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'From there everything changed': conversion narrative in the biomimicry movement

Fransina Stradling 🅛[a] and Valerie Hobbs 🅛[b]

[a]University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, United Kingdom; [b]University of Sheffield, Sheffield, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

An increasingly influential approach to solving human ecological problems is an innovative design practice known as biomimicry. The Biomimicry Institute, a major stakeholder in the Biomimicry Movement, promotes biomimicry as a practice that mimics nature's genius to solve human challenges and provides hope of sustainable futures. Despite increasing global interest in the practice, so far little is known about the value placed on biomimicry within practitioner communities. Employing a corpus-assisted discourse-analytic approach, this paper explores the ways video narratives shared by practitioners affiliated with and curated by the Biomimicry Institute position biomimicry as a sacred practice. Drawing on Stibbe's ecolinguistic approach and Hobbs' functional religious language framework, we observe an overarching discursive pattern of conversion narrative (incorporating both personal and collective storylines) which highlights the sacred significance of the movement. We explore how the linguistic strategies underlying these conversion narratives centre human experience, mark group identity and attract new converts, while constructing an ecologically ambivalent discourse. In particular, we find that use of vague language obscures the precise nature of involvement in the movement and blurs the lines between member and non-member, contributing to the conversion narratives' potential as powerful proselytising tools.

1. Introduction

'Born into a world of stories' (Bochner et al., 1997), humans share a propensity to experience and understand the world through narratives. We use narratives to situate ourselves physiologically, psychologically, socially, and ideologically in relation to our life experiences, and so attach meaning to them. Organising ourselves into groups or movements – whether socio-cultural, political, economic, or overtly religious in nature – relies on sharing narratives with fellow members; within these communities, repeated movement narratives function to articulate and reaffirm core beliefs and so mark group identity,

maintain group boundaries and attract new participants (Hovi, 2014; Jesus, 2011). A prime example of rehearsed stories that acquire significance within a movement is the conversion narrative, what some call 'the spiritual autobiography' (Hartman, 2003). Such narratives signal a shift towards involvement in the metanarrative or worldview shared by a particular community, and, as such, can clarify a member's movement commitment whilst constructing and maintaining that movement's worldview.

In this article, we explore how the genre of conversion narrative functions to frame personal involvement in the metanarrative of the Biomimicry Movement. We do so by analysing conversion narratives in videos shared by 'nature-inspired learners, practitioners, and supporters from around the world' affiliated with the Biomimicry Institute (hereafter TBI), a main stakeholder in the movement. According to TBI, biomimicry is 'a practice that learns from and mimics the strategies found in nature to solve human design challenges, and find hope' (The Biomimicry Institute, n.d.). This version of biomimicry (see Section 2) – first popularised in the 1990s by Janine Benyus, a North American biologist and TBI co-founder – not only presents biomimicry as an innovative design practice but also urges humans to change their stories about humans' relation to nature, by inviting them to think of themselves as 'a species among species' (Benyus, 1997, p. 8) rather than separate from nature. Benyus further calls for humans to view nature as a *model*, taking inspiration from natural designs, as a *measure*, using nature's ecological standard to judge what innovations work, and as a *mentor*, learning rather than extracting from it. In this way, Benyus claims, biomimicry provides 'a new way of viewing and valuing nature … based not on what we can extract from the natural world, but on what we can learn from it' (Benyus, 1997, n.p.; see also Dicks, 2016; Mathews, 2011).

Though not explicitly acknowledged in TBI's documentation, on the face of it, their philosophy of ecological harmony (ecosophy) chimes with contemporary ecocentric approaches to environmental concerns, what ecolinguists refer to as beneficial to 'deep ecology' (Stibbe, 2014), which 'position the natural world, self-sustainability and self-reliance at the heart of decision-making and recognise the intrinsic value of all life-forms and ecosystems' (Honeybun-Arnolda & O'Riordan, 2020, p. 225; cf. technocentric approaches, see Section 6). Biomimicry endorsing current trends towards sustainability and ecological living has undoubtedly led to its adoption in many research areas (see Davidov, 2019), businesses and educational establishments. For example, biomimicry has found its way into UK GCSE Science and Design & Technology classrooms (see Environmental Audit Committee, 2012).[1] In spite of this, little research has so far been published on what it means to engage with 'biomimicry as a praxis that radically reframes, or has the potential to reframe, our understanding of resources and the human-nature relations' (Davidov, 2019, p. 42). In this paper we explore the personal angle to this question, firstly, by investigating how biomimics collectively narrate their experiences of the movement, and, in doing so, frame the movement and invite new joiners. And secondly, we consider the extent to which these personal stories align with ecocentric philosophies aiming to celebrate 'the centrality of life and all life forms, [to] convey new ways to conceptualise the planet and to interact with it, and … to conserve nature and the environment' (Virdis, 2022, p. 5), i.e. ecologically beneficial discourses (Stibbe, 2014).

In what follows, we use corpus-assisted discourse-analytic methods, aided by Hobbs' (2021) functional framework for analysing religious language, to analyse the linguistic and discursive features underpinning narrative strategies in videos on TBI's YouTube

Channel and the extent to which these point to the sacred significance of the Biomimicry Movement for participants. Section 2 contextualises our analysis by introducing TBI and its relation to the Movement. Section 3 describes the significance of conversion narrative within movements as a backdrop to describing our data in those terms, before Section 4 details our methods. Section 5 presents our findings regarding the ways the stories in our corpus act as conversion narratives, straddling personal and collective storylines to centre human experience and mark group identity. Finally, Section 6 explores how they function to attract new converts, especially through vagueness. We finally conclude that the conversion narratives under investigation frame the Biomimicry Movement as a sacred, nature-centred community of practice that provides space for everyone to contribute to a hopeful and sustainable future in simple and fulfilling ways. At the same time, the use of these narratives paradoxically functions to characterise the nature-focussed movement as highly human-centred.

2. The Biomimicry Institute and the biomimicry movement

TBI is a not-for-profit organisation in the USA that was co-founded in 2006 by Janine Benyus, author of *Biomimicry: Innovation Inspired by Nature* (1997), a book widely recognised as catalytic for the popularisation of biomimicry (RSA, 2022). TBI's website provides its mission: 'to naturalize biomimicry in the culture by promoting the transfer of ideas, designs, and strategies from biology to sustainable systems design' (The Biomimicry Institute, n.d.). Their stated aim is to achieve this in collaboration with the for-profit consultancy Biomimicry 3.8, which offers consulting services, professional training, and inspirational speaking, while TBI maintains the networks to promote the practice of biomimicry globally. TBI is also behind the website *AskNature.org*, which provides a curated database of nature's strategies and solutions that may be emulated to solve human challenges (The Biomimicry Institute, 2021).

TBI uses the language of 'movement' to describe the influence of biomimicry across the globe, as in their 2022 interview of Benyus, entitled 'From a Meme to a Movement: 25 Years of Biomimicry'. Needless to say, this 'Biomimicry Movement' is not representative of all practitioners of biomimicry. Many practitioners in other fields may instead align themselves with slightly different perspectives on biomimicry (see Davidov, 2019) or may work on biomimetic solutions to human challenges beyond those exemplified by TBI, such as social inequality or organisation management. However, Benyus' affiliation to TBI lends it power over other expressions of biomimicry and positions it as a leading voice.

Notably, TBI's definition of biomimicry (see Section 1) goes beyond mere nature-inspired design by focussing on its human benefits, revealing their social mission: not merely to provide information and support but also to create a culture of optimism in the face of environmental degradation. TBI's website further emphasises the socio-ethical nature of biomimicry in specifically human terms by stating that

> biomimicry is about valuing nature for what we can learn, not what we can extract, harvest, or domesticate. In the process, we learn about ourselves, our purpose, and our connection to each other and our home on earth. (The Biomimicry Institute, n.d.)

Despite one of the largest voices on biomimicry explicitly addressing the sociological aspects of biomimicry, scientific literature on the subject has to date seen limited

engagement with 'how biomimicry is situated within the broader social, political, and economic context as both an epistemic paradigm and an economy of value' (Davidov, 2019, p. 35). In particular, there is a lack of understanding around the ways biomimicry as a practice is valued in various socio-political and economic contexts, including practitioner communities. In this paper we contribute knowledge to this gap by considering how TBI curates practitioner narratives expressing the personal significance of biomimicry in ways which achieve cultural naturalisation (and thus widespread acceptance) of biomimicry. Using an ecolinguistics framework, we further explore the extent to which these curated narratives constitute discourse either ecologically beneficial, destructive or ambivalent (neither actively destructive nor beneficial) to TBI's ecosophy (Stibbe, 2014).

3. Conversion narratives: a sub-genre of movement narratives

Given TBI's language of movement, this section lays foundation for exploring their messaging in terms of movement narratives. Movement narratives can be roughly divided into two main categories, though the boundaries between the two remain fuzzy: participant narratives and (meta-)movement narratives (Benford, 2002). The former refer to stories that individual members tell about their experiences within the movement and which help to construct the movement's complex idioculture and signal commitment to the group. The latter refers to overarching myths, legends and folk stories communally constructed and retold at key moments in a movement's history. Though members may tell and retell these meta-narratives at any time, they tend to occur during times of change (Bryant & Cox, 2004), conflict (Gonzalez, 2020) and crisis (Eschle, 2018), whether these involve victory (Poethig, 1985) or defeat (Beckwith, 2015).

The two types of movement narratives tend to co-occur, as participants are often 'navigating the intersection of two different story lines: the dominant metanarratives that pervade the ideologies of their respective cultural spheres and the story of their personal lives' (Gonzalez, 2020, p. 590). This overlap is unsurprising when considering that the overemphasis of one storyline over the other in a movement can cause group breakdown. For example, focusing too heavily on meta-narratives can result in members feeling personally uninvolved and undervalued. Alternatively, hyper-individualism can cost the movement their sense of shared 'morality, political dedication, and public virtue' (Lichterman, 1996, p. 10). One type of movement narrative that straddles the fence between metanarrative and participant narrative is the conversion narrative, defined by Nock (1933, p. 7) as nothing short of

> the reorientation of the soul of an individual, … a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right.

Initial encounters with our data (see Section 4.2) indicated that the videos might fall within this movement narrative sub-type, focused as the data are both on the potential of biomimicry and on the personal impact of the speakers' trajectory towards religious-sounding destinations of hope and a purpose with biomimicry as the means.

Conversion narratives communicate a participant's personal shift towards involvement in a (often sacred) metanarrative. Other terms for conversion narrative signal that their distinctiveness lies in the weightiness of the transformation: change narratives (Noy, 2004), religious experience (Iyadurai, 2015), spiritual awakening (Galanter et al., 2014),

stories-of-becoming (Towns & Towns, 2001). 'To change one's religion is to change one's world' (Buckser & Glazier, 2003, p. xi), and conversion narratives share the specifics of this change, crucially, in ways recognisable enough to the community as to mark that person as a participant. Friends and spiritual advisors therefore often play a significant role in helping a convert to acquire the appropriate language (Heinrich, 1977). Conversion narratives also serve a proselytising function, 'an opportunity for movement adherents and advocates to speak on behalf of their community and "show others the light"' (Malesh, 2009, p. 141).

Conversion narratives tend to be associated most closely with shifts towards organised religion (Khalifa, 2019; Stromberg, 2014). In keeping with this, researchers documenting similar stories in seemingly secular contexts – like backpacking (Noy, 2004), vegetarianism and other dietary choices (Malesh, 2005), alcoholism (Galanter et al., 2014) and even academia (Mantai, 2019) – have chosen not to use the explicitly religious phrase 'conversion narrative'. And certainly, people's stories-of-becoming will differ from community to community in their form and content, since one function of these narratives is to mark one's membership. Still, across all such stories, there are remarkable similarities. Several consistent themes include: an encounter with a different system of ideas, discomfort arising from uncertainty, a loss of personal and social identity, the anxiety of destabilisation, the reconstitution of the self, and the discovery of new language of the soul (Leone, 2004). Working across these themes is similarly consistent linguistic patterning, such as a discursive push–pull strategy involving positive self-representation and negative other-representation, that is, a vision of two alternative ways of life, where push factors are those aspects of a system of belief that involve a sense of dissatisfaction or alienation and where pull factors are attractions or rewards that another system of belief offers (Sydnor, 2017; Timol, 2022). This is where conversion stories may become manipulative, for example when great emphasis is placed on the divide between negative previous-belief-system and positive current-belief-system (Van Dijk, 2006). Also typical of conversion narratives is a reliance on figurative language to communicate the ideological and emotive significance of life change. Chew (2010), for example, documents the particular use of metaphor to depict push–pull factors, including those of BREAKTHROUGH, LIGHT AT THE END OF A TUNNEL, ESCAPE ROUTE, GROWTH, BATTLE, and JOURNEY. Conversion narratives also tend to rely on intertextuality – such as references to widely known, authoritative conversion stories – to legitimise the convert's story and signal insider knowledge (Nickel, 2015).

In our view, the wide range of social movements and other contexts in which conversion narratives occur, as well as their discursive similarities, support their characterisation as sacred-making practices, within an open definition of religion, which all humans participate in and use language, among other resources, to accomplish (Hobbs, 2021). In all contexts, conversion narratives fulfil three main functions of religious language: reaffirm beliefs (an ecosophy, for example), articulate shared experience and, in so doing, provide a sense of community and comfort (Malesh, 2009, p. 140). For these reasons, we use the term 'conversion narrative' in what follows.

4. Research questions, data and design

Following on from our discussion of the genre of conversion narratives as a sub-genre of movement narratives, and especially their sacred significance, our research questions aim

more widely for greater understanding of identity-formation and meaning-making in TBI's social activism (Davis, 2002). Further, within ecolinguistics specifically, we consider the extent to which our data might reflect a beneficial, destructive or ambivalent discourse.

4.1. Research questions

1. What linguistic strategies underpin the conversion narratives that biomimics affiliated with TBI tend to use when expressing what biomimicry means to them?

2. In what ways do these features in combination replicate patterns in the genre of conversion narrative and so reveal and reaffirm biomimicry beliefs, enact social-cohesion and bolster emotional and psychological stability?

3. What conclusions can be drawn regarding the extent to which:

a. TBI's use of conversion narratives frames itself as a sacred community?

b. TBI's practitioner narratives constitute discourse either ecologically beneficial, destructive or ambivalent?

4.2. The data

Our data consists of all videos ($n = 68$, at the time of writing) from a playlist on TBI's YouTube channel entitled 'Putting Nature Back into Human Nature'. According to the playlist description, these videos capture what biomimicry means to 'nature-inspired learners, practitioners, and supporters from around the world as [they] together put nature back into human nature'. An earlier version of the playlist, featuring video testimonies of people affiliated with TBI, formed part of the launch of a TBI daily journaling project entitled '30 Days of Reconnection' during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. This project was aimed at providing stress relief, inspiration and hope, and empowering participants to 'mobilize and act, discover new ways to live in this world, and embrace a practice of biomimicry, where we create conditions conducive to life – just like nature does' (The Biomimicry Institute, 2020, n.p.). We note the significance of this context for religious meaning: this explicit invitation to reconnect at a time of global crisis could be read as a call to members to re-sacralise the biomimicry community, rearticulate what and who matters most to them and why, and receive reassurance in the process (see Keane, 1997).

As part of this invitation, participants were tasked on day 29 with recording a video about what biomimicry means to them. Submitted videos were added to the playlist in 2022, which as of June 2023 has received nearly 13,000 views. The video corpus comprises 155:40 min, with times for individual videos ranging from 6 s to 9:39 min (median time 1:42 min).

Three videos stand out from the other 65 in title, length (between 5 and 6 min each) and in form. While 65 videos represent views and practices of biomimicry of individual participants from the United States, Russia, France, Argentina, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Spain and India (titles include 'Tina Miller says biomimicry helps her cope' and 'Biomimicry changes the way Kristen Nordstrom teaches youth'), three videos consist of clips taken from participant videos and can as such be characterised as curated summaries of the other videos. One of these curated videos, 'Putting Nature Back into Human Nature' (22 speakers) lends its title to the playlist. This video can also be found on TBI's website under the heading 'Stories from the Network'. The other curated videos are entitled

'Why we love biomimicry' (12 speakers) and 'Biomimicry is Belonging' (31 speakers). This curation indexes the videos as representative of TBI's preferences for perceiving biomimicry.

4.3. Methods

We consider our data to constitute a corpus of naturally-occurring language use representative of messaging endorsed by TBI as conveyed by testimonials from practitioners associated with the institute. We employ corpus-assisted discourse analysis (CADS) to identify and analyse the linguistic and discursive strategies used across the corpus to frame biomimicry as a sacred community. CADS is an established analytical approach (see Baker et al., 2008; Taylor & Marchi, 2018) characterised as 'that set of studies into the form and/or function of language as *communicative discourse* which incorporates the use of computerised corpora in their analyses', facilitated by corpus linguistic tools (Partington et al., 2013, p. 10, original emphasis). Such tools can assist in-depth scrutiny of large amounts of data, like our corpus (22,160 words[2]), by using computational techniques to identify the frequency with which particular discursive patterns occur and their meanings in context. The curated videos provided a starting point in our analytical process: we used them to identify central themes and linguistic strategies that we could subsequently explore in more depth across the 65 source videos. Ahead of our analysis, we transcribed all 68 videos verbatim and noted multimodal features, such as speakers' backdrops and use of visuals, for example one speakers' inclusion of video footage of their children. This allowed us to complement our analysis of discursive themes with occasional discussion of the multimodal means of the videos, particularly of the ways the visual imagery contributes to their messaging. Ecolinguist Arran Stibbe refers to this approach as attending to stories 'not in the traditional sense of a narrative, however, but rather discourses, frames, metaphors and, in general, clusters of linguistic features that come together to convey particular worldviews' (2014, p. 117).

The analytical framework we adopt is Hobbs' (2021) approach to the study of religious language. Hobbs maintains an open perspective on religion, going beyond institutionalised religion to argue for a functional approach to religious language as a means of sacred-making, with at least three sub-functions: axiomatic, social-cohesive and emotive. This approach assumes that anyone or anything can be made sacred, and that religious language serves as a toolkit for that sacred-making. Accordingly, religious language is used within movements to foster community (social-cohesive function), establishing and reinforcing borders that unite around community-specific sacred notions and practices (axiomatic function), and to help humans cope existentially (emotive function). As for its linguistic forms, religious language is often derived from language common to an institutionalised religion prominent in a community's socio-cultural context, characterised by Hobbs as 'explicit religious language' (2021, p. 43). This derivation can be at the micro level, i.e. smaller stretches of text like words and multi-words, metaphor, archaism and manifest intertextuality, and at the macro level (adopting genre features of Christian sermons, for example). Identifying sacred-making meaning in a text often starts by attending first to explicitly religious features like these.

However, consistent with a functional model, one may also draw from a wider repertoire of language to do religion – what Hobbs (2021, p. 44) refers to as 'implicit religious

language' – so long as such language evokes a sense of being set apart. Identifying such language requires close attention to text-internal and text-external context, particularly in those situations when people tend to express their notions of the sacred: times of crisis and conflict, high stakes and key life events. Using CADS is compatible with Hobbs' framework, as CADS makes amenable to qualitative analysis the behaviour of language through the ways corpus software displays words and their co-text. Furthermore, CADS can reveal the 'incremental effect of discourse' (Baker, 2006, p. 13) that may not be observed in manual analysis, so that it may provide evidence for the (religious) meanings of particular words or phrases in the corpus beyond introspective interpretation.

Our analysis proceeded in this way:

1. We manually analysed transcriptions of the three curated videos, line by line, using a discourse-analytic approach complemented by consideration of multimodal features.

2. Having identified recurrent conversion narratives in these videos, we drew on our initial findings of linguistic patterns underpinning these narratives to evaluate their significance within the broader corpus of 65 transcribed source videos by using the corpus software Wmatrix (Rayson, 2009). In particular, we drew on its in-built part-of-speech (using the CLAWS7 tagset[3]) and semantic features (using USAS semantic categories[4]) to respectively create concordance lines of frequently used parts-of-speech and semantic domains.

3. We complemented our findings from Wmatrix with qualitative discourse analysis to investigate the functions of each linguistic element in creating conversion narratives. We also created a visual representation of the texts, mapping key discursive strategies and their linguistic realisations, to understand their overlaps and effects.

5. Findings

The videos consistently rely on explicitly religious and anthropocentric discursive strategies common to conversion narratives. This is most clearly indexed by frequent use of the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor, involving a spiritual 'path' 'from a [deficient] place … ' and an unfulfilling way of life 'to [a highly desirable destination]', with the Biomimicry Movement as the means. This 'journey', a noun repeated verbatim 15 times, is characterised by a push–pull narrative in which additional metaphor frames in tension, communicating states of being DISCONNECTED before finding biomimicry versus RECONNECTED after doing so, or being ASLEEP before versus AWAKE after, are layered over the overarching metaphor of LIFE IS A JOURNEY. The journey is also characterised by other semantic groups of opposition, such as forgetfulness versus re-learning and remembering, helpless versus powerful/effective, and feelings of grief, loss and pretence versus feelings of love, gratitude, curiosity, relief and hope. Cumulatively, this consistent push–pull narrative creates an overall picture of individual humans in multiple negative states who, upon encountering the Biomimicry Movement, awoke and relocated their path towards 'the future of humanity', and the fulfilment of 'deep desire'. This discursive strategy common to conversion narratives positions the videos as involved in creating religious meaning around biomimicry, nature and the Biomimicry community. In the sections that follow, we look at linguistic features used to communicate and further sacralise various aspects of the JOURNEY, beginning with its starting point.

5.1. Conversion moment

The speakers consistently represent the aforementioned awakening as a conversion event. While some use time indicators ('10 years ago', 'about 2011') to pinpoint a specific time of 'immediate homecoming' or 'arrival into coherence' in the past, most use past tense verb forms to implicitly mark an unspecified moment when they 'nodded their head' or experienced a contemplative sense of wonder ('I thought, wow', 'it was an a-ha moment') in response to learning about biomimicry (21 occurrences). Others use continuous verb forms to connote the journey's beginning and emphasise its ongoing nature, as in 'remembering what it means to be a part of nature', when they were 'discovering Biomimicry', 'started learning' and 'questioning' (16 occurrences). Furthermore, conditionals and subordinate conjunctions are frequently used to communicate the conditions for joining the path: conditionals like 'If we understand', 'If you just look around and truly experience', 'when we tune into' and subordinate conjunctions like 'once' in 'once you get into the connection' and 'once you start questioning' emphasise the significance of the specific point of conversion and lead viewers to consider what awaits a person if these preconditions are met. The active – intentional – nature of the continuous verb forms, conditionals and conjunctions in these constructions highlights the human effort required in the process (cf Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 226ff), while the inclusive pronouns *you* and *we* within these constructions blur the lines between movement members and viewers, and so invite outsiders to consider themselves actively involved and encouraged to put this effort in.

At times, speakers directly address viewers to prompt their own conversion moment, with questions like 'Have you ever asked … ' and the use of imperatives to communicate urgency: 'Join the movement', 'so join us'. This explicit invitation appears at the end of all source videos and is repeated five times in succession by different speakers at the end of the curated video entitled 'Putting Nature Back into Human Nature'. The call to convert is bolstered by frequent cross-corpus use of words tagged with the USAS semantic category *Belonging to a group* (S5+) (167 occurrences; 13th most frequent semantic category) that highlights the collective nature of the biomimicry project, and the repeated phrase 'Together we can put nature back into human nature' (19 videos) that implies its success is incumbent upon new joiners. The significance and positive consequences of the conversion event are emphasised by language evoking a total personal change, such as frequent use of intensifiers (see Méndez-Naya, 2008) and other totalising language to evoke significance and fulfilment (see Palayon et al., 2022). 'From there everything changed', as one speaker puts it, with others referring to it 'actually totally' changing their life, their thinking and their work, making them the 'luckiest person in the world'. Using the explicitly religious imagery evoking a 'God-shaped hole' (see Fiala, 2009), another speaker reflects:

> It filled the hole in my heart. It filled a part of me that was endlessly curious but also deeply eager to reconnect to something bigger than myself.

In many cases the moment of conversion is further represented as a sensory, embodied experience, as speakers began 'looking to/at', gaining 'a new lens to look' (29 occurrences within the USAS category X3.4: *Sight*). This figurative language participates in the highly productive explicitly religious metaphor of UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING, specifically the

acquisition of 'new eyes' that often appears in narratives of conversion (see Charteris-Black, 2004, p. 79).

5.2. The destination: nature personified and deified

The principal destination in the metaphorical journey is big-N Nature personified and even deified, an all-knowing guide and object of speakers' experiences, but also involved in communication, a means for humans to 'know where to look' and to 'see things differently', so they can 'tune into nature' and 'begin looking at nature'. Firstly, Nature is portrayed as a conversational partner ('it communicates'), with speakers on occasion referring to the 'language of nature', even its 'universal communication language'. Humans, conversely, are presented as those needing to hear Nature to understand it (to 'tune in' and mimic Nature's 'speech signals'). Thus drawing on the explicitly religious metaphor of (DEEP) UNDERSTANDING IS HEARING/SPEAKING (see Miles, 2006; Tilford, 2017), Nature is depicted as an embodied, even personified, destination by simultaneously casting it as the object of human perception and conceptualising it as a conversational partner akin to humans in interaction.

This is complemented by a representation of a deified Nature as the 'greatest' TEACHER (10 occurrences within USAS category Q4: *Education*), more specifically an ARCHITECT (5 occurrences within USAS category *H1: Architecture, Houses and Buildings*), with 'winning designs', a 'source of inspiration of learning' and 'solutions', the 'source of answers', even 'rules'. One speaker takes this further, equating Nature with the explicit religious phrase 'ecological elders'. Nature as a deified destination, however, is not represented as a new place nor a new way of life. The journey instead approximates a Biblical prodigal son narrative, constituting an explicitly sacralised human 'return' to Nature as 'this "home" that is ours', a 'homecoming' to humanity's 'collective birthright', a 'remembrance' of forgotten places, when you 'find your place in nature'.

5.3. The roadmap: biomimicry as embodied guide

With Nature as the destination and the source of 'wisdom', for these speakers, the Biomimicry Movement itself is both 'path' and embodied guide, which 'speaks to', 'excites', provides 'the way … through', 'the tools', 'a place for solutions' (IDEAS ARE LOCATIONS/ROADMAP ON A JOURNEY). At times, like Nature, the Movement itself is given explicitly religious meaning through phrases like 'secret sauce', suggesting a special formula for success to be discovered and closely guarded.

Consistent with this imagery, biomimicry is depicted as a way of life, even 'the way', as in 'practising biomimicry', 'a community of practice', reflecting and echoing a wider sociocultural turn in the ways people characterise their worldviews, away from emphasis on sacred texts, beliefs and knowledge and towards 'embodiment, habit and daily activity' (Bender, 2011, p. 273). We also note the consistent use of present tense in depictions of the Biomimicry Movement's actions and those of its members, contributing to its daily, ongoing and totalising value ('Biomimicry gives', 'helps', 'speaks to, inspires, excites') (see Bennett, 2015). Nominalisation of the problem-solving nature of biomimicry was frequent (21 occurrences of 'solutions') in depictions of the Movement as well, likewise indicating permanence and timelessness (see Downing, 2000). A common

construction was 'Biomimicry is (about)/means', followed by noun phrases such as 'inspiration', 'innovation', 'engagement', 'collaboration'. By leaving out the grammatical subjects and objects of these nominalised processes, in a construction that equates noun phrases with biomimicry (see Jeffries, 2010), these nominalisations contribute to essentialising biomimicry as processes without making explicit who is involved.

5.4. Qualities of the journey

The speakers at times detailed qualities of the Biomimicry Movement journey, as in a 'long journey' containing certain obstacles, represented metaphorically as physical roadblocks met at the beginning of or along the path, such as 'problems we are facing' and 'common challenges we're faced with'. However, they minimise these challenges in several key ways. Speakers accomplish this, first, through vagueness facilitated by these metaphors and by further non-specification of what these obstacles constitute. Second, they depict the journey's ease ('a viable path') and emphasise its simplicity. Biomimicry can be summed up 'in one word', as one put it. It's 'not rocket science'; on the contrary, it's 'just going outside', 'just getting kids out into nature', 'just get them outside'. Their use of the adverb 'just' is particularly notable, conveying the simplicity of the efforts involved in biomimicry and underscoring the idea that contact with a deified Nature is all that is required for full participation in biomimicry (see Breheny et al., 2023). The video's visual imagery contributes to this message. Almost without exception, speakers chose a backdrop of plants, especially forests, for their personal testimonials. Third, speakers minimise challenges in the journey towards Nature by repeating the means by which one can reach the desired destination: being not just hearers but 'practising' doers, i.e. 'not just heard this … but have gone out and made it real', 'work tirelessly', 'keep pushing', are 'impactful' 'changemakers', who 'mimic', 'reapply', and are 'finding ways', finding 'the answers we seek'.

Speakers rarely get into the specifics of this groundbreaking work of biomimicry, however. Apart from one speaker who discusses the use of biomimicry to design factories and cities that 'function like a forest [and] fit seamlessly into nature', the explicit goals of the movement are not articulated beyond semantically vague expressions like 'making really good stuff' and making 'the world a better place'. The effect is that viewers are prompted to fill in what that 'practice' looks like, allowing them to interpret the message in terms of their existing ideas of good practice. In fact, we find that vagueness plays a significant role in articulating and advertising the path of the Biomimicry Movement and its participants, as we explain in Section 6.

5.5. Characteristics of the biomimicry community

We turn now to the portrayal of members themselves, previously noted as emphasising not just being hearers, but doers. The movement is primarily portrayed as a 'collective', communicated through similar phrases like 'belonging', 'being part of', 'together', 'community', 'our human species' and 'entire family' in 'this home that is ours' (once again evoking NATURE IS A PERSONIFIED ENTITY).

Another related semantic theme is that of being united, communicated, firstly, via the shifting pronoun and antecedent use already mentioned ('we all know', 'all of you', 'we

want', 'we as a people'). This works to de-emphasise community boundaries, as uses of ambiguous 'we' and pseudo-deictic 'you' blur distinctions between all involved, being at once personal, impersonal and generalised (see Bell & Ensslin, 2011). This vagueness (semantic underspecification) seems to function as a euphemistic strategy, facilitating an emphasis on inclusivity and simplicity (Grondelaers & Geeraerts, 1998).

Video speakers further emphasise the Movement's 'full' size, mentioning 'hundreds and thousands', 'thousands of us', 'so many', and its diversity ('whatever age', 'across the globe', 'diverse', 'so many different people [from] different places'). A sense of community across time is also communicated through photos and video footage of and talk about children ('I want my daughters to grow up in a world where … ', 'my entire family'). The effect of these multimodal depictions is not just an emphasis on movement cohesion, but also provision of emotive reassurance; it offers further feelings of permanence and hope for the future, stretching across generations of – specifically – humans spread globally.

We've already mentioned the weight that speakers placed on personal, human self-actualisation, i.e. 'an individual's expression of their full potential and a desire for self-fulfilment' (Ivtzan et al., 2013, p. 119). They spoke of their personal feelings of 'love', 'gratitude', 'awe', the sense of being 'fascinated', 'curious', 'transformed', 'excited' and 'humble'. Another characteristic we noted was their certainty, which worked alongside frequently repeated expressions of hope. One speaker conveyed epistemic certainty, describing being 'filled with gratitude and hope because I *know* that there are thousands of us working across the globe to create more regenerative solutions' (emphasis not original). Another speaker stated, once again relying on totalising language: 'When people ask me if I am an optimist about our future on this planet, I *always* say yes because of biomimicry'. In sum, the videos impress on the audience and on current members the reassuring message that Biomimicry is for everyone, everywhere, for all time.

6. Discussion

In the sections above, we've analysed the extent to which a corpus of videos that TBI solicited, curated and published on official channels, in the context of a global pandemic, replicates the genre of conversion narrative, resulting in an emphasis on human self-actualisation and inclusivity. This anthropocentric precedence alone constitutes a discourse ambivalent to deep ecology, beneficial rather to the status quo (Virdis, 2022). Whilst unlikely that individual speakers deliberately chose these emphases, given TBI's task simply to state what biomimicry means to them, the cumulative messaging of these videos consequently reveals, sacralises and proselytises the Institute's unique core values and qualities. Yet we also find that pervasive linguistic vagueness and (related) simplification leave viewers somewhat in the dark as to what the Movement stands for and against and what participation specifically means. In this section, we focus particularly on the effects of this recurrent vagueness and its particular role in constructing an ambivalent discourse, considering it especially in terms of its role in obscuring the Movement's belief system and bolstering its emotive and social-cohesive potential.

The videos' vagueness was most potent in their depiction of biomimicry journey outcome and of movement membership. While the videos paint the end goal of the

conversion 'journey' as a sacred success, speakers give little detail as to what success actually looks like, beyond a reconnection with Nature deified and with one another. This emphasis on a positive yet ambiguous outcome, particularly in powerfully emotive terms, constitutes a discourse ambivalent towards concrete, ecologically beneficial action, what ecolinguist Virdis (2022, p. 42) calls 'the "greening" of language [via] abstract ecological words, expressions and discourse'. All this makes texts like these especially effective both for galvanising existing members and proselytising, i.e. 'the act of converting someone from one belief or opinion to another' (Hobbs, 2021, p. 164). Sociologist Williams (1995, p. 139) comments on the power of such vagueness for social-cohesion in social movements, writing that 'by generating "solidarity without consensus" (Kertzer, 1988, p. 69) the symbols of community or the good society provide political actors with a venue for argument, but one that leaves the specifics of content artfully ambiguous'.

This is not a new strategy nor is it news to those who study social and political movements. Hank Johnston comments on the longstanding and highly productive power of a flexible 'deep grammar' (Johnston, 2010, p. 341) (or cultural logic) that can draw together a diverse set of participants towards a common goal. In essence, these flexible, aspirational narratives create space for what Rochon (1998) refers to as frame alignment and frame bridging. But what our study does offer to scholarship on social movements and to ecolinguistics is the specific linguistic mechanics of this vagueness in ambivalent discourses. For instance, we have mentioned that the speakers in the videos often use nominalisations (processes expressed as nouns) to depict the nature of biomimicry. While nominalisations may improve clarity by packaging large amounts of information into one word, here they not only communicate permanence but also obfuscate the role of humans (and thus the viewers) in the processes of inspiration, innovation, engagement, problem-solving, collaboration and creative thinking. Without a transparent or exclusive subject and object of each process, viewers must resort to inferences to identify who or what might fit these grammatical slots, and may be tempted to fill one of those roles by imagining themselves and their own actions in it. This allows them to rehearse both subject and object position in relation to biomimicry.

This is further facilitated by the video speakers' emotionally charged use of, at times layered, intensifiers ('major major', 'really', 'so many amazing') alongside their simple directions to 'just get … outside'. The extensive use of totalising discourse as well as underspecified language (like shifting pronoun use) leaves out or leaves ambiguous the relationship between insiders and outsiders, humans and biomimicry and the exact nature of participation. These features combined, alongside the vivid world created by metaphors such as the successful JOURNEY, encourage viewers to visualise themselves as participants within the biomimicry community. This may in turn convince them to join the movement, even to fuse their deepest sense of self with it.

We note, however, that conversion narratives may also amplify a form of social control (see Benford, 2002), especially when the complexities of group membership and participation are particularly de-emphasised and oversimplified, as in our corpus. And while we judge linguistic vagueness, like all language, in terms of its appropriateness, rather than either all good or all bad, we nevertheless question the ethics and effects of such vagueness, especially when combined with the sacred-making power of religious language and when elicited within and for a target audience made vulnerable by crisis or other

destabilisation like a pandemic, as our corpus was (see Van Dijk, 2006). Given the added urgency of the climate crisis and the need for ecologically beneficial discourses, we wonder whether it's an act of manipulation to use a combination of heavily religious-coded language depicting movement 'practice' as a sacred journey from bad to good, while withholding clarity of mission, to persuade people to join their movement and save the planet. Indeed, vagueness of a movement's mission can be both a strength and a danger, particularly when it draws on the rhetoric of the 'public good'.

In light of evidence that TBI's projects have tended to draw their funding from large corporations and the defence industry (see Marshall & Lozeva, 2009), we also wonder about the extent to which their use of vagueness might conceal more technocentric than ecocentric goals. As Honeybun-Arnolda and O'Riordan (2020, p. 225, 231) explain:

> Technocentric approaches … dominate the environmental world, buoyed up by a hubristic optimism that science and technology will forever discover solutions or management techniques to alleviate pressing environmental issues and increase conventional growth. Such an approach concentrates power and widens inequality thereby maintaining the environment as a component of capital.

The corpus' anthropocentric – and thus ecologically ambivalent – meanings, with their focus on human experience and emotional well-being, seem to support this conclusion.

In short, while vague language has multiple pragmatic functions, including showing intimacy and solidarity, it also can meet the pragmatic aims of shielding from risks or wrongs (self-distancing) and non-cooperative evasion that 'deliberately avoids conveying correct/accurate information to manipulate the situation to the speaker's advantage' (Zhang, 2011, p. 577). In making explicit the potential misuses of vagueness as part of a wider sacralising strategy in TBI's video corpus, our work contributes to the growing field of ecolinguistics, particularly elucidating the linguistic features constituting ambivalent discourses.

In this article we are also in conversation with research on the roles of narrative in the construction and maintenance of socio-political movements more broadly. As we've mentioned, linguists and other social scientists working in this area have long acknowledged the power of, for example, vagueness in forming and galvanising such movements. Yet our findings point to a need to account for the religious meanings communicated in and through movement narratives, and to the usefulness of Hobbs' functional model of religious language – reliant on open definitions of religion – to accomplish this.

7. Conclusion

Our paper has examined the extent to which TBI positions itself as a sacred community, using the macro-lens of a corpus of videos of biomimics talking about what the Movement means to them, and the micro-lens of three compilation videos curated by TBI. We identified and analysed the linguistic and discursive strategies common to these videos, finding that speakers relied consistently on the genre of conversion narratives – with their typical push–pull strategy and overarching sacred LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor, alongside supporting micro-features such as metaphor, intensifiers and totalising language, nominalisations, verb forms and, at times, explicitly religious lexis – to talk about their experiences. These conversion narratives, taken together, root participants

in a sacred community of practice, discursively centred primarily on human social-cohesion and emotive attributes as its primary axioms, united in a common journey towards Nature deified and self-actualisation, guided by biomimicry. These sacralising conceptualisations of Nature correspond to Benyus' ideal of nature as a personified mentor and model, indicating speaker alignment with the philosophical framework behind TBI. We found that vagueness plays a particular role, obscuring the precise nature of involvement in the movement beyond these central values of community and self-actualisation, and, importantly, blurring the lines between member and non-member, powerful tools for coaxing viewers to join. In sum, engagement with biomimicry as seen through the lens of personal narratives paradoxically looks more community – than nature-focussed, thus constituting ambivalent discourse.

Notes

1. See also: https://www.bbc.co.uk/teach/class-clips-video/design-and-technology-introduction-to-biomimetics-inspired-by-nature/zmytscw
2. Though our corpus is relatively small in size compared to many corpora used in CADS studies, it covers the kinds of messaging under study and is therefore appropriately sized for this study.
3. CLAWS7 stands for 'the Constituent Likelihood Automatic Word-tagging System' (Davies, n.d.). This software automatically tags corpora for part-of-speech, allowing for part-of-speech categorisation of every lexical item in the corpus.
4. USAS stands for 'UCREL semantic analysis system' (Rayson et al., 2004). This software automatically tags corpora for semantic domain, allowing for grouping words in the corpus according to semantic domains.

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Notes on contributors

Fransina Stradling is a Research Assistant in Corpus Linguistics for the Centre for Biomimetic Societal Futures at the University of Huddersfield. She is also a PhD researcher in Cognitive Stylistics at the same university, examining linguistic triggers underlying empathy with fictional characters.

Valerie Hobbs is Senior Lecturer in Applied Linguistics at the University of Sheffield, where she teaches and researches on religious language. Her most recent book, No Love in War (Mayfly Books), documents everyday violence in Christian Dominionist communities in the United States.

ORCID

Fransina Stradling 🄳 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5042-4333
Valerie Hobbs 🄳 http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8892-2779

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