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Rebuilding trust through discourse

a critical examination of BP's CEO letter after the Deepwater Horizon oil spill

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Rebuilding trust through discourse: a critical examination of BP's CEO letter after the Deepwater Horizon oil spill

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Trust is a valuable asset for business organizations (García-Marzá, 2005; 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 its social legitimacy and survival. A recent and widely reported case of this kind is BP's 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill. The spill not only caused extensive damage to the environment and the economy of the Gulf of Mexico, but also provoked a major loss of public trust in BP, due to the company's responsibility in the accident and the controversial way in which it handled and communicated about it.

This paper examines an instance of BP's trust-repair discourse after the spill, i.e. the CEO's letter to shareholders published in the company's 2011 annual report. The analysis investigates the discourse strategies employed by the CEO to re-negotiate trust in BP after the accident. 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 trust; b) to highlight some important features of the pragmatics of trust-repair and propose a framework for the analysis of trust-repair discourse that can be applied to similar case studies.

This paper aims to contribute to a discussion of the 'OUTS' of business discourse research in the following ways. First, by examining BP's trust-repair discourse after the oil spill, this paper aims to enhance our understanding of the discursive dynamics of trust between businesses and their publics. Second, it aims to improve the currently available tools for the critical assessment of trust-repair and trust-building communication. The paper illustrates the application of both conceptual tools, in the form of a theoretical framework for the analysis of trust-repair discourse, and technological tools. The analysis is, in fact, performed with the aid of a specialized software program for quantitative and qualitative text analysis (Lenzi et al.,

2012) whose potential applications will be discussed during the presentation. These tools may be used by business practitioners to critically evaluate and improve their trust-building messages as well as to analyze and assess their competitors' messages. In terms of the concrete recommendations to practitioners that may derive from the present study, the results seem to suggest that communicating *integrity* and *care* are crucial in a situation of public trust crisis. Finally, this paper aims to foster trans-disciplinary exchange and cross-fertilization between language and organization sciences with the ultimate goal of better understanding a crucial phenomenon for both linguists and managers, namely trust.

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