Corporate discourse

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Corporate discourse

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1. Introduction and definitions

When we think of modern corporations, what comes to mind is probably something like the skyline of Manhattan with monolith skyscrapers or possibly glass buildings with quirky designs dotting the Silicon Valley. But the buildings would have no corporate purpose if it were not for the people who work in them. Essentially, corporations are groups of people who come together to get work done and achieve organisational and interpersonal goals. The way in which they do it is primarily by communicating, that is, using talk and text with one another. Meetings, emails, negotiations with customers, job interviews, annual reports and so on are all forms of discursive events conducted through language. Decisions, actions, and even the shared understanding of corporate goals all grow out of interactions in a multitude of discursive events. It is simply impossible to imagine a corporation without any form of discourse. Discourse is the key tool of performing corporate goals; it is what 'talks' and 'writes' corporations into being (cf. Boden 1994).

For discourse-analytical ears this statement sounds as a platitude but it has only been recently that language in general and discourse in particular started to receive scholarly attention in the field of business communication instigated by the so called 'linguistic turn' in social sciences (Alvesson and Kärreman 2000). Applied linguists and discourse analysts too began to explore aspects of corporate communication and this chapter is primarily dedicated to showcase this work and outline its implications for to the field of discourse studies and corporate communication.

The notion of corporate discourse underlying this chapter draws on Breeze's (2013) understanding of corporate discourse as a set of social practices comprised in a cohesive discourse system (Scollon et al., 2012) that "supposes acceptance of a common ideological position, a process of socialisation of members, a set of preferred discourse forms […] that act as symbols of membership and a structured system of relationships, both inside the domain and with outsiders" (Breeze 2013: 23). In this sense, corporate discourse goes beyond the notion of discourse as language in use and emphasises what Gee (2014) calls the big D Discourse understood as ways of being that is, thinking, acting, interacting, believing etc. Corporate discourse can therefore be understood as ways of corporate being. Although these ways of corporate being are voluntary, they are "underpinned by a cohesive though not explicit ideological system" (Breeze 2013: 23), of which empiricism, utilitarianism and individualism are, at least in the Western corporate world, the core principles.

Corporate discourse is closely tied with corporate practices. As such, corporate discourse is never static and changes as new practices arise. It is important to bear in mind that corporate practices are not always transparent and often hide much more than they reveal. Analysing discourses through which corporate practices are constituted can be a way into this hidden world of corporations. At the same time, it needs to be emphasised that these discourses are likely to be opaque too. It is therefore imperative to read between the lines and scrutinise what is said, how it is said and also what is not said (Breeze 2013). This is where the tools and methods of (critical) discourse analysis come in handy.

This chapter begins with an overview of the major topics and directions in research on corporate discourse. First, studies concerned with internal corporate talk are discussed. Contrary to the common perception that corporate talk is dry and purely transactional, discourse-analytical and sociolinguistic studies of corporate talk have shown the prominence of interpersonal discourse features (hedges, humour, politeness, impoliteness) highlighting

that in corporate life relational goals are as important as transactional ones. The chapter moves on to outline research on corporate communication with the outside world focusing specifically on discursive strategies that corporations employ to legitimise their actions and to persuade or dissuade stakeholders. Increasingly social media have become an important site for maintaining public relations. Yet, context collapse poses a challenge to business as usual and opens up ways for a wider public scrutiny of corporate practices. The chapter concludes with a discussion of some of the practical and ethical issues that arise when 'doing' a critical analysis of corporate discourses and outlines some of the opportunities and benefits that criticality and language awareness can bring to corporate life.

2. Overview of the topic

Given the understanding of corporate discourse as corporate practice, this section focuses on research that explores the role of discourse in creating and maintaining corporate identity and performing corporate goals. Studies concerned with specific lexical, grammatical and generic features of business genres often with a teaching purpose in mind and conducted under the banner of ESP have been extensively reviewed elsewhere (e.g. Bargiela-Chiappini et al. 2007) and will not be discussed here. Since corporate discourse as corporate practice is inherently context-bound, only studies that are based on authentic data collected in corporate settings are considered. Research using methods that do not emphasise authentic contexts, for example, simulations is excluded.

2.1 Discourse and the Inner World of the Corporation

A corporation is a legal entity which in order to exist needs to be formally 'incorporated' into a registrar of companies. For example, in the UK this is the House of Companies. The

most important part of this process is the completion of a specific text known as Memorandum of Association and giving the company a name. In this way, a corporation is entextualised into being and cannot exist otherwise. From that moment, texts and talk will define much of the structure and inner workings of a corporation.

However, it was only recently that the role of text and talk in the corporate inner life has been recognised. For a long time, research concerned with business communication has been premised on the understanding that communication is just about transferring information and if the information is clear and well defined, then it will be received in the intended way. This was equated with communicative efficiency and much efforts were spent on creating business communication manuals based on this one-dimensional, transactional and instrumental model of communication (Baxter 2010).

Seminal work by Lampi (1986) who used discourse analysis to study business negotiations is one of the first contributions challenging this output-input model. Her research has shown that business communication is largely about relationships and that the lexical choices made by participants reflect the degree of mutual involvement and the corporate context in which the negotiation takes place.

This contextual and interpersonal nature of business and corporate communication has been demonstrated in subsequent studies concerned with different types of spoken business discourse. Interrogating the Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Business English (CANBEC), Handford (2010) demonstrates the saliency of interpersonal dimension in business interactions as evidenced by the frequent use of routinised chunks (*you know*, *I think*) and the pervasiveness of *we*. In a similar vein and using a corpus-based methodology, Koester (2006) analyses workplace talk and too finds the prevalence of language features typical for interpersonal language use such as hedges, vague language, idioms and metaphors.

One of the major contributions to our understanding of the role of language in the inner workings of business contexts has been the *Language in the Workplace* (LWP) project based at the University of Wellington in New Zealand and conducted by a team of linguists under the direction of Janet Holmes. Many studies with different foci sprang from this undertaking and it is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss the breadth and depth of the LWP research.[1] What is relevant to highlight is that in contrast to other studies concerned with discourse in business environments, the LWP project foregrounded the role of discourse in maintaining and negotiating power relationships in business organisations. It also introduced the theoretical notion of a workplace as a form of community of practice (CfP) (Holmes and Stubbe 2003) drawing on the understanding of CfP developed by Wenger (1998). Accordingly, workplace has been conceptualised as place based on three indispensable components that constantly intersect, namely joint enterprises (goals), mutual engagements (ties and activities) and shared repertoires (symbolic and behavioural practices).

The LWP project amassed authentic interactions from various business contexts with diverse participates representing different gender and ethnic backgrounds. One of the contributions of LWP has been to show the importance of small talk in interactions in business contexts as a means of filling a gap between work activities (Holmes and Stubbe 2003). Humour too has been identified as an important feature of business interactions serving multitude of functions including maintaining of collegiality and good relationships with co-workers and helping to smooth face-threatening acts. It can be a powerful tool for those having a higher status in the managerial hierarchy to assert authority. Equally, humour is used by subordinates to challenge power relationship and express criticism in a 'softer' way (Holmes 2000).

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[1] The project website can offer further insights into the multitude of LWP research projects and relevant publications: https://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/centres-and-institutes/language-in-the-workplace

The intersection of power and gender has been of particular interest to the LWP project challenging some of the common assumptions and stereotypes about women's and men's talk. For example, Holmes and Marra (2004) have shown that the way women and men talk in the workplace depends on contextual factors, of which power status seems to be an important indicator of a communicative style rather than gender (Holmes and Stubbe 2003). For example, although use of directives has been commonly associated with a 'masculine communicative style', women in managerial positions use directives too to get things done (Holmes and Stubbe 2003).

Similar findings were obtained by Mullany (2007) in the context of British workplace interactions. In her ethnographic study, she observes that women in higher status positions use discourse patterns normally associated with a stereotypical notion of 'masculine communicative style', for example, they talk in a direct manner without using mitigating devices. Baxter (2010) too has demonstrated the significance of status and context on the ways in which female and male employees deploy language in business interactions. Challenging the stereotypical notion of women's and men's language, she shows how female leaders combine repertoires of both feminine and masculine speech styles to perform transactional and relational goals. The female style seems distinctive in that it is more proscribed and based on nuanced linguistic strategies, which, in Baxter's (2010: 169) view, is needed "in order to preempt negative evaluation in a business world that continues to be male-dominated."

While spoken interactions are a major part of internal workings of a corporation, employees also spend a significant proportion of their everyday activities on engaging with written discourse either by producing documents and by engaging in text-based digitally mediated communication formats (Darics 2015). Digital technologies, email in particular, have enabled new levels of interactivity and contributed to changes in norms and discursive

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practices of business communication blurring at times the distinction between professional, corporate and lay discourse (Darics 2015). More informal personalised discourse styles emerged influencing also face to face encounters (e.g. Gimenez 2000).

Given that increasingly organisations and corporations are multinational and engage in business across the world, teams are likely to be composed of members of different ethnicities and nationalities with different discursive and communicative styles. This can be as much as an enrichment as an obstacle to effective communication at work. English is now the dominant language of business communication with many large corporations switching to English as the official corporate language (Neeley 2012). For example, Airbus, Daimler-Chrysler, Nokia, Renault, Samsung, Siemens, SAP, Microsoft in Beijing and Mikitani use English only and many more corporations plan to follow suit. This creates a scenario in which most employees communicate in a language, which is not their first or native language and this might be perceived as a problem for effective communication. Research by Incelli (2013) shows to the contrary; she compared business emails written in English by native speakers of English and speakers of Italian and found that native speakers use a range of accommodation strategies to adapt to the kind of English produced by Italian colleagues. Overall, grammatical and lexical errors seem interactionally irrelevant as long as the purpose and technical aspects are understood. Cultural norms seem to play a role too and differences in communication strategies were observed in the degree of formality or informality used in the emails with Italians showing a tendency towards a more causal style, while the English native speakers exhibited a more formal register.

Alongside emails, other digital technologies most notably instant messaging (IM) are increasingly adopted for the purpose of internal communication in corporations (Darics 2013). Garrett and Danziger (2007) argue that IM can be a useful tool of interaction management allowing users to communicate in a more efficient ways. For example, Quan-

Haase et al. (2005) show that IM can facilitate conversations about sensitive matters, while Dennis et al. (2010) conclude that IM can be useful for social and task support. The perceived informality of IM conversations is helpful in creating an atmosphere of trust and collegiality, which is achieved through the use of specific linguistic and discursive resources such as emoticons, capitalisation, letter repetition and various politeness strategies (Darics 2013).

Communication in professional and organisational settings is predominantly a type of frontstage communication (Goffman 1971) assumed to be rational and polite. Indeed, forms of impoliteness such as swearing are less expected because they are associated with offensive behaviour that would be socially sanctioned. Yet, as a study by Jay (2000) and Chaika (1982) show, swearing occurs at the workplace, and can even be quite prevalent in context of backstage communication. Similar to humour, it can be used to exercise power. It can also be an important tool of resistance to authority and contribute to the redefinition of power relationships. Mak and Lee (2015) investigate the use of expletives in IM in the context of white-collar workplaces in Hong Kong and conclude that swearing in IM is much more intentional and strategic that in face to face communication. Alongside expressions of frustration, expletives in IM can help employees release work-oriented pressure, preface bad news or help share negative feelings. The authors argue that swearing in workplace should not always be regarded as 'bad', as it can strengthen relationships and mutual engagements.

One aspect of internal corporate workings which is increasingly given prominence is that of employee branding (Breeze 2013). Nowadays, companies invest a great deal of resources into the creation of a system of values that gives a perception of a cohesive well-working community and employee branding is an important part of socialisation of employees into that community. Research has shown that employees who identify with the corporate identity develop loyalty and are more likely to go the extra mile (Ellsworth 2002). The benefits for corporations are obvious and it is perhaps not surprising that increasingly HR departments

join in efforts with public relation specialists to devise ways in which to increase the 'match' between employees' attitudes and corporate values (Breeze 2013). They do so by employing diverse and increasingly sophisticated symbolic, semiotic and discursive means to create a sense of corporate community and persuade the employees of the merits of the company. Induction meetings, company's newsletters with stories of achievements, requests to wear outfits that display company's brand and brand-associated qualities, and team-building exercises are implemented to enhance employees' engagement and win their hearts and minds (Breeze 2013).

Given the general difficulties in obtaining access to internal corporate materials and settings, there is little research exploring the discourse of employee branding. One of the few examples is a study by Lischinsky (2018) who study training materials given to new employees in the UK retail corporation John Lewis. This corporation is interesting in that it is owned (but not co-manged) by its employees who are normally referred to as partners. Using corpus tools and methods, Lischinsky (2018) looks specifically at the lexical profiles of the terms *partner* and *partnership* and shows how the corporation overemphasises its uniqueness and reciprocity in the relations between employees and the organisation. Also, affiliative and emotional links are created by reinforcing the message that 'we are all in it together' and everyone is responsible for the financial situation of the corporation. In this way, employees are make believe that they are joining structures based on total equality in which responsibility is shared by all, while existing managerial power structures are conveniently downplayed.

Employee branding is a highly problematic discursive practice; it can be seen as an attempt to 'mould' employees' minds by co-opting them to think and behave in the ways desired by the corporation, which essentially turns them into a commodity ready to be used as a competitive advantage for the increase in profits. On the other hand, it is worth noting that

employees who strongly identify with corporate goals and corporate identity might actually be happier employees, as they might feel a harmony between what they do and what the organisation expects them to do.

2.2 Corporate Discourses and the Outside World

If we look at public documents, brochures and websites of corporations in any sector across the world, there will be one dominant theme that they all will have in common: a positive self-image. Companies invest a great deal of time and resources into public relation activities whose main task is to create and communicate a positive self-understanding and reinforce the message that whatever activities a company engages with the goals are desirable and pertain to 'do' some social good. Literature in management and organisational studies describes it as organisational legitimacy (Suchman 1995).

Legitimacy is a key aspect of corporate reputation, which, in turn, can ensure competitive advantage and enhance organisational credibility and trustworthiness. Conversely, weak legitimacy and damaged reputation can weaken corporation's status making it vulnerable to scrutiny, which could pose a risk to business operations. It is therefore not surprising that the area of public relations is at heart of corporate workings.

There are two main streams of public relation work in corporations: a creation of positive corporate image and dissemination of that image to both internal and external stakeholders. Since we have already touched upon employee branding as an example of internal public relation work, this section focuses on communications with external audiences.

Corporate identity is normally understood a set of values and beliefs that define the self-understanding of a corporation, i.e. how the corporation perceives itself and how it wants to be perceived by its stakeholders and the wider world. Corporate identity can create a sense of cohesion and belonging not dissimilar to the ways in which national identity fosters an

imagining of a larger community (Anderson 1991). Yet, as Breeze (2013) highlights, corporate identity differs considerably from national identity in that a corporation is purposefully created and managed by a few who are on top of the organisational hierarchy. Bottom-up redefinitions are rare and those in lower ranks are seldom invited to participate in decision-making processes and to contribute to the formulation of corporate identity or image. Because these processes are, for the most part, created and negotiated through discourse, there is almost no official room for counter or oppositional discourses to emerge and discontent will be vented, if at all, in a back kitchen or private space. Corporate identity is essentially a top-down discursive process controlled, negotiated and strictly supervised by the top management (Breeze 2013). Its prime textual manifestation is the mission statement.

Many of the notions underlying corporate identity feed into the creation of a corporate image. Corporate image differs from corporate identity in that it is the representation of the company disseminated to its internal and external audiences. It is essentially a creation of perceptions about company's products, services and strategies that a company desires to impress on its audiences. Company image is part of branding activities and as such embedded in a complex ensemble of semiotic and symbolic practices directed at a creation of unique and easily recognised brand as a set of associations to engage consumers, influence their tastes and preferences, and increase their loyalty. Whereas in the industrial economies branding focused on information about products and services, given the rise in mass production and mass consumerism in the 20th century and the need for distinctiveness, branding nowadays emphasises symbolic dimensions of products and services with corporations shifting their branding activities towards the management of emotions, images and ideas (Lischinsky 2018).

Corporations utilise a whole range of avenues to communicate with their audiences and to disseminate their image. From the corporations' perspective, the audiences are normally

divided into internal and external stakeholders. Internal stakeholders include stakeholders directly involved in business operations such as investors, employees, customers and suppliers as well as shareholders. External audiences can be communities, governments and public at large. Different types of documents are produced to engage with different groups of stakeholders.

The primary tool of communication with investors and shareholders is the annual report, which is required by law. In its basic form it includes information about the company's directors and its financial situation so that investors and shareholders know how the company is performing and can make informed decisions whether to invest further or sell their shares. Although originally annual reports were intended as collections of hard financial data, increasingly they evolved to a kind of a promotional tool (Breeze 2013). Beattie et al. (2008) examines the changes in the structure and forms of annual reports produced by UK firms over 40 years and reveals a threefold increase in the number of pages with voluntary material increasing faster than the mandatory. This increase has been accompanied by a significant rise of visual material, much of which is used to depict non-financial data. The authors conclude that from being compact and 'technical' documents, annual reports evolved into public relation materials. Increased multimodality of annual report is observed in a study by Breeze (2013: 89-91) who investigates 40 annual reports published in 2010 by different sectors. She notes the existence of diverse linguistic and semiotic features including linguistic and visual metaphors, prevalent representations of people and human faces, magazine-like designs, highlighting key information using various fronts and colours, visual displays of financial data and inclusion of photographs of board members.

One of the most prominent part of the annual report is the CEO letter also known as the letter to shareholders. Its significance is emphasised by placing it at the beginning of the document. CEO letters received a great deal of attention from discourse analysis. Using

corpus tools and methods, Hyland (1998) examines metadiscourse in CEOs letters produced by companies in Hong Kong. The study shows pervasiveness of emphatics, hedges and relational markers all used to project a positive image. Nickerson and De Groot (2005) compare CEOs and Chairman's statements in British English and Dutch annual reports and identify a number of similarities and differences. For example, projection of a positive image is common to both the CEO's and Chairman's statements. Yet, the authors also note that the British CEOs tend to be more factual and informative, whereas the Dutch ones seemed to be more relational.

Combining genre analysis with corpus tools and methods, Rutherford (2005) studies word frequencies in whole annual reports in order to assess the effect of the Pollyanna principle, which presumes that positive, affirmative words are used more frequently than negative words. His analysis shows that indeed the Pollyanna principle is prevalent in the studied sample and deployed particularly frequently by poorly performing companies possibly to disguise bad financial news. Adopting CDA, Merkl-Davies and Koller (2012) examine forms of impersonalisation and evaluation in a chairman's statement in an annual report produced by a defence firm. The detailed analysis shows how passivisation, nominalisation and grammatical metaphors are purposefully deployed to obfuscate the relationship between causes and effects and play a major role in presenting military violence as an essentially abstract entity.

Alongside mandatory disclosures, companies increasingly produce types of disclosures that are not required by law including press releases, conference calls or corporate and social responsibility reports. Voluntary reporting specifically corporate social responsibility (CSR) reports have been identified as the most dynamic practice of current corporate communications and an important means by which corporations attempt to influence public discourse and perceptions (Livesey 2002). Damaging effects of business practices on the

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environment, ecological sustainability, communities and employees began to feature in the media ever since the 1970s grabbing public attention. Increasingly, internal and external stakeholders started to demand more transparency and higher ethical standards. In response, companies institutionalised CSR as an organisational practice and began to produce CSR reports, first in form of shorter narratives included in annual reports and from the mid-1990s onwards in stand-alone reports. Originally, the focus of CSR reporting was on environmental matters but gradually, the reports expanded to include a wider range of issues such as organizational governance, human rights, the environment, fair operating practices and community involvement (Bhatia 2012; Jaworska and Nanda 2018). Critics argue that CSR reporting gives prominence to planed CSR activities and we know little about their impact (Vigneau et al. 2014). Thus, the potential of CSR to contribute to the development of sustainable future should not be overestimated. Nonetheless, research has shown that by making corporate plans and intentions public, voluntary disclosures can be challenged by stakeholders, the wider public and academic researchers leading potentially to changes in business practices (e.g. Livesey and Kearins 2002).

Discourse analysis with a critical edge offers a useful analytical framework to reveal discursive devices and strategies that companies employ to create positive 'spins' in constructing a socially and environmentally responsible image. Alexander's work (1999, 2009) is one of the first important contributions showing how two terms 'sustainable' and 'sustainability' were used in environmental reports produced by Shell in ways that erase the agency and responsibility. In this sense, 'sustainability' becomes an elusive concept used to demonstrate 'commitment' in a non-committal way. Combining CDA with corpus linguistic tools and methods, Lischinsky (2011) investigates instances of self-reference in a corpus of 50 CSR reports issued by Swedish companies in 2009 and notes a prevalence of affiliative voices evidenced by the frequent use of affiliative pronouns *we* and *our*. In the view of the

author, this creates a perception of unity which "fosters a view of the organisation as a cooperative whole, while maintaining a level of generality that hampers criticism and falsification." (Lischinsky 2011: 272).

The area in which discursive spins acquire prominence is in the context of crisis communication. Corporations often find themselves in a situation in which they have to respond to criticism or where there is a belief that a wrongdoing happened. A crisis situation can have a damaging effect on the corporation, especially if it affects the whole organisation. Revealing a corporate wrongdoing is in public interest and could potentially lead to important changes in business practices with positive social and ecological outcomes. Yet, from a corporate point of view, a crisis is a threat to organisational goals and a risk to its corporate image and reputation (Coombs 1998). Thus, companies invest a great deal of resources in crisis management, of which crisis communication is the key.

Response to a crisis is a form of discourse (e.g. press release, statement in the annual report or in the letter to shareholders) and the restoration of the image much depends on that discourse. Crisis communicators use a range of different discourse strategies to repair the tarnished image, most of which will be defensive in nature and aimed at maintaining corporate legitimacy (Breeze 2012, 2013). These include nonexistence, distance, ingratiation, mortification and suffering (Benoit 1997; Coombs 1998). Corporations will normally choose a mix of strategies to respond to criticism depending also on the audiences (Creelman 2015). However, it seems that a true apology is the 'hardest' and companies are reluctant to apologise publicly and will revert first to other strategies before they say sorry. This is because an apology essentially means accepting the responsibility which could delegitimise corporate goals and actions. This, in turn, could undermine trust and credibility leading to a collapse of share prices and invite lawsuits (Benoit 1997; Breeze 2013).

Breeze (2012) studies the discourse of legitimisation in letters to the stakeholders published in annual reports of five leading oil companies following the environmental disaster in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. Her analysis reveals that companies drew on the 'survivor' and 'lesson learned' narratives in order to restore a positive image of the industry and evoke solidarity on the part of stakeholders. Discursive strategies involved in the re-establishment of trust post the Deepwater Horizon spill in 2010 are also of interest to Fuoli and Paradis (2014). Analysing the BP's CEO letter published in the 2010 annual report, the researchers demonstrate how the company attempted to rebuild trustworthiness by adopting two strategies: neutralise the negative and emphasise the positive.

In the same way in which digital technology has contributed to changes in some practices of business interactions (Darics 2015), it also has had an effect on practices of corporate communication with the wider world. The potential of addressing diverse audiences including existing and potential customers have made social made an incredibly useful platform for disseminating and enhancing a corporate positive self-image and expanding corporations' customer base (Creelman 2015). Social media are nowadays firmly integrated in corporate communications because they offer attractive and multimodal forms of self-presentation. Yet, social media are public tools with a high level of interactivity; the context collapse and ambient publics make it difficult to predict who the viewers and readers are. This makes the contents published on corporate social media accounts open to public scrutiny. Social media empower ambient publics to air their criticism that can quickly become viral and grab attention of offline media (Davis et al. 2016).

Research in business and management studies has dedicated much attention to exploring strategies of crisis management online with the view to devise best practices for social media communication (e.g. Austin and Yin 2018). Yet, this research mostly presumes that criticism expressed by ambient publics is threating and needs to be managed in a way that poses

minimal risks to organisations and their profitability, so that companies can continue 'business as usual'. Ambient criticism has the potential to disrupt this corporate mechanics and contribute to changes with wider societal and positive impacts. For example, Davies et al. (2016) has shown how a meme campaign *Let's go* instigated by Greenpeace against the Shell's Arctic drilling inspired and motivated participation of the public at large. The campaign was based on creating memes mostly with an image of a polar bear that used Shell's corporate voice to ridicule Shell's justifications for the drilling in Alaska. Within a few days, the campaign went vital with users contributing some 8,800 (user-generated) memes. The campaign was successful in that it put pressure on Shell and made it stop Arctic drilling (at least for a while). This example shows how social media uses engage critically and creatively with problematic corporate policies and create counter discourses with a potential to change the business-as usual-practice.

At the time of writing this chapter, the social networking giant Facebook was revealed to violate consent decree by allowing a third party – a political consulting company Cambridge Analytica – to harvest personal data of nearly 50 million users. Once the news broke out, it created public outrage, which quickly spread on social media. It led to an online campaign with the hashtag #deletefacebook urging users to deactivate their Facebook accounts. The campaign secured support from high profile celebrities, authors and scientists. It is difficult to estimate how many people deleted their Facebook account because Facebook has refused to provide the data. Some estimates indicate that 10% of American users deactivated their Facebook profiles following the privacy breach.[2] The case has also demonstrated tricks which technology companies such as Facebook or Google deploy to make it difficult for users to

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[2] http://uk.businessinsider.com/delete-facebook-statistics-nearly-10-percent-americans-deleted-facebook-account-study-2018-4

tune their settings to more private ones with free choices being impeded and privacy-friendly settings kept hidden[3].

The ways in which corporations engage with audiences whether on social media or through user privacy settings are all discursive. Scrutinising these discourses would shed light on linguistic choices that corporations make in order to persuade, dissuade and manipulate audiences to believe in 'goodness' and appropriateness of corporate actions. This, in turn, could raise consumers' awareness of corporate discourse spins and help them become more vigilant and thus empowered. Yet, discourse studies on corporate engagement with audiences are rare (cf. Creelman 2015).

3. Issues

Despite the importance and growing interest in corporate discourse, the area presents a niche in discourse analysis and there are several reasons for this including practical, epistemological and ethical issues. Firstly, corporate discourses especially discourses produced within corporations are not easily accessible. Even if access is granted, which is rare, companies put strict legal requirements in place to control the access and restrict the ways in which data can be used and presented, which can be a daunting experience for academic researchers. Companies prioritise commercial and promotional needs and will only be willing to engage in research which is likely to foster these needs and enhance corporate credibility. Based on own research experience with a UK food retailer, companies will try to shape a research project in the way that suits them insisting on a quick delivery of results. We were repeatedly told that five months is, on a corporate time scale, 'million years!'. The industry has also a certain degree of distrust in academia in that academic work is often perceived as being too abstract and disconnected from real world problems (Koller 2018). For

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[3] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-44642569

a critical academic researcher/ discourse analyst, doing research with a corporate partner might feel simply uncomfortable on epistemological and practical grounds. However, I would not discourage discourse analysts from trying to engage with the industry, as any kind of involvement can bring us closer to the inner world of corporations that remains otherwise hidden.

Secondly, research using CDA does not sit comfortably with corporate ethos and goals. The aim of CDA is to uncover discourse practices that are grounded in unequal power relations and are persuasive or manipulative, in short, the kind of practices that do not present corporations in the best light and could 'stain' the positive self-image. This partially explains why companies are less willing to grant access to internal communications because this could be seen as a potential 'infiltration'. Researchers interested in corporate practices tend to revert then to documents that companies publish for wider audiences such as annual or CSR reports. These are however carefully grafted, 'controlled' and polished text types written to boost the collective corporate identity and a positive self-image. Even texts that are written from a personal perspective such as the CEO letter or a testimony are carefully composed to strengthen the collective ethos and positive self-representation (Breeze 2013). We may then reasonably ask what new aspects an analysis of such texts would bring to our understanding of corporate discourses? Despite the uniformity of the corporate voice that permeates such texts, they give corporations "ample opportunities for reality construction" (Pollach 2018: 2) also around social and environmental issues. Writers of such texts have a wide pool of linguistic and discursive choices at their disposal. Yet, they 'prefer' certain choices over others and in doing so, construct the issues in a way that reflects practices and ideologies established in the corporate world and serve the needs of that world (cf. van Dijk 1995). Studying corporate 'reality constructions' can shed light on the ideologies underpinning

corporate attitudes towards critical societal and environmental matters with the possibility of generating some accountability (Jaworska 2018).

Thirdly, there is the issue of crossing to the 'dark side'. Discourse analytical research into, for example, branding can shed light on a range of linguistic features that make a brand successful or less successful. In doing so, this research might unintentionally engage in "reverse engineering" (Beattie 2014: 128) and deliver 'tools' that could contribute to the perpetuation of problematic business-as-usual practices and be implicitly involved in their legitimisation (Fairclough 1992; Koller 2018). On the other hand, the professional field of branding and advertising can be an attractive career option for linguists and linguistic expertise is increasingly sought after by corporations to assist departments of corporate communication, PR and branding (Koller 2018). Increasingly, departments of (applied) linguistics flag these areas as important employment opportunities for graduates in their own PR activities such as open days. We need to remember that in such settings, discourse is essentially seen as an instrument that needs to bring about effects which contribute to operational and commercial goals. Again, this raises an ethical dilemma specifically for (critical) discourse analysts who see this use of discourse as an ideological 'abuse' and write and teach about the need for critical language awareness (Mautner 2010). Being too critical and challenging corporate beliefs can have unpleasant consequences for an employee and it is also unlikely to dramatically change the *modus operandi* of corporations. Should we then stop teaching students, that is, future professionals about the importance of criticality and critical language awareness? The answer is no and if anything, we should increase our efforts in showing them how using discourse can "convey empathy, courtesy and professionalism without mimicking the customer-service discourse of the commercial sector" (Mautner 2010: 184).

4. Implications

The question of what the implications of investigating corporate discourses are goes back to the question of why to do this kind of research. I hope that this chapter has shown that exploring corporate discourses is necessary if we want to understand how powerful organisations, and corporations are without a doubt very powerful, maintain and exercise power. This is important not only from a purely discursive point of view; it has much more fundamental implications. The principles that corporations endorse such as individualism, competition, utilitarianism and promotionalism are not just integral to corporate organisations. They are becoming all-encompassing and 'accepted' values that are increasingly colonising public and private spheres. CDA research by Mautner (2010), Ledin and Machin (2015), Zhang and O'Halloran (2013) provides strong evidence for this corporate colonisation of public institutions and spaces as manifested in the discursive practices being gradually 'copied' from the corporate world. Studying corporate discourse will show us what the tendencies of this discourse are and alert us to the ways in which corporate values increasingly attempt to govern us and the society at large. Why is this important? As Breeze (2013: 190) concludes, the principles which underlie corporate *modus operandi* such as utilitarianism and consumerism reduce "the human being to the economic sphere, where having is more than being". The human begin itself turns into a (human) resource and commodity. As Fromm reminds us (1978), life is not a business deal; it is a being and as such nothing other than a form of self-realisation and actualisation of potentiality. Work assumes an important part in our life in that it helps us achieve some of the potentiality also together with others, which, in turn, gives us dignity and satisfaction. Studying corporate discourse from a discourse-analytical perspective can help us learn to read the corporate text and talk in order to reveal the mechanics of corporate persuasion or dissuasion. Adding a critical understanding could help position our values and beliefs against the corporate rhetoric and

when necessary help us challenge or reject it, so we are not that easily turned into a mere resource. As Koller (2018: 17) stresses: "while intervening in a company's discourse does not change the broad economic structures in which it operates, any increase in respect towards, and agency for, stakeholders is to be welcomed."

In more practical terms, discourse analytical investigations of corporate text and talk can offer insights contributing to the creation of a more positive, collegial and balanced work environment. Research by Baxter (2010) on female leadership, which led her to formulate recommendations on how female managers could communicate to overcome certain gender barriers and stereotypes, is an indicative example of such practical and highly relevant implications.

5. Future directions

The overview of the topic above has shown that discourse analysts exploring corporate discourses have studied a range of talk and text types including internal and external communications. They have also approached the topic with a variety of research methods established in discourse analysis including conversation analysis, genre analysis, interactional sociolinguistics, CDA and corpus linguistics. Nonetheless, future research on corporate discourses would benefit from expanding its portfolio of methods and data sources.

First, multimodality is a pervasive aspect of corporate discourse and yet, studies on corporate discourses that combine textual and visual analysis are far and few between. Multimodal discourse analysis has been adopted to study advertising. However, other corporate branding activities and even texts such as annual reports that originally were just compilations of words and numbers are increasingly becoming multimodal. Taking multimodality as an analytical framework would enrich future research on corporate

discourse showing how both the visual and the textual work together as means of corporate persuasion. Research by Ledin and Machin (2015, 2017) offers here useful directions.

Most research on corporate discourse has focused on the ways in which corporations engage with stakeholders including internal and external audiences. It is now time to explore how the audiences engage with and respond to this kind of discourse. Investigating users' responses on social media could provide ample opportunities for researching such engagements. As the example of *Let's Go* campaign by Greenpeace has shown, social media users do not necessarily 'buy' into the corporate propaganda. What is more, they recontextualise it in creative and critical ways that can actually instigate a change in corporate practices. We need to expand the research agenda by exploring such online grassroot practices in more depth. The notions of entextualisation (Bauman and Briggs 1990) and intertextuality (Bakhtin 1986) can offer here useful analytical anchors. Finally, experimental studies into readers' responses to corporate discourse could offer further cognitive insights into the ways in which corporate discourse persuades or dissuades. Fuoli and Hart's (2018) work on readers' responses to corporate trust-building strategies is an indicative step in this direction.

6. Summary

Corporations are powerful organisations whose values and beliefs increasingly encroach and envelop public and private spheres defining roles and identities in these spheres two. It is in our interests and in the interest of our students (future professionals) that we critically scrutinise the kind of discourses that corporations produce, challenge them and, if possible, create a counter discourse to empower individuals. We also need to show how discourse can be used not just for the purpose of self-praise or persuasion but as a means of creating a

professional, equal and collegial workplace in which people can realise their individual

potential.

7. Related topics

Anders Björkvall, Discourses of Advertising & Branding

Annabelle Mooney, Discourses of Financial Crisis

8. Further Reading

Darics, E. & Koller, V. (2018). *Language in business, language at work*. London: Palgrave Higher Education.

This book presents an excellent introduction to the role of language in many facets of business communication including stakeholder communication, brand narratives and management of conflict and self-branding. Each topic is discussed in an engaging way by drawing on a range of authentic examples.

Breeze, R. (2013). *Corporate Discourse*. London: Bloomsbury.

Using a combination of CDA and corpus linguistics, this volume offers comprehensive insights into the ways in which discourse constructs and maintains corporate identity and relationships with internal and external audiences. A wide range of written genres produced by corporations are explored in depth.

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Bio

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