O’ Brien, “Indigestible Food, Conquering Hordes, and Waste Materials: Metaphors of Immigrants and the Early Immigration Restriction Debate in the United States”, *Metaphor and Symbol*, 18.1 (2003), 33-47.

catchphrases mask the issue by suggesting a linear understanding of climate change as the cause of trouble, environmental refugees as the consequence and thus reduce a multifaceted problem to a narrow understanding of the issue.

While former US President Obama used the catchphrase ‘threat multiplier’, the ex Vice President Al Gore contributes to the ‘thorny debate’ (28) by reiterating the ‘destabilizing power’ of climate-induced crises that industrialised countries have to face (28). The descriptor, “destabilizing” alternates with “power”, “force” and “effect”. Such buzzwords are used to suggest that climate change has the power to cause unrest and trouble. Buzzwords are often repeated by the media and end up creating associations between a specific subject and a specific jargon. In our case, buzzwords are used to justify the call for more military spending on immigration and homeland security in using ‘destabilizing power/force/effect’ to describe climate change, the issue is developed as one that deals exclusively with security threats.

Ex. 1. “Such climate-induced crisis could topple governments, feed terrorist movements or destabilize entire regions”. (4)

Ex. 2. “Scientists fear climate effects so severe that they might destabilise governments, produce wave of refugees, precipitate the sixth mass extinction of plants and animals in Earth’s history”. (13)

These buzzwords in their varied textual realisations draw attention once again to the consequences of climate change. In this sense, they silence the causes of the issue such as the physical realm of unstable soil, due to soil erosion, unstable grounds due to ice-melts, to focus exclusively on the destabilizing power of climate change as a cause of a security threat. Al Gore categorically makes the connection between security and environmental refugees: he cited the prospect of waves of “environmental refugees” fleeing ravaged third world economies or low-lying areas and “causing enormous destabilizing pressures” for industrialised countries (28). Thus, the human face of climate change morphs into being the face of security threats, firmly entrenching the frame of environmental refugees as security threats.

Other buzzwords associated with climate change discourses are nominalisations such as ‘sustainability’, ‘mitigation’ and ‘adaptation’ which find way into the coverage of the issue with differing effects. For example, the word sustainable, the popular buzzword that most discussion on ecosystems and their carrying capacities contains had been used only three times over thirty years to show that continual misuse of other ecosystems in an unregulated manner is problematic. Even the nominalised lexical realisations which silence the efforts of the agents fail to be used astutely by *NYT* to frame ways by which countries could be called to attach value to nature and humans who are displaced and provide ways by which the health of various ecosystems can be encouraged.

Adaptation	Mitigation	Vulnerability
There is no doubt we in the US can adapt, but we shouldn’t think those adaptations are cost-free. (47)	Because of the uncertainties of climate change and the variables of mitigation measures, it is impossible to rank nations precisely on a scale of risk. (36)	most are more vulnerable to climate change and less able to adapt to it than are the industrialised nations of the cooler latitudes. (46)

Table 10. Nominalisations in *NYT*

Since climate change needs to be detailed in terms of its characteristics, these associated buzzwords are often used to mask how environmental refugees are the true victims, who do not have the recourses to adapt and mitigate the effects of climate change.

3) *Exemplars*: the definition of exemplars is, “a sample of incidents from a population of all occurrences that share particular characteristics most commonly manifested in news-media as personal stories or testimonials”.⁴¹ Exemplars are rarely “randomly sampled from the population, and thus, do not reliably represent the phenomenon with which they intended to correspond”.⁴² Since exemplars are repeated in the coverage, what happens is that the frame is populated with selective examples that gain currency.

One case that should be considered is the representation of disappearing island nations.⁴³ This is the synecdoche of climate change effects on humans and human displacement. Island-nations are characterised by “narrow resources bases and dependency on links to the outside world”.⁴⁴ They become an interesting case study in the “international global climate change arena”,⁴⁵ and often get framed for being examples of the un-resilient, which then allows international actors to help in efforts to adapt and mitigate the effects of climate change (33; 46; 25; 43; 32; 3). Featuring people from island-nations provides specific concrete evidence of the consequences of climate change to showcase an understanding of environmental challenges at local levels, on specific people. Thus, exemplars put a human face on an abstract issue. The island-nations’ woes represented through the voices of the people exemplify a juxtaposition of the interrelationship between the geopolitics of climate change and development.⁴⁶ Thus, the repeated representation of a ‘community under threat’ in the news article is constructed with the personalised stories emerging from the island nations:

Ex. 1. Although island nations and their people generate low levels of emissions, they still have to cope with the consequences of climate change:

“What we need to do is nothing short of decarbonizing the entire global economy,” he said, his high voice cracking. (42)

Ex. 2. The low-lying nature of island nations coupled with their geographical dispersion, weak and fragile infrastructures and rising sea levels exacerbate their vulnerability to climate change:

“We can do nothing to stop climate change on our own, and so we have to buy land elsewhere,” Nasheed said in November. (42)

The selection of island nations, emblematic of disappearing ecosystems, may encourage assumptions of climate change and its consequences on people. The assumption packed into providing island nations’ voices as exemplars is that they fit very well into framing climate change as a disastrous scenario excluding the resilience and adaptation strategies employed by various ecosystems in those island

⁴¹ Riva Tukachinsky et al., “Is a Picture Worth a Thousand Words? The Effect of Race-related Visual and Verbal Exemplars on Attitudes and Support for Social Policies”, *Mass Communication and Society*, 14.6 (2011), 720-742, 722.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Carol Farbotko, “Wishful Sinking: Disappearing Islands, Climate Refugees and Cosmopolitan Experimentation”, *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 51.1 (2010), 47-60.

⁴⁴ Godfrey Baldacchino and Daniel Niles, eds., *Island Futures: Conservation and Development Across the Asia-Pacific Region* (Kyoto: Springer Japan, 2011), 1.

⁴⁵ Amelia Moore, “Climate Changing Small Islands: Considering Social Science and the Production of Island Vulnerability and Opportunity”, *Environment and Society*, 1 (2010), 116-131, 116.

⁴⁶ Dennis Rumley, “Ideology, Carbon Emissions and Climate Change Discourses in the Indian Ocean Region”, *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 6.2 (2010), 147-154.

nations. Instead, in projecting exemplars like the one in the following example, one is left with a mask of “only” passive victimhood:

... in Salman Rushdie’s ‘Imaginary Homelands’, he says you can imagine your home, but then you imagine with words that you know. So, basically, you would always be imagining the beach, imagining the palm tree, imagining the horizon. You can’t be doing that in the middle of Rajasthan”. His voice wavered like that of a man on the verge of tears, and the normally upbeat president looked grief-stricken. “Believe me, we don’t want to go there. We are fine here. Moving will never be easy for anyone. (42)

Not even one article on environmental refugees in *NYT* seems to include the rich traditional ecological knowledge used to implement sustainable resource management in the island nations. The success stories of Aitutaki (Cook Islands) Kiribati and Niue resilient fisheries are excluded from *NYT* narratives on climate change and environmental refugees. These “deferring and complimentary ways of knowing” and adapting to climate change are never featured.⁴⁷ As a matter of fact, the exemplars offered by island nations focus only on the negative consequences of climate change. This failure to engage with any alternative perspective on climate change narrows the adaptation to climate change only through migration. The use of the exemplars such as the ones mentioned above, silences the effort and the attempts made by these people to adapt and mitigate climate change as an alternative to moving away from the island.

Similarly, offering China as an example and including individual stories of people as exemplars for internal human displacement testifies to how selective prominence is given to issues that are related, but that can easily lead to false assumptions. To suggest that floating populations and internal migrant workers seeking a better life are environmental refugees allows for the connotative meaning of ‘refuge’ to come into play without actually making a connection to the actual category of people escaping severe and harsh climatic events or environmental degradation. This relationship is masked with the choice of quotations by the migrants:

“The local people there bullied us because we were from the countryside,” he said. And the factory boss, who had promised high wages, delivered only half of that on payday. (49)

To use China as the only example of internal migration conjures up associated arguments of burgeoning populations affecting the distribution of resources, and migration is represented as a conscious decision and strategy to seek a better standard of living. Finally, international migration does not call into question the legal status of refugees as discussed earlier.

There is no doubt that these anecdotes of human displacement allow the reader to understand the issue a little better in terms of degrees of affectedness.⁴⁸ However, they orient the reader towards a certain interpretation of social reality which prevents the understanding of the issue at large.

4. Conclusion

The choices made by *NYT*, both thematic and textual, direct the reader in envisaging a reality that may not be complete because of the presence of voids, traces and masks. These textual and thematical constellations of knowledge regarding themes and discussions of people, processes and events are weaved in with the frames. We can draw the following conclusions from this study. First of all, climate change is a global phenomenon, presented as such, although the problem of environmental refugees is

⁴⁷ Susan A. Crate, “Climate and Culture: Anthropology in the Era of Contemporary Climate Change”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 40 (2011), 175-194, 175.

⁴⁸ Christina Nilsson and Mark Nuttall, eds., “Climate Change and Indigenous Peoples”, *Indigenous Affairs*, 1-2 (2008), 4-15.

framed as a problem confined to the developing and least developed countries. In *NYT*, the environmental refugees are the human face for the global effects of climate change, yet the reportage presents patterns of absences regarding their lived reality, their movements and the nature of such movements.

Secondly, the absences in a text need not be a consciously manipulative strategy employed by the news providers, but a result of their choices. Studying the patterns of absences foregrounds both information otherwise alluded to but not delved into, and information constructed in a negative manner because of choosing to mask alternative interpretations of reality. These constructed and context-dependent absences are classified into masks and traces. The analysis may further help researchers to theoretically classify absences in discourse. One absence was defined as a void but may also be defined as a manipulative silence.⁴⁹

Finally, much has been said about climate change discourses in Ecolinguistics,⁵⁰ yet very little has been said about humans as both victims and perpetrators of climate change. This research validates the point that there must be better ways to represent both humans and non-human species in an environment that we need to take care of. This way interconnections can be validated between the natural world and us.

APPENDIX

Newspaper Source: *The New York Times*

1. S. Amrith, "The Bay of Bengal: In Peril from Climate Change" (14 October 2013).
2. Anonymous, "Scientists Urge Global Action on Clean Energy" (28 February 2007).
3. Bajaj, V. "Climate Prophet in Hot Water" (1 April 2012).
4. N. Bernstein, "U.S. is Ending Haven for those Fleeing a Volcano" (9 August 2004).
5. D. Bilfesky, "Fears of More Red Sludge in Hungary, and More Refugees" (11 October 2010).
6. K. Bradsher, "Font of Natural Energy in the Philippines, Crippled by Nature" (22 November 2013).
7. J. Broder, "Obama Readying Emissions Limits on Power Plants" (20 June 2013).
8. J. Broder, "Climate Change Seen as Threat to Security and Drain on Military" (9 August 2009).
9. S. Byravan and S. Rajan, "Before the Flood" (9 May 2005).
10. S. Chan, "Global Warming's Role in Mass Migration is Addressed" (13 December 2015).
11. Z. Chang, "China Lacks Water to Meet its Mighty Thirst" (7 November 1993).
12. E. Cline, "Climate Change Doomed the Ancients" (28 May 2014).
13. B. Crossette, "Sudan is Said to Force 400,000 People into Desert" (22 February 1992).
14. B. Crossette, "Bangladesh Reports Toll from Storm is Near 40,000; Says it May Exceed 100,000" (3 May 1991).
15. J. Dao, "No Fixed Address" (11 September 2005).
16. C. Davenport, "Climate Change Deemed Growing Security Threat by Military Researchers" (14 May 2014).
17. J. Davis, "Obama Recasts Climate Change as a Peril with Far-reaching Effects" (21 May 2015).
18. Editorial, "Death of an American City", (11 December 2005).

⁴⁹ Thomas Huckin, "Textual silence and the Discourse of Homelessness", *Discourse and Society*, 13.3 (2002), 347-372.

⁵⁰ See, among the others, Stibbe, *Ecolinguistics*, and Richard J. Alexander, *Framing Discourse on the Environment: A Critical Discourse Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

19. T. Egan, “Haunted by Waters” (19 December 2015).
20. T. Egan, “In Land of French-fry, Study Finds Problems” (7 February 1994).
21. B. Fagan, “The Impending Deluge” (1 June 2013).
22. T. Friedman, “Obama on Obama on Climate” (8 June 2014).
23. T. Friedman, “WikiLeaks, Drought and Syria” (22 January 2014).
24. T. Friedman, “Without Water, Revolution” (19 May 2013).
25. J. Gillis, “U.N. Panel Issues its Starkest Warning yet on Global Warming” (3 November 2014).
26. J. Gillis, “Short Answers to Hard Climate Questions” (1 December 2015).
27. J. Gillis, “Where Gulf Spill Might Place on the Roll of Great Disasters” (19 June 2010).
28. A. Gore, “We Can’t Wish Away Climate Change” (28 February 2010).
29. B. Herbert, “In America: Cold Facts of Global Warming” (21 July 2000).
30. J. Kingson, “Final Alaska, Oregon or ... Detroit?” (23 September 2014).
31. D. Kirkpatrick, “Congress Approves Financing for Military and Immigration” (11 May 2005).
32. N. Kristof, “Paradise Drowning” (8 January 2006).
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