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# Waterphors

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## Preface

This special issue on so-called Waterphors, a creative blend for *water metaphors*, is the outcome of an international conference organized on April 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>, 2024 by the Linguistics Research Center (*Centre d'Études Linguistiques - Corpus, Discours et Sociétés*) at Jean Moulin Lyon 3 University (France). It aimed to bring together a diverse group of researchers specialised in the study of water metaphors within various linguistic disciplines: metaphor studies, cognitive linguistics, corpus linguistics, lexicology, discourse analysis, stylistics, etc. but also other disciplines such as sociology, literature, philosophy, history, psychology, to name but a few.

Water, the source of life, has long captivated human imagination and found its way into the very fabric of our linguistic expression. It has been used as a powerful symbol across diverse cultural contexts, linguistic varieties, and historical periods, ranging from the silent flow of a stream to the tumultuous crash of waves against the shore. Furthermore, scholars in the field of linguistics and sociology (Bauman 2000; Bernardot 2016) have examined the concept of liquidity as a metaphor for behaviours observed in contemporary societies over the past decades. However, notwithstanding the obvious overlap between liquid metaphors and water metaphors, this issue displays other characteristics that define *waterphors* as a unique type on its own.

In the vast ocean of language, metaphors act as currents, shaping the way we perceive and understand the world around us; this phenomenon aligns with the principles of cognitive linguistics, as articulated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), Lakoff (1993), Turner (1996), Kövecses (2005), among others. So-called Waterphors flow through discourses in politics, literature, science and emotions while also structuring conversations, offering insights into the collective consciousness and the intricacies of human experience and thought.

The ten contributions in this special issue offer an exploration of the nuances of *waterphors* across different languages, cultures, and disciplines. The aim of this interdisciplinary dialogue and scholarly inquiry is to deepen our understanding of how these metaphors shape our perception of the world and inform our communication practices.

The issue is divided into two sections. The initial six articles focus on *waterphors* in an everyday world, encompassing studies that examine the role of *waterphors* in the conceptualisations of political, scientific and everyday worlds.

The issue opens with an article entitled “Climate change, Covid-19 and other stories... the Titanic Metaphor as a parable to depict modern shipwreck” by Caroline Crépin-Davis & Denis Jamet-Coupé. They first outline the fact that the Titanic narrative has become *shared knowledge*: it has been made *history*, as a fluctuating combination of true and invented events. Following the precepts of cognitive linguistics, they deem that language reflects our conceptual system and the way we perceive, structure, conceptualize the world, i.e. make sense of it. The authors use Titanic metaphors as a case to investigate the element of fascination that is at the heart – not only of the ocean – but of the metaphorical process itself: we, as individuals, are more likely to retell the stories we are drawn to and which are apt to teach us something about ourselves.

The second article by Anne-Laure Daux-Combaudon, entitled “Métaphores aquatiques et moyens d’action humains dans le discours de presse en français et en allemand”, offers an analysis of aquatic metaphors and more specifically of human action verbs from the hydraulic register (channel, dam, etc.) – water being the source domain and grammatical objects belonging to another conceptual domain (channel migration flows). Her analysis works on two levels: through the mark of the language system, the structure of the language (lexical semantics), but also through its uses and situations of enunciation in context (discursive semantics).

In her paper “Entre convention et créativité : métaphores liquides dans les discours scientifiques”, Micaela Rossi analyses the issues about liquid metaphors as a starting-point for neonymy in technical and scientific vocabularies. Metaphorical terms are here distinguished on the basis of the factors that govern their creation and implementation. By offering a case study on the term *onde(s) électromagnétique(s)* (‘electromagnetic wave(s)’), she looks at the strategies for reactivating these metaphors in media discourses addressing the general public. Her study shows how metaphorical terms are sometimes taken up, manipulated and diverted in media online discourse.

In the fourth article of this issue, “WAVES and TIDES in politics: water metaphors for change”, Dolores Porto & Manuela Romano examine WAVE and TIDE metaphors, in four countries undergoing elections in 2022 and 2023. They show



that our embodied knowledge of waves and tides as huge, relentless, cyclic forces is projected onto the political context of elections by means of mappings like 'mass', 'change' and 'movement', and also 'catastrophe' and 'resistance'.

The fifth paper, entitled "Submersion, Porosity and Contradictions: Waterphors and immigration in contemporary French and American political speeches", by Bérengère Lafiandra, studies the conceptualisation of immigration through the use of *waterphors*. With a corpus composed of American and French speeches delivered between 2015 and 2020 by Biden, Clinton, Le Pen, Macron and Trump, she shows that two major types of *waterphors* can be distinguished: WATER metaphors that directly conceptualize immigrants as water and those that represent the borders of the host country as colanders.

This section ends with Marc Bernardot's article entitled "Eaux politiques : le peuple comme matière aquatique". He deals with metaphors such as PEOPLE IS WATER and identifies the spread of the association between aquatic matter and the political representations of the population in the contemporary world, both in terms of electoral behaviour and public policy.

The second section of this volume is composed of 4 articles that focus on *waterphors* for a fictional world and more specifically on the poetics, polemics and power of *waterphors*.

It opens with Mascha Canaux's paper entitled "'Sea More Blue' : Des métaphores vivantes pour bleuir nos imaginaires à l'aune de la crise écologique". She explores current debates on metaphors in ecological humanities and examines marine metaphors in the novel *Héliosphera* by Wilfried N'sondé. Highlighting the relevance of Paul Ricoeur's concept of "métaphore vive" and Serpil Oppermann's notion of "living metaphor," she offers a new perspective on the interaction between language and marine materiality.

Then, in "Feminist reclaiming of water metaphors", Ann Coady analyses how the metaphorical connection between water and women has been used to control and exploit women. Her results show that all the metaphors analysed, except one, are based on a CONTAINER image schema. Sexist metaphors seek to contain women, in order to exploit them, whereas feminist metaphors highlight resisting containment.

The penultimate paper, entitled "'A subaqueous condition of the mind': Madness and Water Metaphors in Janet Frame's *Asylum Stories*", by Diane

Gagneret argues that in Frame's *Asylum Stories*, the "radical metaphoricity" of madness (Felman 1978) hinges on the aesthetic and epistemological dividing line of water metaphors, focusing first on the effects of her immersive writing, before reflecting further on the applications and implications of fluidity in the liminal tales of madness.

Finally, in "*Water/works* : images et passages de l'eau dans la poésie de Lotte Kramer", Nathalie Vincent-Arnaud examines the characteristics and issues raised by a WATER metaphorical continuum in Lotte Kramer's poetry. She shows how WATER becomes an overriding metaphorical element which largely structures the imaginary world on which her poetry feeds.

To conclude, we would like to thank the editors of *metaphorik.de* for giving us the chance to publish the papers in this volume.

Caroline Crépin-Davis, Denis Jamet-Coupé, Bérengère Lafiandra  
(Guest editorial team for this issue)

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**Waterphors for a non-fictional world: conceptualizations of political, scientific and sociological realities**



# **Climate change, Covid-19 and other stories... The Titanic metaphor as a parable to depict modern shipwrecks**

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## **Abstract**

With his eponymous 1997 blockbuster, James Cameron pulled the wreck of Titanic out of oblivion. By elevating ancient news into a modern myth (Barthes 1957), he made it truly unsinkable. Few may ignore the name of the infamous ship, be it for its tragic fate or the romance Cameron attached to it, even those who have, somehow, not seen the movie. This article first establishes the fact that the Titanic narrative has become shared knowledge: it has been made history, as a fluctuating combination of true and invented events. This hybrid texture makes it an elastic outline that can be reapplied metaphorically to a variety of contexts or, to borrow Turner's terminology (Turner 1996), a working *parable* to provide understanding for unprecedented situations. Based on a selection of occurrences retrieved from reference corpora of English, and following the precepts of cognitive linguistics (Lakoff/Johnson 1999, 2003; Lakoff 1993; Langacker 1987, among others), we argue that the Titanic as a shipwreck metaphor exhibits canonical target domains attached to WATER (Crépin 2023) such as FEAR and DANGER, as well as specific features such as CLASS, HUBRIS, or RESPONSIBILITY. The study of Titanic metaphors will also serve as a case in point to investigate the element of fascination that is at the heart – not only of the ocean – but of the metaphorical process more broadly, as we, as individuals, are more likely to retell the stories we are drawn to, and which are apt to teach us something about ourselves. A hundred years after its loss, the Titanic has become something else. It has survived as a narrative, an allegory, which since 2010 has been reapplied to a variety of topical domains of which this article presents a few examples.

Mit seinem Kassenschlager *Titanic* von 1997 barg James Cameron das berühmte Schiff aus der Versenkung und machte es zu einem modernen Mythos im Sinne Barthes'. Alle kennen die Titanic, wegen ihres tragischen Untergangs oder wegen Camerons Liebesgeschichte. Der Beitrag erhellt zuerst die Tatsache, dass die Titanic-Erzählung allgemein geteiltes Wissen ist, bestehend aus wahren und erfundenen Ereignissen. Ihr elastischer Umriss kann, so zeigen wir, metaphorisch auf eine vielfältige Menge von Kontexten bezogen werden. In Turners (1996) Terminologie fungiert die Erzählung so als Parabel für neuartige Situationen. Auf der Grundlage von Belegen aus englischen Corpora und mit den Regeln der kognitiven Linguistik (insbes. Lakoff/Johnson 1999, 2003; Lakoff 1993; Langacker 1987) legen wir dar, dass die Titanic als Schiffbruch-Metapher zum einen Zieldomänen veranschaulicht, die – wie insbesondere ANGST und GEFÄHR – mit WASSER verbunden sind, dass sie zum anderen aber auch spezifische Konzepte wie KLASSE, HOCHMUT oder VERANTWORTUNG darstellt. Die Untersuchung von Titanic-Metaphern soll auch als Fallstudie dienen, um die für metaphorische Prozesse offenbar so bedeutende Faszination zu erkunden, die dafür sorgt, dass wir Menschen besonders von Geschichten gepackt werden, die uns etwas über uns selbst erzählen. Aus der vor über 100 Jahren gesunkenen Titanic ist etwas anderes geworden: eine Geschichte,

eine Allegorie, die seit 2010 auf alle möglichen Bereiche bezogen worden ist, von denen wir hier einige beispielhaft anführen.

**Keywords:** water, shipwreck metaphors; Titanic; parable; myth; multimodality; fascination

## 1. Introduction

What does the word *Titanic* evoke in us? Is it the supposedly unsinkable ship that sank on her maiden voyage in 1912, a monument to both human achievement and fallibility? Is it James Cameron's 1997 film, the blockbuster that has kept afloat the careers of Leonardo DiCaprio, Kate Winslet and Celine Dion ever since? Or, is it an abstract narrative born of both of the above, a modern-day metaphor whose actual reference is unclear?

By including footage of the wreck in his movie, Cameron dredged the Titanic up from the depths for the whole world to see. The film mixes two timelines and two paradigms, telling a fictional story against a backdrop of scientific, historical evidence. The characters themselves are partly inspired by real passengers of the Titanic, and partly invented, as is the case with the protagonists.

Likewise, when we refer to the Titanic nowadays, the input of historical and fictitious layers to the story is unclear. We do not refer to an isolated object or event, but to a phenomenon, or, as this paper will argue, a *myth*, in Barthes's sense (Barthes 1957) or, to borrow Turner's terminology (Turner 1996), a *parable* providing conceptualization and understanding for unprecedented situations. This may have been the fate of the ship all along, as her very name, *Titanic*, predisposed her to be mythologized, sacrificed on the altar of her creators' hubris, and taking down 1,500 passengers with her to the bottom of the sea.

In an interview for *National Geographic*, James Cameron himself brandishes his work as a metaphor for looming climate change:

Part of the Titanic parable is of arrogance, of hubris, of the sense that we're too big to fail. Well, where have we heard that one before? [...] You've got the starving millions who are going to be the ones most affected by *the next iceberg that we hit, which is going to be climate change*. We can see that iceberg ahead of us right now, but we can't turn (Shearman 2012, Emphasis is ours).

In other words, his adaptation was always meant to be allegorical in essence, and this might be the reason for its unabating resonance ever since. As the

modern world is daunted by the prospect of collective shipwreck – ecological, economic, pandemic, nuclear, or all of the above – the Titanic metaphor resurfaces as a multimodal, polysemous vehicle to depict humanity’s vulnerability in the face of icebergs ahead.

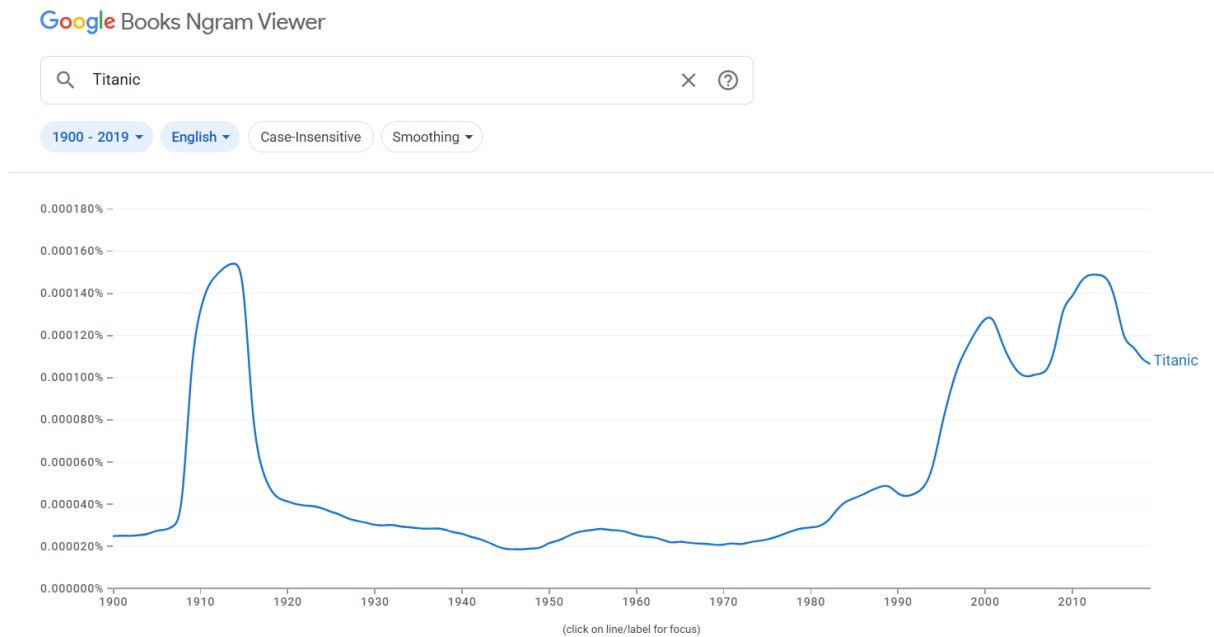
It is in this context that the scenario of the Titanic disaster has proved a particularly accurate analogy to depict the magnitude of the world’s unpreparedness in the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, as suggested in these occurrences from the *Coronavirus Corpus*:

- (1) I feel like the *Titanic*, and we have hit the iceberg, and we’re trying to make decisions of what time we should have the band play (Coronavirus Corpus).
- (2) For all practical purposes, the world’s economy is a ship called *Titanic* and its iceberg bears the name Corona (Coronavirus Corpus).

This paper thus intends to answer the following research question: why and how has the Titanic narrative become a powerful, almost universal metaphor that can be applied and reapplied to a variety of negatively connoted contexts, both linguistically and visually?

The complex, multilayered and multimodal appeal of the Titanic analogy in times of crisis will be discussed in detail in section 4 of this article, after a thorough review of the methodology used to retrieve occurrences from online Corpora (section 2) and a discussion of the results of the quantitative analyses carried out on different corpora (section 3).

From a quantitative perspective, a basic search in the Google browser sheds light on the evolution of the use of the occurrences of the word “Titanic” over the twentieth century, as shown in Figure 1:



**Fig. 1:** Use of the word “Titanic” (1900–2019) (Google Books Ngram Viewer)

Looking at this graph, three peaks stand out: one in 1912, the year of the shipwreck, one just before 2000 which coincides with the release of Cameron’s movie (1997), and one around 2012, which we propose to analyze in this paper. The centenary of the tragedy has obviously fueled a renewed interest in the press. However, it would be unlikely to explain such a loud mediatic echo. Our hypothesis is that, starting from the 2010s, references to the Titanic become largely *metaphorical* because of the conventionalization of the Titanic metaphor. The number of occurrences remains high from 2010 onwards, with another peak sure to mark Covid-related uses around 2020, as data beyond that period is not yet available.

The twentieth century opened with the sinking of the ship and closed with its cinematic resurrection. The cultural effect of Cameron’s Titanic is arguably equal to the shockwave caused by the iceberg that finished the RMS Titanic eighty years earlier. In the twenty-first century, we are left with a legacy of both, as metaphors of the Titanic have become increasingly commonplace to refer to grand human projects that end up on the ocean floor, to the point where it has become, perhaps, “the world’s largest metaphor” (NOW Corpus – 13-03-08 – US *The Diplomat*).



## 2. Theoretical framework, corpus and methodology

### 2.1 Theoretical framework: cognitive linguistics

To analyze the metaphorical occurrences of the Titanic, we worked within the framework of cognitive linguistics, a branch of linguistics focusing on the way our conceptual system is reflected in language (Evans/Green 2009: 14) in order to get a grasp of the way(s) abstract concepts are mentally conceptualized:

Cognitive linguistics approaches language in a way that prioritizes human thought as an explanation for the observed characteristics of language. In particular conceptualization, or how people construct abstract concepts and schemata to think about the world (McEnery/Hardie 2012: 169).

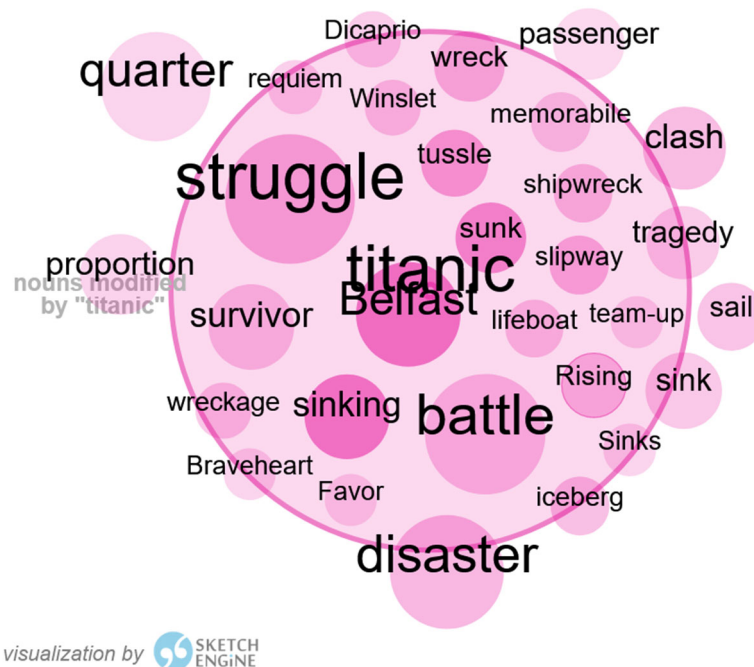
Numerous works in cognitive linguistics have highlighted the fact that metaphor is one of the tools – if not *the* tool – that greatly contributes to the elaboration of a figurative link between cognition and language. According to cognitive linguists, not only is metaphor a means of conveying meaning, it is also a reflection of our thoughts and reasoning: “Metaphor is not just a matter of language, but of thought and reason.” (Lakoff 1993: 208). This assumption led to the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT from now on), developed by Lakoff and Johnson in the 1980s. According to CMT, metaphor not only operates at the level of language, but also structures our conceptual system (Lakoff/Johnson 1980: 6), and the use of linguistic metaphorical expressions is proof that we do think metaphorically; indeed, it is possible to use metaphors to talk about a specific concept because this concept is first and foremost metaphorically conceptualized on a cognitive level.

The Titanic has been used as a source domain to refer to various abstract target domains in English, especially since the success of James Cameron’s movie. The target domains conceptualized through the Titanic metaphors have to do with what we called “modern shipwrecks”, i.e. significant crises, be they environmental, political, economic, medical, etc., as exemplified in occurrences (3) to (6):

- (3) This is the only way we can turn this big *Republican-made Titanic situation* around. A little melodramatic don’t you think? (campaignstops.blogs.nytimes.com).

- (4) Like the *Titanic* striking a massive iceberg in 1912, a deadly novel coronavirus, later named COVID-19, struck Wuhan (hongkongfp.com).
- (5) Today's election is merely a choice of who is going to captain the sinking *Titanic* (rednecksrevenge.org).
- (6) The *climate change titanic* has already hit the iceberg. This needs to be on a war footing (eco-business.com).

The visual representation of the word “Titanic” in the Word Sketch option available from English Web 2021 (enTenTen 2021) on SketchEngine is proof of that (we selected “nouns modified by ‘Titanic’” and 30 as the number of collocates):



**Fig. 2:** First 30 most frequent collocates of “Titanic” (SketchEngine)

It is interesting to note that most nouns modified by “Titanic” – *shipwreck*, *wreck*, *wreckage*, *battle*, *sink*, *sinking*, *struggle*, *disaster*, *battle*, *tragedy*, etc. – refer to a crisis, which is perceived negatively, axiologically speaking, a point that will be further developed.

## 2.2 Corpus / Data building

To create a pilot corpus, we first decided on a relevant timespan, i.e. 2012–2024, as 2012 corresponds to the Centenary of the *Titanic*’s shipwreck, and 2024 to the

present period. This enabled us to cover a 12-year period of time.<sup>1</sup> The corpora we used to retrieve linguistic (verbal, or textual) occurrences were the following ones: *English Web 2021* (enTenTen21), the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA), the *News on the Web Corpus* (NOW corpus), as well as the *Coronavirus Corpus*. The COCA, the NOW corpus and the *Coronavirus corpus* are available on *English-Corpora.org* and were used so as to get a diachronic perspective; enTenTen21 is available via *SketchEngine* and was used to get a contemporary, synchronic perspective, as the corpus only comprise occurrences from 2021.<sup>2</sup> As we wanted to carry out a multimodal analysis, we also retrieved visual occurrences of the Titanic metaphor, through a Google search, then selected the most relevant occurrences (mostly as illustrations of the linguistic metaphorical occurrences).

## 2.3 Methodology: corpus linguistics

We used corpus linguistics techniques to retrieve occurrences: it has to be noted that we only retrieved occurrences related to the Titanic, with the use of a specific Corpus Query Language (CQL) search combining the word “Titanic” with the following keywords: iceberg; shipwreck; wreck; s?nk\* (for tokens such as *sink*, *sinks*, *sunk*, *sank*, *sinking*, *sunken*, etc.). To retrieve the most frequently used sequences of words in the English Web 2021 corpus, we used various queries on *SketchEngine* (2014). CQL searches allow linguists to perform more complex searches than the simple searches carried out above to account for the frequency of use.

We resorted to the MEET tag enabling to retrieve collocations of “Titanic” in combination with one of the above keywords, with a 5-word span to the left and 5-word span to the right. The CQL searches used are exemplified in Table 1:

---

<sup>1</sup> It has to be noted that few occurrences were retrieved in 2024.

<sup>2</sup> “The most recent version of the enTenTen corpus consists of 52 billion words. The texts were downloaded in October–December 2021 and January 2022. The sample texts of the biggest web domains which account for 40% of all corpus texts were checked semi-manually and content with poor quality text and spam was removed” (enTenTen21).

CQL (meet [lemma="iceberg"] [lemma="titanic"] -5 5) • 2,829 occurrences 0.05 per million tokens • 0.0000046%
CQL (meet [lemma="shipwreck"] [lemma="titanic"] -5 5) • 306 occurrences less than 0.01 • 5e-7%
CQL (meet [lemma="wreck"] [lemma="titanic"] -5 5) • 1,522 occurrences 0.02 per million tokens • 0.0000025%
CQL (meet [lemma="sink"] [lemma="titanic"] -5 5) • 6,699 occurrences 0.11 per million tokens • 0.000011%

**Table 1:** CQL searches to retrieve the collocates of “Titanic” (SketchEngine)

We established our database by combining the word “Titanic” with other keywords so as to get a manageable corpus in terms of size. We are fully aware that another method may have been possible, such as looking for keywords in isolation. The results will be presented and analyzed in section 3.

For the corpora available on *English-Corpora.org* – namely the COCA, the NOW corpus and the *Coronavirus corpus* – the same procedure was followed. The search enables linguists to look for collocates, i.e. words occurring in a neighboring context. Figure 3 shows the search for the word “iceberg” used in collocation with the word “Titanic” within a span 5 to the left, 5 to the right (for the COCA, the span was 7 and 7 so as to collect a larger number of occurrences):

The screenshot shows the COCA search interface. At the top, there are tabs: List, Chart, Word, Browse, **Collocates**, Compare, KWIC, and -. Below the tabs, there are two input fields: 'iceberg' and 'titanic'. To the right of the 'iceberg' field is the label 'Word/phrase [POS] ?'. To the right of the 'titanic' field is the label 'Collocates [POS]'. Below the input fields is a grid of colored boxes representing the search results. The grid has 10 columns and 2 rows. The first row contains the numbers 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, 0, 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9. The second row contains the numbers 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, 0, 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9. The 'Find collocates' button is highlighted in blue.

**Fig. 3:** Search for collocates of “iceberg” and “Titanic” (COCA)

The results for the various searches on the COCA, NOW and Coronavirus corpora are presented and discussed in the following section.