Negotiating trust during a corporate crisis

a corpus-assisted discourse analysis of CEOs' public letters after the Gulf of Mexico oil spill

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Negotiating TRUST during a corporate crisis: a corpus-assisted discourse analysis of CEOs' public letters after the Gulf of Mexico oil spill*

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This paper examines the discourse strategies deployed by BP's CEO to restore stakeholders' trust after the 2010 Gulf of Mexico disaster. Combining data-driven quantitative and qualitative analysis, the study examines how interpersonal language resources are used in the CEO's public letters to communicate a trustworthy corporate identity. The analysis employs the model of TRUST proposed by Mayer et al. (1995) and draws on Appraisal Theory (Martin and White, 2005) and Hyland's (2005) concept of metadiscourse. The results show that affect, evaluation and modality play an important role in BP's trust-building communicative efforts.

Trust, as Luhmann (1979, p. 4) puts it, is a "basic fact of social life". It is a critical component of human relationships and plays a key role in any form of cooperation and exchange (Misztal, 1996, p. 12). However, whereas the notion of trust has attracted increasing scholarly attention from a range of disciplines, including sociology, psychology and business studies, it remains largely unexplored in linguistics. Yet, as Linnell and Keselman (2011, p. 156) point out, "it is in interaction between people, or between individuals or groups and their environments, that trust and distrust are created, negotiated, sustained, confirmed or disconfirmed. It is in discourse that trust comes to life".

The analysis focuses on the CEO's 'letter to shareholders' and 'letter to stakeholders' included in the corporate annual report and social responsibility report, respectively. Considering the catastrophic consequences of the accident and the reputation damage suffered by BP due to its controversial management of the crisis, the research question I examine is the following:

> What discourse strategies does BP's CEO adopt in his public letters to restore stakeholders' trust?

To address this question, I have compiled and analyzed a small-size specialized corpus of CEO letters published by BP and other 4 major oil companies from 2009 to 2012, i.e. before and after the accident. The analysis combines quantitative corpus methods and qualitative discourse analysis (Baker, 2006; Baker et al., 2008). It focuses on three key attributes of trustworthiness, i.e. ability, benevolence and integrity (Mayer et al., 1995), and investigates how these are communicated in the CEO letters. It is shown, for example, that ability is communicated through positive appraisals of the company's performance (*We are becoming a leading player in wind energy*), benevolence by demonstrating empathy (*We are deeply sorry*), and integrity by underlining the reliability of the information provided (*You will see a continuing, relentless focus on safety*) and displaying ethical commitment (*Our refreshed values*). The language features connected to these three components of trustworthiness were identified and coded in the corpus using the UAM corpus tool (O'Donnell, 2008) and their distribution compared across companies and diachronically. Inter-coder agreement scores were used as a measure of reliability in the annotation process (Artstein and Poesio, 2008).

Preliminary results show that BP's letters contain a comparatively higher number of expressions of affect and that these expressions are more frequent in the letters published after the disaster. Also, BP's letters feature a comparatively higher number of epistemic and modal markers and personal pronouns. These differences are interpreted in light of BP's need to re-establish stakeholders' trust after the accident.

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