

Diachronic changes in the production or interpretation of public messages: Focusing on figures of speech in corporate profiles

Mana Kitazawa
Keio University

Keywords: corporate discourse, diachronic change, figure of speech, audience design

This study examines corporate profiles using annual reports and argues that the production and comprehension of public messages have changed over the last three decades, with a focus on changes in the expressions used in descriptions of products and services, various stakeholders, and companies. Because of their promotional function, the media discourses of companies and universities have been extensively studied from the perspective of critical discourse analysis (Arshad & Shakir, 2014; Bano & Shakir, 2015; Bauer et al., 2013; Fairclough, 2003; Jindřichovská & Eckert, 2021; Leung, Parker & Courtis, 2015). Most existing research in this area highlights the construction or reproduction of social ideology through discourse and explores the linguistic elements that are involved in this process. While the present study acknowledges the implicit features of media discourse, such as promotion, it approaches corporate discourse as a helpful tool for observing the interactions among society, media, and discourse and for understanding shifts in the way people participate in media discourse. Therefore, this study identifies some components of corporate discourse and analyzes how descriptions vary across over time.

The data for this study were taken from Mergent Online and consist of the corporate profiles of ten U.S. corporations that were published from 1980 to 2021. Most companies publish annual reports for stakeholders in the form of booklets or on their websites. Shareholders, investors, and other interested parties are the primary readers. However, anyone with access to the website can read the annual reports. Prior to the 2000s, most annual reports were distributed in paper form and only reached a small audience, but with the introduction and development of the internet, they have become more accessible to a larger audience. Furthermore, societal changes, such as economic conditions and growing environmental awareness, impact companies as well. This study will seek to clarify how these changes have impacted corporate discourse by coding components of corporate profiles and conducting a qualitative analysis of the descriptions (particularly the use of figures of speech) in each component.

The analysis shows that companies' use of broad, general descriptions in the component "products/services" and of reference terms that indicate actors or recipients in the component "contributions" have increased over time. The following examples from Best Buy include product descriptions and descriptions of the relationship between the corporation and its stakeholders. These descriptions (underlined) shift from naming specific products and services in (1) to using words or phrases to summarize those products and services in (2) and (3). The terms for targets (in italics), while they usually refer to customers, have also changed to include broader categories. In (3), the term "lives" can indicate a wide variety of target clients, stockholders, employees, and even non-human entities such as society and animals. Also, in 2021, agents (in bold type) have been moved to the background (for example, "at Best Buy"), and corporate involvement with their actions appears to be less direct.

- (1) ... **the Company** sells a full line of audio and video accessories and provides after-sale services, such as extended service contracts and installation services (1986 annual report).
- (2) **We** improve *people's* lives by making technology and entertainment products affordable and easy to use (2001 annual report).
- (3) At Best Buy, our purpose is to enrich *lives* through technology (2021 annual report).

This study shows that public messages have become more generic and indirect and that these changes result from shifts in the target audience of different types of media, as corporations use media that range from printed media to online publications. The study also shows that, because generalizations blur the distinctions among organizations, it is becoming increasingly important for members of the target audience to actively participate in interpreting corporate messages in order to understand them correctly.

References

- Arshad, Amna & Aleem Shakir. 2014. Corpus-based study of private and public verbs in online university prospectus. *Corpus* 4(25). 24-28.
- Bano, Zakia & Aleem Shakir. 2015. Personal pronouns in "About Us" section of online university prospectus. *Journal of Education and Practice* 6(1). 133-139.
- Bauer, Robert Paul, Kathleen M. Dougherty, Alan. D. Goodno, Sarah C. Hatch, Jennifer N. Nailos & Cameron Vakilian. 2013. Examining the representation of mission statements within admissions marketing materials: An Indiana University–Bloomington study. *Journal of the Student Personnel Association at Indiana University*. 15-34.
- Blair-Loy, Mary, Amy S. Wharton & Jerry Goodstein. 2011. Exploring the relationship between mission statements and work-life practices in organizations. *Organization Studies* 32(3). 427-450.
- Fairclough, N. 2003. *Analysing discourse: Textual analysis for social research*. Psychology Press.
- Jindřichovská, Irena & Eva Eckert. 2021. Social responsibility of mining companies at a time of COVID-19: Dear shareholders! *Sustainability* 14(1). 1-19.
- Leung Sidney, Lee Parker & John Courtis. 2015. Impression management through minimal narrative disclosure in annual reports. *The British Accounting Review* 47(3). 275-289.