

‘I am proud to be on this team and
believe that our best days are ahead’

Stance in corporate reports

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I am **proud** to be on this team and
believe that our best days are ahead.

(JP Morgan Chase Bank 2011 annual report)

Background



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- Companies use communication **strategically** in order to positively influence the image the public has of them, and build favorable relationships with different stakeholder groups (e.g. Merkl-Davies and Brennan, 2007; Hallahan et al., 2007; Van Riel, 1995)
- One key strategy they use to pursue these communicative goals is to project a positive **corporate identity** (e.g. Fombrun, 1996; Van Riel, 1995)
 - corporate identity refers to “a firm’s strategically planned and purposeful presentation of itself” (Westcott Alessandri, 2001: 177)

Background



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- Companies have multiple stakeholders with **different expectations** and demands (Freeman, 1984; Friedman and Miles, 2006)
 - investors pursue profit maximization and risk minimization, employees safety and job satisfaction, customers product quality (Johansen and Nielsen, 2011)
- Different stakeholders have different expectations as to what characteristics and values a company should have, i.e. they have **specific expectations concerning a company's corporate identity**
 - investors value managerial competence, employees transparency and benevolence, customers technical competence and integrity (Pirson and Malhotra, 2011)
- Companies need to understand and fulfill their key stakeholders' expectations in order to gain access to vital resources and be successful (Dowling and Pfeffer, 1975; Freeman, 1984)

Outline of the study



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- It investigates how companies discursively construct and promote a positive corporate identity in order to appeal to and earn the trust of different stakeholder groups
- The study compares two key genres of corporate public communication, i.e. annual reports and CSR reports
 - annual reports address **shareholders and investors**, and include information about a company's financial standing
 - CSR reports target a broader audience of **stakeholders**, and provide information about a company's social and environmental performance
 - both report types are 'hybrid' discourse genres; they simultaneously fulfill informative and promotional, image-building goals (e.g. Bondi, 2016; Bhatia, 2004; Breeze, 2013)

Outline of the study



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- The analysis focuses on *stance* expressions (e.g. Biber, 2004, 2006a, 2006b; Biber and Finegan, 1988, 1989; Biber et al., 1999; Conrad and Biber, 2000)
- Stance features are directly implicated in how speakers express their identity in discourse and negotiate interpersonal relations (e.g. Bednarek, 2015; Englebretson, 2007; Martin and White, 2005; Thompson and Hunston, 2000)
- Research questions:
 - What types of stance expressions do companies use more often in annual reports versus CSR reports?
 - How are stance expressions used to discursively construct and promote a positive corporate identity in these two text types?
 - Are there differences in the way companies present themselves to investors and stakeholders in annual and CSR reports?

The analysis framework



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- Attitudinal stance
 - We are **happy** [to report about this program’s success].
- Epistemic stance
 - We **believe** [that outstanding service is the key to organic growth and long-term success for our franchise].
- Modality
 - At JPMorgan Chase, we believe that customers **should** [be treated like we would want to be treated ourselves].

The analysis framework



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- Markers of *style of speaking* stance (e.g. ‘In short’), were not considered, as they proved to be extremely infrequent in the corpus
- As in Biber (2006b), modality was kept separate from epistemic stance
 - modals may convey epistemic meanings when used in *extrinsic* sense
- Lexical markers of stance were excluded
- Only the instances where the expressed stance could be unproblematically attributed to the reporting company or any of its members were taken into account

The corpus



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Corpus details

Total number of reports		32 (16 annual reports; 16 CSR reports)
Total corpus size		2,433,956
Size of subcorpora	ACR	1,828,029
	CSR	605,927
Mean report size	ACR	114,251.8
	CSR	37,870.4
Sectors and companies		Financial services, oil and gas, pharmaceuticals, food processing

Method



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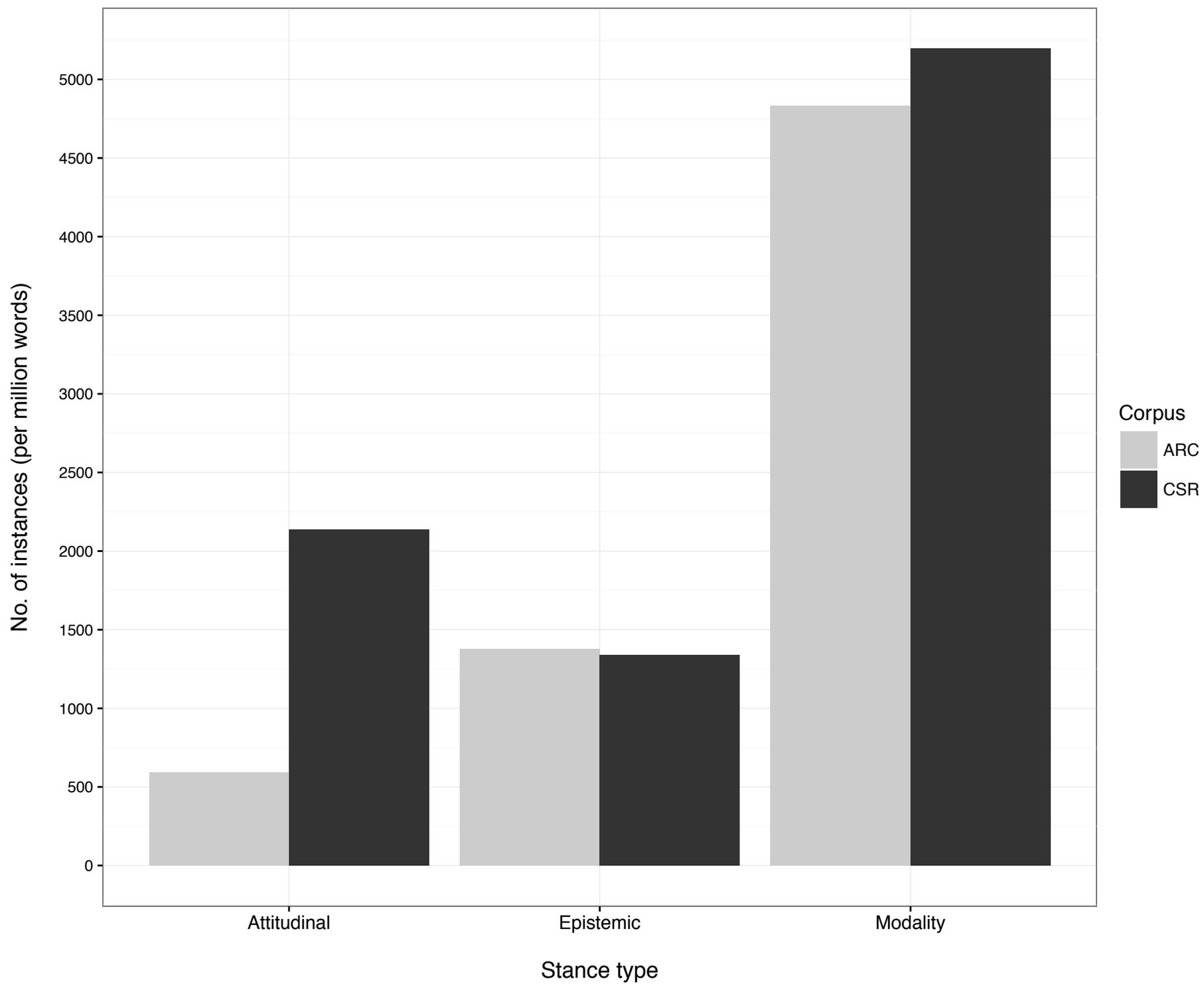
1. Automatic stance marker retrieval
 - an extended list of stance expressions was created based on the lists in Biber and Finegan (1989) and Biber (2006b)
 - the stance markers in the lists were simultaneously and automatically searched for in the corpus using a custom Perl script
2. Manual word-sense disambiguation by means of concordance analysis
 - the results of the automatic analysis were manually inspected with the aid of AntConc (Anthony, 2012) in order to identify and remove all irrelevant items
3. Quantification and statistical analysis
 - pairwise log-likelihood tests were performed to assess the statistical significance of differences



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Results

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ability or willingness adjective
+ comp. clause

attitude adverb

attitude verb
+ comp. clause

e

- We **aim** [to be a good neighbour to the communities close to our projects and facilities].

emotion/attitude adjective
+ comp. clause

evaluation adjectives
+ comp. clause

0 100 200 300 400 500 600 700 800 900 1000 1100 1200 1300

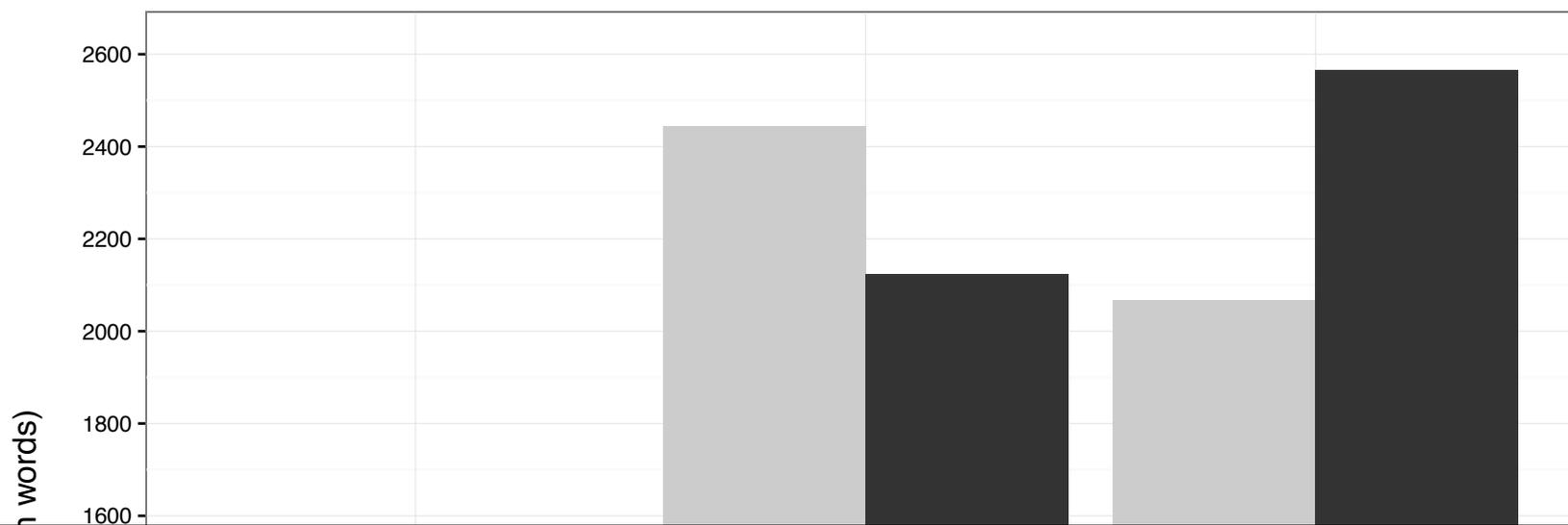
No. of instances (per million words)



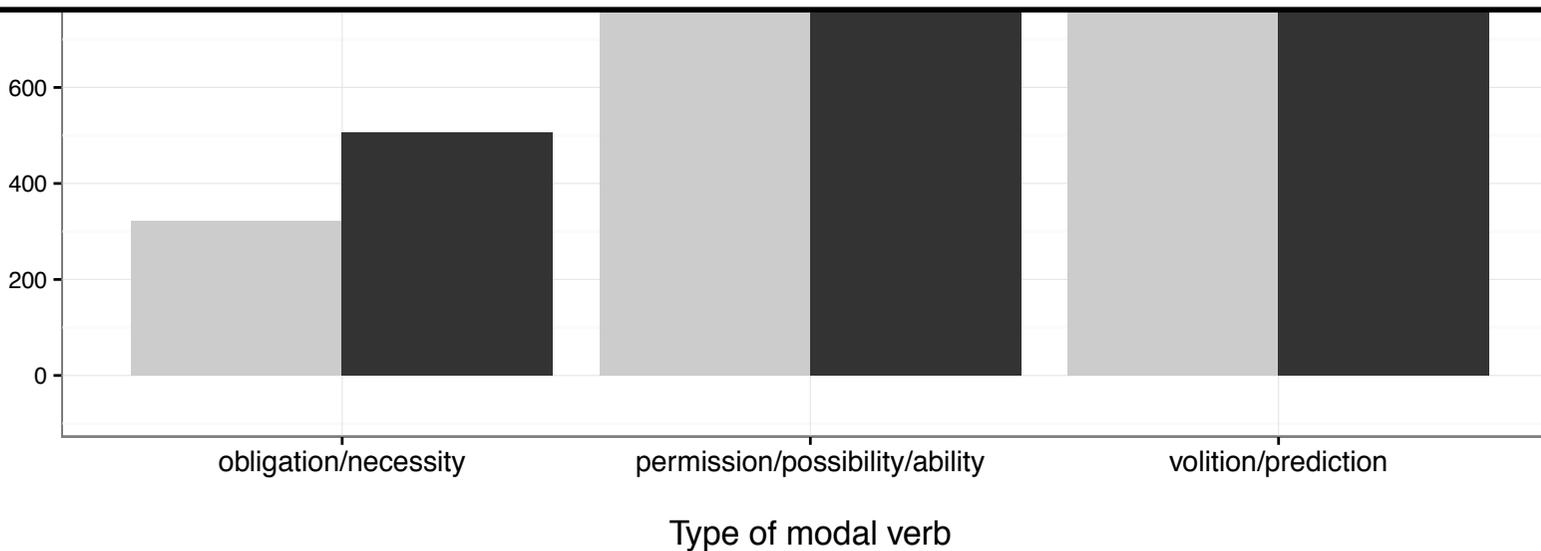
- We are well placed in emerging markets and we **expect** [these markets to continue to drive growth].

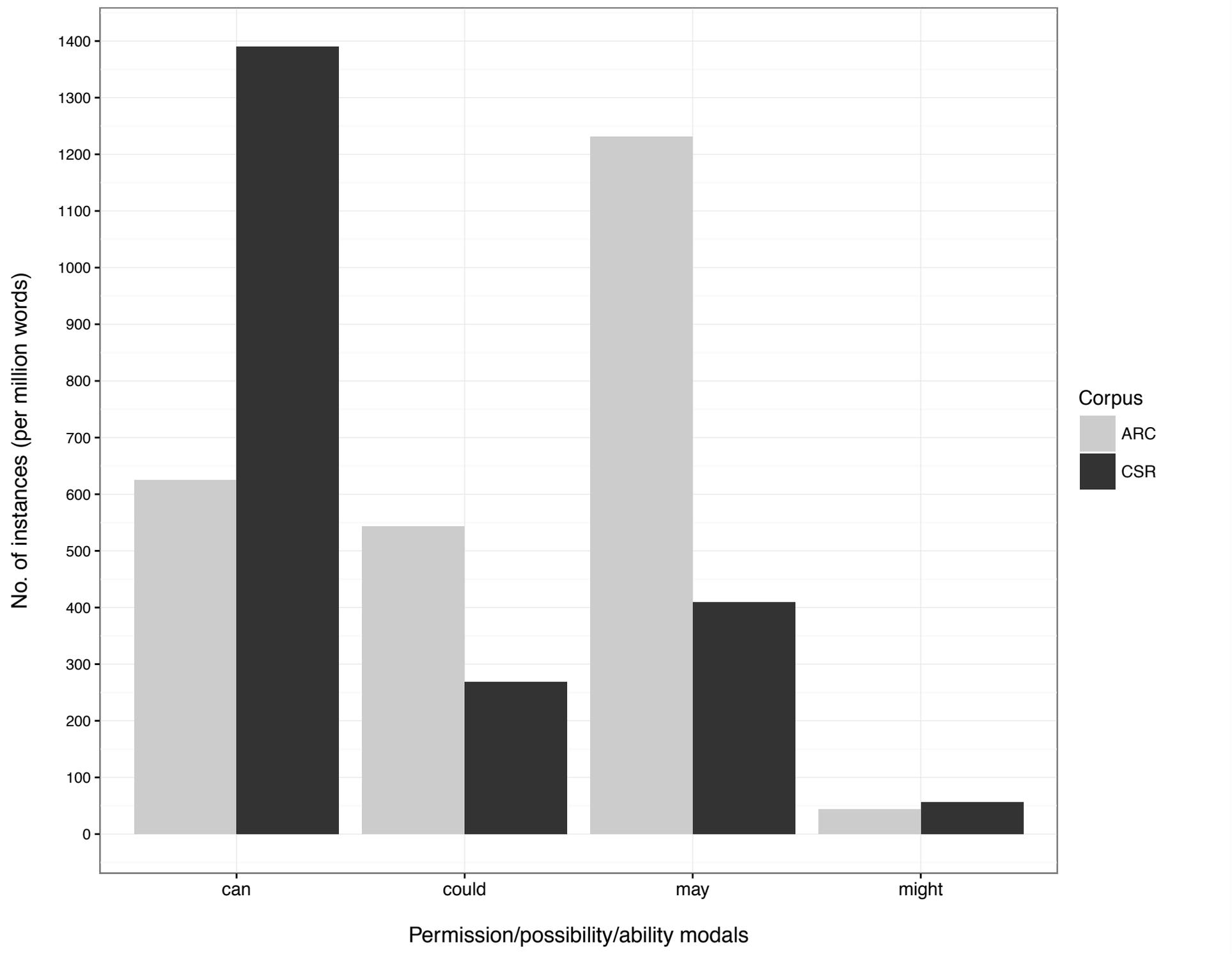


Function of epistemic stance constructions



- All employees are expected to uphold the highest ethical standards of business integrity. They **must** [comply with all applicable laws and accurately record and track all business transactions].





Conclusions

How do companies portray themselves in annual and CSR reports?



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- Overall, the results indicate that companies profile different identities in annual and CSR reports
- In annual reports, companies present themselves as unbiased, rational, and competent decision makers
 - they display an objective and emotionally detached attitude towards the information provided, as shown by the infrequent use of stance
 - they show a cautious and responsible attitude to forecasts and assessments through the frequent use of likelihood markers
 - they demonstrate readiness through the recurring use of verbs such as *expect* and *anticipate* to discuss future scenarios

Conclusions

How do companies portray themselves in annual and CSR reports?



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- In CSR reports, companies use stance resources to portray themselves as committed, honest, and caring corporate citizens
 - they underscore their genuine commitment to the principles of CSR through the frequent use of expressions of intentions and desires
 - they project integrity by emphasizing their ethical values through the verb *believe*, evidentials such as *show* and *find*, and by portraying themselves as attentive supervisors through the frequent use of necessity modals
 - they communicate benevolence by displaying a receptive and sympathetic attitude through the frequent use of *know* and *understand* to acknowledge stakeholders' perspective

Conclusions

How do companies portray themselves in annual and CSR reports?



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- The identities expressed in annual and CSR reports as strategic self-representations aimed at maximizing the persuasive appeal of the reports *vis-à-vis* the specific readerships they target
 - shareholders seek to maximize profits and minimize risk and value managerial competence (Johansen and Nielsen, 2011; Pirson and Malhotra, 2011)
 - companies emphasize competence, readiness and an display an objective attitude
 - stakeholders attach particular importance to companies' benevolence and integrity (Pirson and Malhotra, 2011)
 - companies mainly emphasize their integrity and benevolence in these texts, rather than other aspects of their identity



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Thanks a lot for
listening!