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Towards a model of trust-repair discourse

Trust is a valuable asset for business organizations (Ingenhoff and Sommer, 2010, Pirson and Malhotra 2011, Poppo and Schepker, 2010). Some actions or events initiated by a company can, however, break the bond of trust between the company and its stakeholders, creating mistrust and threatening the company's social legitimacy and survival. A recent and widely reported case of this kind is BP's Deepwater Horizon oil spill of 2010.

This paper examines an instance of BP's trust-repair discourse after the accident, i.e. the CEO's letter to shareholders published in the company's 2011 annual report. The analysis investigates the discourse strategies employed by BP's CEO to re-negotiate trust in the company after the spill. The main goals of the analysis are a) to shed light on BP's discursive management of the spill with a focus on the company's attempt to restore public trust after the accident; b) to propose a novel framework for the analysis of trust-repair discourse that connects linguistic phenomena at the 'discourse-as-text' level (Fairclough, 1992), communicative action and the construct of interpersonal trust. By pursuing these objectives, this paper aims to contribute to our understanding of the pragmatic and discursive dynamics of trust, which is still limited and fragmentary (Linell and Keselman, 2011).

The analysis is qualitative and performed through a systematic close reading and interpretation of the text. At the discourse-as-text level, it focuses on the linguistic resources that can be directly associated with two main types of trust-repair discourse strategy: a) engaging with and acting upon the discourses that represent an actual and potential source of mistrust – *neutralize the negative*; b) discursively constructing a trustworthy discourse persona – *emphasize the positive*. The former strategy mainly draws on the resources for dialogic engagement (Martin and White, 2005; White, 2003, 2012) such as epistemic modality, attribution and negation/denial. The latter primarily involves the use of evaluative and affective language (Bednarek, 2008; Hunston, 2010; Martin and White, 2005). The use of these resources is interpreted in light of the behavioral model of interpersonal trust described in Mayer et al. (1995). The ultimate goal of these strategies is seen as that of promoting the addressees' positive perception of the trust-breaker's trustworthiness in terms of *ability*, *integrity* and *benevolence* (Mayer et al., 1995) and restore trust.

Keywords: *trust, legitimacy, trust-repair discourse, corporate discourse, dialogism, evaluation, affect, stance, Deepwater Horizon oil spill*

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