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Author

Bromhead, Helen

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Disaster linguistics, climate change semantics and public discourse studies: a semantically-enhanced discourse study of 2011 Queensland Floods

Helen Bromhead

Griffith Centre for Social and Cultural Research, Griffith University, 170 Kessels Road, Nathan, Queensland, 4111, Australia



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ABSTRACT

Natural disasters, such as what are known in English as 'floods' and 'wildfires', are increasingly a topic of concern due to the climate emergency, and their vocabulary and public discourses hold much to be explored through linguistics. This article inaugurates the examination of public discourse about extreme weather events through semantically-enhanced discourse studies, an approach which is based on Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) and developed herein. Taking the example of floods in the particular geographic, cultural and historical environment of the Australian state of Queensland in 2011, this transtextual study draws on a public inquiry into the event and English as spoken in Australia, more broadly, along with media reports, and literature from humanities and social sciences. Five case studies of vocabulary and discourse patterns are presented to cast cultural and semantic spotlights on the public discourses. It is demonstrated that this approach can provide high resolution analysis of discourse and bring out cultural and historical factors at play in extreme weather language thereby contributing to disaster linguistics, climate change semantics and public discourse studies.

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1. Introduction

People respond to natural disasters in culturally constructed ways of speaking and writing. These can take forms such as insurance policies prior, warnings during and public inquiries after. Further, not only are these responses cultural artefacts but also are the words for extreme weather events themselves like *wildfire*, *flood* and *hurricane*.

Extreme weather is becoming more severe and more frequent due to anthropogenic climate change; therefore, linguistic inquiry into its discourse is of both intellectual interest and, potentially, social urgency. Although of global concern, natural disasters are geographically, historically and culturally anchored, and a particular event may be one scene among many within the particular linguaculture that discourse phenomena are present. The case chosen is floods in the Australian state of Queensland in 2011, a year considered a harbinger of the new normal of climate change induced events due to the number of natural disasters across the world.

Australia has a lot of fires, floods and cyclones. They take place in a settler colonial context in which English understandings of landscape and weather, as well as settlement patterns, have been imposed on environments different from Britain. This imposition has generated a distinct Australian English vocabulary and discourse of folk biology, geography and

E-mail address: h.bromhead@griffith.edu.au.

meteorology. To give two examples: *bush*, an undifferentiated mass of wild, dry vegetation, dominated by eucalypts, and *bushfire*, meaning a wild fire in *bush* (Arthur, 2003; Moore, 2008; Bromhead, 2011a, 2020). Yet the First Nations Traditional Custodians of the Australian continent have their own ways of knowing of and speaking of land, water and weather, some of which are becoming more widely known among non-Indigenous Australians (Simpson, 1997; Hercus et al., 2002; Mark and Turk, 2003; Randall, 2003; Bromhead, 2011b; Gammage, 2011; Turpin et al., 2013; Pascoe, 2014; Turk, 2016; Pleshet, 2018; Goddard, 2020: 20–23; Hill and Ashmore, 2020; Moggridge, 2020; Steffensen, 2020).

To illustrate, the Queensland floods took place in fixed cities and towns built by rivers that, in heavy rain, regularly overflow their banks causing events known as *floods* in English. Floods are conceived of as disasters in their effects on the places and the people who live in them. By contrast, the Turrbal and Jagera people, Traditional Custodians of the regions on which the Queensland cities of Brisbane and Ipswich sit, regard changes in water flow as part of the natural cycle of the large waterway Maiwar (called in English, Brisbane River) rather than an exception (Cook, 2019: 1–3). They occupied their country according to seasons and built camps at elevation during the wet season to protect from rising water (Kerkhove, 2015: 1).

The present study is an examination of extreme weather discourse and climate change semantics in general, and, specifically, how they are enacted in the selected event (Queensland floods 2011) and the public discourse of a linguaculture (English as spoken in Australia). A public inquiry into the event offers a way into this discourse. At the same time, I develop a novel form of public discourse studies, semantically-enhanced discourse studies, which is based on Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 presents background and methodological frames. Section 3 provides a sketch of the floods and a content analysis of the discourse topics found in a collection of witness statements taken in the public inquiry. Sections 4–7 give case studies of four selected discourse and vocabulary features of public discourse around the events: the word *flood* (Section 4), 'the Inquiry' (Section 5), 'flood warning' (Section 6), the Australian English construction *to just get in and VP*, as in *they just got in and cleaned up* (Section 7). Section 8 provides some concluding remarks.

2. Background and methodological frames

In recent years, in linguistics, weather has been increasingly studied, along with the vocabulary and discourse of extreme weather (Arthur, 2003; Döring, 2003, 2018; Eriksen et al., 2010; Bednarek and Capel, 2012; Koptjevskaja-Tamm, 2015; Potts, 2015; Potts et al., 2015; Stibbe, 2015; Levin and Krejci, 2019).¹ In addition, there has been growing attention to climate change as both a field of linguistic inquiry and an imperative for reform of disciplinary practices (Fløttum, 2017; Rodríguez Louro et al., 2019). This study joins the conversation through semantically-enhanced discourse studies based on Natural Semantic Metalanguage approach, henceforth, NSM approach (Goddard and Wierzbicka, 2014).

The essence of NSM approach is its practice of putting complex terms into simpler ones, what is known as reductive paraphrase. This practice results in concrete and transparent meaning representations as opposed to obscurement or mystification (Ye, 2017). These representations can then be tested via directly substituting them into natural language examples of use, from there, they can be rejected or refined, either in parts or as a whole (see Goddard and Wierzbicka, 2015 for an treatment of this process). The goal to establish the semantic invariant, in contrast to a contention that meaning is vague or the cataloguing of difference uses, also goes hand-in-hand with this practice.

The reductive paraphrases are written in a tightly controlled metalanguage, which is made up of simple, ordinary words whose meanings cannot be decomposed, *viz.* semantic primes (e.g. 'someone', 'people', 'say', 'see', and others), and an attendant simple syntax. The inventory of primes and syntax are hypothesized as universal (based on empirical studies, e.g. Goddard and Wierzbicka, 2002; Farese, 2018), but it is not the purpose of this article to advance universality, an acceptance of which is not necessary to appreciate the approach's establishment of explicit mental models of meanings for hundreds of words and grammatical constructions (Evans, 2010; Koptjevskaja-Tamm et al., 2015). Along with semantic primes, another important concept of the approach is that of semantic molecules, more complex meanings that are part of intermediate semantic structure, e.g. 'water', 'to rain' and 'river' in the case of *flood*, so that the explanatory language consists of several hundred words. Semantic molecules can ultimately be decomposed into primes, also, and some are hypothesized as universal, e.g. 'water', whereas others are culturally specific, e.g. 'money'.

Four aspects of the approach are particularly pertinent for the present study. Firstly, NSM approach seeks to represent the naïve or folk picture of the world as constructed through language instead of a technical or scientific one (Apresjan, 1992). Secondly, like other cognitively-based linguistics, it views meaning as anthropocentric. Human languages come out of human experience in the body, the senses, movement, and social, cultural and material life (Wierzbicka, 1989; for other approaches Rohrer, 2010; Enfield, 2014; Newman, 2020). Thirdly, it is a humanistic approach in orientation, and language, in this case, of extreme weather, is put in cultural context by drawing on humanities, social science and media (Bromhead, 2018: 20). Fourthly, NSM approach, as I see it, consists not only of compositions written in the metalanguage, but also the surrounding material; 1) the initial investigation, 2) a metalanguage composition, and 3) a concluding exposition of the composition, are all integral parts.

¹ Work on weather and climate from other disciplines of humanities and social sciences is also notable (Carrigan, 2015; White et al., 2018; Barry et al., 2021).

As well as semantic analysis, NSM approach also has a pragmatic arm, ethnopragmatics, in which widespread practices and norms in linguacultures, notably those of speech, are examined and then distilled through statements phrased in the language of explanation, what are known as cultural scripts (Goddard, 2006; Ye, 2019). Cultural scripts have strong commonalities with cultural models from anthropology (Quinn, 2005; Kiesling, 2005 for use in linguistics). Discourse has also been addressed through the NSM approach; most significantly the study of cultural keywords has been leveraged to study wider discourses and ideologies constructed around specific keywords, e.g. *kawaii* in Japanese (Asano-Cavanaugh, 2017; other studies Levisen and Waters, 2017a; Levisen, 2017).

Semantically-enhanced discourse studies is intended to add to the diversity of discourse studies (van Dijk, 2001) via its focus on shared themes, topics and keywords through the prism of NSM. This article is an event-based, transtextual study of Queensland floods 2011, which draws on material from a public inquiry after the floods, including, but not limited to, the announcement, the terms of reference and witness statements, and also media reports, social science, history and naturally-occurring language from corpus and web searches. Through the event and its texts, one can make wider generalisations about extreme weather public discourse in Australia.

The semantically-enhanced discourse study unfolds as follows. In Section 3, it offers a content analysis of the discourse topics of a collection of witness statements taken in the public inquiry as an entry point into the discourse. Content analysis is a qualitative research method that allows one to quantify common themes in a set of materials (Krippendorff, 2019; Becken et al., 2020). In Section 4, it turns to the word *flood*, a discourse keyword, which is a culturally laden word around which the event's discourse is organised (see Levisen and Waters' definition of cultural keywords, Levisen and Waters, 2017b: 3). The semantic explication of *flood* denaturalises this kind of extreme weather event and establishes it as a particular cultural concept, so one can view the surrounding discourse through its lens.

In Section 5, the study takes a wide view of the discourse of a public inquiry from which, and about which, many of the selected texts come. I am calling this wide view a macro-level perspective. What I have coined a 'discourse script' appears, which is a specialised form of cultural script. A discourse script differs from an NSM semantic explication or a conventional cultural script. It portrays a specific discourse formation that is brought about and established within the broader lingua-cultural context of Australian English. For example, a semantic explication of *public inquiry* (Bromhead and Goddard, 2020) seeks to capture the semantic invariant of the expression, whereas the discourse script on 'the Inquiry' (Section 5) conveys the particular features of the Inquiry treated, Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry 2012, although there may be overlapping components. The discourse script demonstrates the purpose and bounds of the genre in which some of the discourse unfolded.

In Section 6, the study looks at a more localised part of the discourse of Queensland Floods, what I am calling a meso-level perspective, in an exploration of 'flood warnings'. I present a discourse script, which shows the conditions and function of this narrower genre. In Section 7, a notable construction that appears in the discourse is treated. I argue that the construction *to just get in and VP* (as in, *they just got in and cleaned everything out*) is one distinctly Australian lexico-grammatical enactment of the discourse theme of gratitude towards volunteers who cleaned up after the event. I unpack this meaning through a semantic explication, and I am calling this a micro-level examination.

A visualisation of the semantically-enhanced discourse study in this article follows in Fig. 1. This figure shows the witness statements as a starting point from which to dig through some of the layers of discourse, all the while informed by transtextual readings.

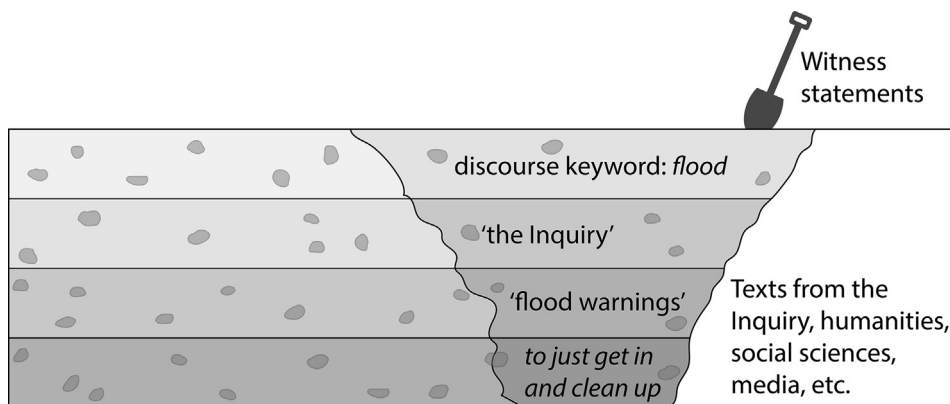


Fig. 1. A visualisation of the semantically-enhanced discourse study in this article.

Semantically-enhanced discourse studies is also informed by Cultural Discourse Analysis' commitment to emic thick descriptions and deep cultural meanings (Carbaugh, 2005; Scollo, 2011). Cultural Discourse Analysis has been applied to

studying communication about environment and place (e.g. Carbaugh and Cerulli, 2013), among many other domains. The analysis in this study also has intersections with Ecolinguistics (Steffensen and Fill, 2014; Stibbe, 2015; Döring, 2018; Fill and Penz, 2018): it treats the embedding of language of environment in wider social, political and cultural structures (e.g., Döring, 2003 on a flood occasioning national identity discourses). The present article also follows from the initiation of NSM-based exploration of Australian extreme weather event vocabulary in Bromhead (2020).

3. The floods and discourse topics of inquiry witness statements

In January 2011, Queensland experienced extremely heavy and intense rainfall; rivers and creeks flooded. Seventy-eight per cent of the state was inundated with water. Over 30 people died, and around 29,000 homes and businesses flooded (QFCOI Interim Report, 2011: Introduction; Chapter 1).

Following the floods, the state government established an independent quasi-judicial inquiry entrusted in its terms of reference with investigating flood preparations, warnings, evacuation centres, response of emergency services and community, performance of insurers, dam procedures, and land development (QFCOI Final Report, 2012: Appendix 1, 623–625). As part of the Inquiry, police took sworn witness statements from experts, people in authority and lay people.

Some of the texts used in this study are a collection of 18 witness statements taken from lay witnesses in Ipswich, an urban region of South East Queensland located to the South East of the state's major city, Brisbane (QFCOI Witness Statements, 2011). The collection of approximately 31,000 words² comprises 11 statements tabled in the Inquiry's hearings of 20 May 2011 and 7 statements tabled the hearings of 18–19 October 2011.

Two hearings were held in Ipswich because findings were handed down in two stages. An interim report was presented August 2011 to make preparations before the next Queensland wet season (Summer 2011–2012). This left more long-term matters to be considered later, and the Inquiry's final report was issued March 2012.

A call for people to make public submissions was issued, and investigators went to flood-affected areas. The investigators referred some of those to whom they talked to have formal sworn witness statements taken by police. According to the hearings transcripts, the 20 May sessions emphasised warnings and evacuation centres, whereas the 18–19 October sessions had insurance and land development as focuses (QFCOI Transcript of Proceedings 20 May, 2011; QFCOI Transcript of Proceedings 18 October, 2011; QFCOI Transcript of Proceedings 19 October, 2011). The statements are heterogenous and were informed by the particular experience of each of the witnesses. However, most of the statements contain more information than solely these topics. The statements are a co-creation between the witnesses and the institutional powers of the Inquiry (Holt and Johnson, 2010).

A content analysis (see Section 2) was undertaken on the 18 witness statements to determine the discourse topics of the statements. As the statements were divided into numbered paragraphs, each paragraph was taken as a unit of analysis and assigned a topic. The discourse topics were arrived at through a consultation of the terms of reference of the Inquiry (QFCOI Final Report, 2012: Appendix 1, 623–625), and several close readings of all the statements. The discourse topics mostly correspond to the terms of reference, but not in all cases. For example, dam procedures are not included in the discourse topics because these particular witnesses were lay people and did not have information about this aspect. The discourse topic of 'clean-up' was added even though it is not a specific term of reference. Nine of the witness statement containing one or more paragraphs using keywords like *clean-up process* (NLV), *clean up stage* (PTB), *clean up time* (SOE), *the clean up* (LIN, WIJ), *cleaning up* (GGW1, JOT), *cleaning out* (TGS) and *salvage* (TRC).

Each paragraph was coded as either 'biographical information', 'preparation', 'warning', 'evacuation', 'clean up', 'recovery', 'insurance', 'land planning' or 'other'³. After removing the introductory paragraphs containing biographical information, for each of the 18 statements, the number of paragraphs in each particular discourse topic was quantified and assigned a percentage of the statement as a whole. These percentages were averaged across the total number of statements, and the weightings are shown in Table 1 along with a sample of each of the discourse topics:

Table 1
Content analysis of the sample of witness statements.

Discourse topic	%	Sample
preparation	10.67	I was approached by the Ipswich SES [state Emergency Services, Author] Co-ordinator regarding planning for future flood evacuations. (...) he made quite a big fuss about having an evacuation plan for the park. NKU
warning	13.17	I would say that those warnings were timely and although the message was clear about the possibility of flooding, it was difficult to understand what the impact of the flood was going to be. LIN
evacuation	22.78	I saw the water level had increased (...). As the water had rose so quickly and from my previous experience in Indonesia with flooding, we decided to evacuate our home. TRC
clean-up	8.85	RE [local counsellor, H.B.] and GE [the counsellor's wife, H.B.] organised a group of 25 Air Force personnel to come and clear my home of my possessions ... SOE

² Count is approximate as statements are not in machine readable form.

³ The 'Other' discourse topic category mostly comes from one statement GGW2, which dealt with the circumstances of the death of the witness' relative. The remaining 'Other' coded paragraphs were ones that simply commended the statements to the Inquiry.

Table 1 (continued)

Discourse topic	%	Sample
recovery	8.28	Other child care centres from interstate sent toys and "Bookplace" (books for floods) got onto us and met us at the Centre, before donating a lot of books. <i>NLV</i>
insurance	17.57	I put a claim in for the stock and damage to the shop for the full amount however I only received about 20% of this value. <i>WJ</i>
land development	16.26	... they asked for an increased buffer zone of 200 m or better still that this area not be developed and kept as a nature reserve and never to be built on in the future as they had concerns of flooding. <i>MIR</i>
other	2.43	I would like to see protocols recommended in regards to commercial media publishing details of a person's death. <i>GGW2</i>

Statements move through the phases of the floods sequentially; they do not move from point to point through the terms of reference (see [Murphy, 2019](#): 89–90 on chronology in public inquiries). Running through the statement are three threads: the first, what happened at the relevant times leading up to, during, and after the flood; the second, whether the systems and practices that occurred were adequate; and the third, what should happen in the future. To take an example of flood warnings:

- (1) I did not receive any warning prior to the flood event alerting me of an impending severe weather event. In my opinion I consider that in the event of a future incident the best method of warning people is by the media. I also consider that the forecasts provided by the Weather Bureau were not really adequate; they didn't go into enough detail. *TGS*

I set out the structure of the discourse topics in [Fig. 2](#).

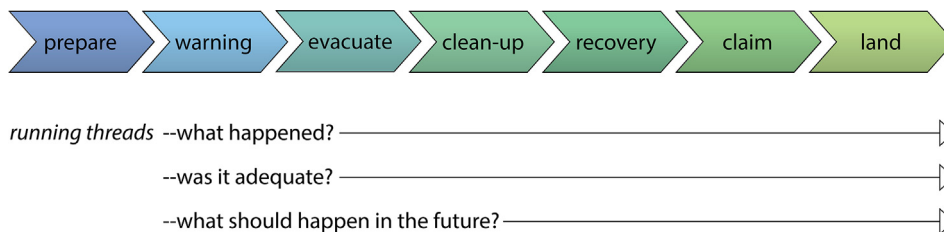


Fig. 2. Discourse topics and running threads of flood witness statements.

Notably, detailed experiences of the rain and flood water on the day hardly figure in these accounts because the Inquiry is about factors that can be changed by government. The public discourse contained in these witness accounts is geared towards authorities' management of the situation, a story of responsibility and reform, even blame ([Murphy, 2019](#)). The mainstream present-day Western view of natural disasters, reflected in the response to Queensland floods, is that humans through mismanagement can either cause or exacerbate their effects on people and place as opposed to some linguacultures' emphasis on supernatural forces as driving factors. It is also significant that the Inquiry did not treat the effects of anthropogenic climate change despite the fact that discourse of this nature was also present at the time of the floods ([Bohensky and Leitch, 2014](#)).

4. Discourse keyword: *flood*

The discourse keyword *flood* shapes the wider discourse around the event, which was touched on in Section 1 with specific reference to First Nations vs. non-Indigenous Australian perceptions of the waterways of Brisbane and Ipswich. Further, in the aftermath of the event, the meaning of the word *flood* became an issue of public interest due to the definitional intricacies of insurance documents.

Because of the wordings of some insurance policies, many people whose homes were damaged received insufficient pay out even though they believed they were eligible for recompense ([Canterford et al., 2016](#)). While the word *flood* may be the most common way to describe what happened, in an insurance claim, the word *inundation* is more salient ([Druery et al., 2012](#); [Hayes and Goonetilleke, 2012](#)). In Australia, most house insurance policies cover bushfire, earthquake and storm damage, yet for floods, the cause of the *inundation* must be determined. Damage via rain from a storm is covered, and, at the time of the floods, terms like *flash flood* and *storm flood* were used in policies to describe this situation ([Calligeros, 2011](#)). By contrast, if the water comes ultimately from a river bursting its banks, then the cause is characterised as a *riverine flood*, which is not covered in most policies ([Druery et al., 2012](#); [Hayes and Goonetilleke, 2012](#)).

Witness statements from the collection tell of problems with the distinction in coverages, as in (2):

- (2) The reason for the rejection of the claim was that our policy was for **'flash flooding'** and that the flood at our home was **'riverine flooding'**. *CBH*

In some statements, people who have had their claims rejected use the language of insurance in the verb *inundated*, as in (3).

- (3) ... when our house became **inundated**, I contacted our insurer ... *DTM*

The Australian federal government also responded to the issue of flood insurance generally in the light of Queensland floods in a 2012 review, and proposed a standard definition of flood for use in insurance documents:

The covering of normally dry land by water that has escaped or been released from the normal confines of:

- any lake, or any river, creek or other natural watercourse, whether or not altered or modified; or
- any reservoir, canal, or dam ([Australian Government The Treasury, 2012](#)).

This definition is designed to make it clear to people purchasing insurance what it is that they are and are not covered for. Yet in ordinary language *flood* can be used for a wider variety of situations; for instance, floods in the Queensland towns Toowoomba and Grantham, 'inland tsunamis', were caused by enormous amounts of rain rather than rivers escaping their confines, yet they, too, are included in the Inquiry ([QFCOI Interim Report, 2011](#): Introduction; [Gearing, 2013](#); [Cook, 2019](#): 145). Besides, a house may be damaged by multiple sources of water, both storm and river, yet weighting of causes can only be determined by a hydrologist. The semantics of *flood* as used by non-specialists can encompass all these events, although a riverine flood may be the most canonical.

A semantic explication captures the ordinary sense of *flood* in [A]:

[A] a flood

(a)

when people say there is a flood in a place, they are saying:
 something like this is happening now:
 it rains very, very much in this place, not like at other times
 because of this, there is very much water in many places where there isn't water at other times
 people don't want this, it is very bad for people

(b)

sometimes it happens like this:
 because it rains very very much, there is very much water in places like rivers, not like at other times
 after this, it rains more, some of this water isn't in places like rivers anymore
 there is much water everywhere
 there is a lot of water on roads, there can be a lot of water in houses
 very bad things can happen to people when something like this happens
 sometimes people die because of it

(c)

after something like this happens in places, it is like this:
 there is a lot water in places for some time, it can't be there for a very long time
 at the same time, these places are not like they were before
 something bad happened to them because for some time there was very much water in them

In (a), the bare bones of a flood are sketched. It is an event when it rains uncharacteristically torrentially. This causes water to be in places it is not normally. The effect upon people is unwanted and bad. This sketch could cover both floods from rivers, and floods directly from storms.

Section (b) gives the prototypical flood scenario introduced with 'sometimes'. Water from a place such as a river escapes because of the large amount of rain. There is water in places of human habitation. Bad things can happen to people, even death.

In (c), the results are depicted. Water can be present for some time, but at some point the water recedes. The places where the water was are changed. Something bad has happened to them: a flood causes damage.

The meaning is anthropocentric (see Section 2), far from detached, scientific or legalistic; human desires, lives, bodies and constructions (roads, houses) play their parts, as well as 'water' and 'river', which are defined via human experience ([Wierzbicka, 1996](#): 230; [Bromhead, 2011b, 2018](#)).

Coming back to the mismatch between colonial expectations of water and its bodies in Australia, another feature of the explication is the climatic variability conveyed by phrases 'where there isn't water at other times' and 'not like at other times'. Arthur has pointed out that the critical aspect of flood vocabulary in Australian English is "the association of what is *normal* in Australian riverine behaviour with a vocabulary of *exception*" (2003: 146). There are longstanding narratives about the

country's 'harsh' weather and climate. An often quoted poem, 'My country' begins 'I love a sunburnt country, a land of sweeping plains, of ragged mountain ranges, of droughts and flooding rains' (McKellar, 1908).⁴

5. A macro-level perspective: The Inquiry

In this section, I model the institutional setting of the Inquiry. Public inquiries into natural disasters are more prominent in Australia than elsewhere (Callaghan, 2020). In her announcement of the Inquiry, the Queensland Premier Anna Bligh states 'now is the time to forensically examine the devastating chain of events and the aftermath'. She wants to ensure 'all possible lessons are learned' (Bligh, 2011). The press release on Bligh's announcement states: 'the Inquiry would have the powers of a Royal Commission [a form of judicial public inquiry in British Commonwealth countries, H.B.], would take public submissions from across Queensland and would make recommendation in its interim report for future wet seasons'.⁵

In an article about the Inquiry, public policy expert Jim McGowan writes 'it is both good public policy and good practice to debrief and review the preparation for and response to that disaster' (McGowan, 2012: 356). That said, McGowan takes issue with the Inquiry's form as a 'formal Commission of Inquiry utilising Royal Commission or judicial powers' (McGowan, 2012: 356). This contributed to, as he sees it, the process being 'trapped in a reactive inquisitorial mindset' (McGowan, 2012: 355) that lead to recommendation for increased regulation and missed an opportunity to promote community resilience.

Having the powers of a Royal Commission meant the Inquiry could compel witnesses to give evidence. Thus, the Inquiry is premised on the idea that some people involved in the floods may not want to speak in order to protect their and others' actions from detection, and that it is in the public interest to force them by law to give evidence. The Inquiry structure therefore implies that people and authorities may have done something wrong.

Ewart and McLean (2014) analyse newspaper reporting of the Inquiry reports. The study finds that the news frames used meant that the reports were viewed through the lens of blame. This may be, in part, a result of the discourse script on which the Inquiry is based. There is the possibility of wrongdoing within the discourse script.

The discourse script represents what the Inquiry purports to be – its ideological formation, and what it could widely be understood to be.

[B] Discourse script on 'the Inquiry'

(a)

something very bad happened in this place a short time ago, there were floods
we know: after some time, there can be other floods in this place

(b)

before there was a flood,
many people did many things in this place because they knew there could be a flood
when there was a flood,
many people did many things in this place because there was a flood at that time
after there was a flood,
many people did many things in this place because there was a flood before

(c)

we think: maybe bad things happened because some people did some things in this place
maybe good things happened because some people did some things in this place
we want to know what things people did
we want to know what happened because people did these things
we want to know what it is good to do before there is a flood, when there is a flood, after there is a flood

(d)

because of this, we want some people to say some things about it
sometimes maybe some people don't want to say some things about it
when it is like this, we say: 'you have to say some things about it'
if people say some things about it, we can know what things some people did
we can know what happened when they did these things
we can know what it is good to do before there is a flood, when there is a flood, after there is a flood

(e)

when we know these things, we can say them to everyone here

Section (a) sets up the framework for the Inquiry: it is about a recent event, floods, and rests on knowledge that similar occurrences can take place in future. (b) portrays the focus of the Inquiry, people's actions, which could presumably be changed in future. These actions are in three time settings: before, during and after the floods mirroring the terms of reference of the Inquiry and the discourse topics in the statements.

⁴ The fame or infamy of the poem means it has become a touchstone in debates about climate change, particularly dating from the time around the 2011 floods where it was quoted to argue that the floods were not exacerbated by climate change (Anonymous, 2015).

⁵ It is notable that part of the *raison d'être* of the Inquiry was preparation for future wet seasons. The use of wet season instead of Summer shows that non-Indigenous Australians in Queensland have come to terms, to some extent, with the climate.

In (c), one finds the presumption that bad things could have happened because of people's actions. There is also the possibility, which Premier Bligh mentions in her announcement and comes out in the Inquiry, that good things have occurred due to people's actions, in particular volunteer aid (Sections 1, 7). It is these two thoughts that form the basis for questions the Inquiry wants to ask: what people did, what the results were and what it is good to do for future floods.

Section (d) sketches the process of the Inquiry. It involves the Inquiry asking questions and people responding. Some of these people can be compelled to respond. By asking questions, the Inquiry can know what it needs to. Section (e) encapsulates that the Inquiry is to make recommendations to the state.

6. A meso-level perspective: flood warnings

In narrower focus, flood warnings will be dealt with. One can encapsulate the content of the discourse about warnings and the societal assumptions that undergird this topic through a discourse script. Some illustrative examples from the statements will first be discussed.

In (4), a witness checks a reputable authority, Australia's Bureau of Meteorology (a federal government authority) website but finds no warnings.

- (4) I got up and decided to check the BOM [Bureau of Meteorology, H.B.] website for any changes to the flood condition of the caravan ['trailer', H.B.] park area at Gailles. There were no warnings for flooding in the Brisbane River. *NKU*

The nature of the source is important for determining what does and does not constitute a warning, as in (5).

- (5) Warnings are something that I do not have a lot of knowledge of, however I am aware that staff working in the Bradken Engineering plant (...) were advised of the flood on the Monday morning and told to go home if they needed to. I don't know if this is something that was initiated by Management or if they received a warning ... *GGW2*.

(5) suggests that if management of an engineering plant advised staff to go home, then it would not be a warning. A warning may have to come from someone with the licence to give it, and management of an engineering plant might not be considered as possessing that authority.

Further to this point, there seems to be a distinction made in effectiveness of a member of the public *warning* people of a flood (using the verb) and the issuing of information by those in authority via a formal *warning* (using the noun). In (6) a witness tells of going door-to-door to warn residents.

- (6) ... my wife and I drove around till 3am the next day **warning** people up Old Ipswich Rd and Duncan St as the water was now crossing Duncan St rapidly. *RLT*

He puts forward what he thinks should happen in the future with reference to his experiences (see (7)).

- (7) I consider that in the event of a future incident the best method of warning people is to SMS, but a bit earlier than they did this time and to be more specific as to how serious the threat was, as when we approached residents of Riverview they didn't believe us when we told them and it would have had more impact if the Emergency Services, i.e. police, SES [State Emergency Services, H.B.], army etc., had door knocked instead of us. *RLT*

(7) also speaks to the importance of timeliness of warnings and the fact that they need to be clear so that people can grasp the impact of the impending flood. The lack of understanding and lack of time in which to prepare are themes that come out in many of the statements as in (8) and (9).

- (8) ... on the Tuesday afternoon I received a weird phone call (...). All that call consisted of was a siren and at the time I had no idea what it was about. *NLV*

- (9) I only had time to gather a few belongings and leave the house. *SOE*

The key ingredients to an adequate warning are that it be issued by a believable authority, ultimately going back to government; be understood by everyone and arrive in time that people be able to take the appropriate action. These factors are spelt out in a discourse script for flood warnings in [C].

[C] *Discourse script for flood warnings*

(a)

all people in this country know it is like this:

some people in this part of the country have to know a lot about what happens in places here
 these people have to know when there will be a lot of rain in places here
 these people have to know when there will be a flood in places here

(b)
before there is a flood in a place, these people have to say to everyone in this place:
in a short time, there will be a flood in this place
because of this, everyone has to go to another place now, far from where there is a flood

(c)
when they do this, everyone in this place can know what will happen,
everyone in this place can know where they have to go

(d)
these people have to say these things a short time before there is a flood in a place, not a very short time
when they do this, everyone in this place can do some things with the things in their houses
before there is a flood, everyone in this place can go to another place before there is a flood

In (a), the cultural and societal knowledge under which Australians are operating in the discourse on warnings are set up. It is understood that there are relevant authorities for one part of the country whose role is to know about what happens there, which includes prospects for rain and flood. The wording 'some people' is deliberately vague. The statements suggest various sources as able to give warnings: politicians, the Bureau of Meteorology and the emergency services.

Section (b) contains the dictum: the fact that there will be a flood in a place and that everyone in the relevant place has to leave for safety.

Section (c) covers the reception of the key messages of the dictum: when they have been set out by believable sources people can know what to expect and to evacuate their homes.

In (d) the timeliness of warnings is treated. Warnings need to be delivered at the right time to allow people the opportunity to leave and to prepare their house.

7. A micro-level perspective: to just get in and clean up

A strong theme in the clean-up discourse topic of the witness statements is the involvement of volunteers in the clean-up after the flood, as well as gratitude towards them. In Australia, there is a discourse of local people banding together in times of crisis (Hansen and Griffiths, 2012; Rowan, 2017: 76–77). This apparent tradition has been characterised as indicative of national character (Flannery, 2010). There are also anti-discourses that dispute whether this mutual aid is a uniquely Australian practice and point to how some in the community can be excluded from assistance (Fisher, 2011). Premier Bligh's announcement indicates that the Inquiry is intended, in part, as an avenue through which to applaud volunteers (Section 5). In 2011, the expression *mud army* emerged to describe volunteers who spontaneously formed informal working groups to help clean up after the Queensland Floods (Bohensky and Leitch, 2014; Cook, 2019). This term has been used for similar volunteer parties after subsequent Queensland natural disasters (Kayhan, 2017).⁶

We can find one crystallisation of the national discourse of volunteerism in the construction (*to*) (*just*) *get in and VP* (as in *they just got in and did the job*), which occurs four times in the collection of statements in relation to volunteers cleaning up after the floods. Examples (10), (11) and (12) are from one witness, and (13) from another witness.

- (10) I knew a bloke with a bob-cat [skid steer, H.B.] who was helping the clean-up (...). He in turn knew another bloke with another bob-cat and (...) **they both got in and cleaned everything out.** LIN
- (11) ... overall a lot of good work happened and although we were frustrated on many occasions, **everybody just got in and went on with the job.** LIN
- (12) ... **everyone just got in and helped** and it was a great effort to just do the best with what we had. LIN
- (13) One of the fathers from our centre (...) contacted me to see if we needed a hand. (...) he met me at the gate and asked where we wanted them and then **they just got in and were able to pull apart the kitchen.** NLV

The construction (*to*) (*just*) *get in and VP* is about responding to a problem that requires action and acting quickly and decisively without instruction from others. The prototypical action is something physical, using the body and the hands. A semantic explication of the construction in the frame *They just got in and did it* appears in [D]. During the research process, upwards of 350 natural examples from the statements, and web and corpus searches, were carefully read for sense.

[D] *They just got in and did it*... (e.g. cleaned everything out)

- something bad is happening in a place
- many people think like this: it will be good if some things happen in this place now because of this
- these things can happen if someone does something like someone can do with their body,
if someone does something like someone can do with their hands

⁶ The lexicalisation of the concept of volunteers banding together to help in a disaster with the expression *mud army* has proved productive in Queensland. Although the original *mud army* was not formed by government, in April 2020, the Queensland State Government formed the *Care Army*, a group of volunteers and professionals, to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. Queensland Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk referenced the *mud army* in her announcement and 'Queensland's community spirit' (Bavas, 2020).

- d. because of this, someone does something like this at this time
- e. no one says to them: you have to do it
- f. they do it because they think like this:
- g. 'I want to do this because I know that someone has to do something
- h. this someone can be me
- j. I want to do it now'
- k. because someone does this now, some things happen in this place as many people wanted
- l. many people think like this: it is good when someone thinks like this
it is good when someone does something like this

Components (a) and (b) set up the context for the person's action. Something is going wrong in a place, and there is widespread agreement that something has to happen to remedy it. Component (c) identifies that this involves practical action. In (d) and (e), a person acts without instruction. Components (f)–(j) model the person's thought, a can-do attitude, if you will. Component (k) contains the result. In (l), the positive cultural evaluation of the person's mental state and their actions is captured.

This construction (*to*) (*just*) *get in and* VP appears to be used more in Australian English than in British English and American English based on results of Google Advanced Searches as displayed in Table 2. The construction appears more than 10 times in Australian material than in sources from United States and United Kingdom.⁷

Table 2
'just got in and' Advanced Google Search Results by region.

	Australia	United States	United Kingdom
Relevant sense	103	13	9
Total results	130	54	51

Judging from examples found, the construction is mostly used in reference to physical activity, notably playing sport, but also others, such as gardening and furniture removal, as well as other examples of helping after extreme weather events. The construction can even be extended, as I see it, to activities not as transparently involving the hands and body, such as selling real estate, as in business activity, and responding to climate change, as in climate action. Example (14) from the Google search contrasts the inactive speaking and indecision of 'debating what to do about climate change' with the positive *getting in and doing it*.

- (14) So, you can see that instead of debating what to do about climate change, local councils **have just got in and done it** (Local Government Association Queensland, 2019).

Results from Collins Wordbanks corpus also point to the construction being more common in Australian English, though the number of exemplars is not as great (Collins). There are only three examples of (*to*) *just get in and* VP (with the *just*) in the relevant sense, all from UK Spoken subcorpus. In searching for (*to*) *get in and* VP (without the *just*) in the relevant sense, one finds 16 examples in the Australian material, and 8 and 4 in the UK and US material, respectively. This is despite the fact that Australian material represents only 6 per cent of the corpus as against 46 per cent UK material and 35 per cent US material.

One could see the construction (*to*) (*just*) *get in and* VP as conforming with a traditional Australian ethos (or mythos) of practicality, improvisation and exertion in an emergency (Ward, 1974[1958]: 1–2). This ethos is most closely associated with Anglo-Australian men. However, it is worth noting that Australian English colloquialisms are also used by women and migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds (Manns, 2019: 92). Also, a lot of Aboriginal Australians in many contexts do not use English in contrastively different ways to other Australians (Dickson, 2019: 150). Culturally-indicative constructions (e.g. Wierzbicka, 2006) can be less obvious than well-known cultural keywords, such as in the case of Australian English *the bush* or *bogan* (Bromhead, 2011a; Rowan, 2017). Close attention to texts at a micro-level can uncover these almost invisible artefacts of discourse and culture. Capturing the sense of (*to*) (*just*) *get in and* VP offers a glimpse into how some people model the mental attitude of volunteers, a source of admiration for many.

8. Concluding remarks

This article has unpacked some public discourses of the 2011 Queensland floods through a transtextual semantically-enhanced discourse study:

- (1) The structure of a collection of witness statements has been determined via a close reading of the collection and the terms of reference of the Inquiry, and a content analysis. This has shed light on the institutional bounds of the Inquiry and how the concerns of lay witness are mediated through these bounds.

⁷ Searches of the string 'just got in and' by the three regions were performed on 4 April 2020. The string with *just* was chosen to reduce the number of results that did not contain the relevant meaning. This restriction using *just* also allowed for a reduction the number of results overall, which allowed for careful checking of each example for its sense. Examples not in the relevant construction and sense were excluded, such as 'our order just got in and it's full of new products', etc.

- (2) The study has taken the discourse keyword *flood* and explicated its ordinary semantics, which interact with technical definitions in insurance. Like other extreme weather words, the sense of *flood* is anthropocentric. By explicating *flood*, one can view this familiar English word as an English language geographic and cultural construction, which sits in contrast to First Nations understandings of seasons and waterways.
- (3) At a macro-level, the study has rendered bare the institutional setting in which some of the discourse unfolded, the Inquiry, through, in part, a discourse script. This rendering displays the Inquiry's emphasis on human action, questions, the possibility for fault-finding and the quest for reform.
- (4) At a meso-level, the study elucidated the discourse of warnings, in part, via a discourse script. It has found that the discourse of Queensland floods indicates people seek timely and clear messages from those with expertise and authority.
- (5) At a micro-level, a representation of how people in Australian esteem spontaneous volunteerism has been gained through distilling the meaning of one construction. *(To) (just) get in and VP*, as in *they just got in and cleaned everything out* may look unfamiliar as a carrier of cultural meaning yet it appears to be used more in Australia than in other English speaking countries. Its sense reveals broader cultural concerns and values in Australia, including those around extreme weather and climate.

Moreover, in this study, I have developed an approach to studying discourse through NSM approach, semantically-enhanced discourse studies, which is a culturally-informed approach. The words people use, and the patterns formed when people talk and write about particular topics, contribute to building shared ways by which people understand themselves and the place where they live. The method developed allows one to encapsulate, in a clear and precise way, word meanings in semantic explications, and specific event-based genres in discourse scripts, which are an innovation of this study. The fine-grained detail of the compositions, and the simple words and syntax of their phrasing, allow for the familiar to become strange and the strange to become familiar. In these ways, one can gain insights into the public discursive means people in a linguaculture conceive of, and deal with, extreme weather.

Above all, the study has inaugurated a method with which to explore disaster linguistics, climate change semantics and public discourse studies that has the potential to be used in future studies.

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