Lexical and syntactic markers of persuasive strategies used in corporate annual reports

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Abstract

Corporate and institutional annual reports represent a specific type of persuasive institutional discourse, characterised by emphasis on conveying well-structured, credible, reliable and objective information to the stakeholders of an organisation. The semi-public genre of corporate annual reports obviously utilises some persuasive strategies, which can be partly compared with their analogues in marketing and in advertising in particular. The strategies are realised by a set of devices, including overt ones, such as lexical, syntactic and discursive means, as well as covert ones. Corporate reports, namely their text sections with a persuasive potential (e.g. Letter from a CEO, Chair´s Message, Chairman´s Statement, Letter from the President, Letter to Shareholders, etc.) form a fairly conventional set of genre types, whose format and linguistic devices are highly conventionalised and of which the target audience have relatively concrete expectations.

The underlying corpus-based research employs the concordancing tool *SketchEngine*, combining quantitative data with a qualitative analysis of persuasive strategies and their correlation with lexical and syntactic means. The research was carried out on the subcorpus of English business documents incorporated in the *Corpus of English and Czech Specialised Discourses* (*CECSD*), compiled at Masaryk University in 2017. Theoretically, the study of persuasive strategies is based on the concept of persuasion as a communicative effort aimed at influencing attitude, thought and action (Perloff 2003), linguistic indication of evaluation (Hunston and Thompson 1999) and the theory of appraisal and attitude (Martin and White 2005). Along with Biber and Zhang (2018), texts with an appeal on target readers included in annual reports are seen rather as "Informational Persuasion" than "Opinion Persuasion", as the former relies on less explicit evaluative means, namely on lexis. The representation of author´s identity (Hyland 2008) and preference of implicitness (Östman 2005) are also relevant to the analysis of corporate persuasion. The analysis looks into the characteristic linguistic correlates of all three modes of persuasion (or rhetorical appeals), namely ethos, logos and pathos (e.g. Herrick 2018) and their persuasive potential.

The fulfilled expectation of positively connotated lexis as opposed to devices with negative connotations (or excessively positive ones, which are similarly undesirable), of a non-imposing and objective tone, expression of sharing and involvement, etc. contribute to the readers´ satisfaction and identification with the company in whose business or social role they hold a stake. The author´s initial research (Vogel 2018) identified two large strategies used by corporate persuaders, namely the strategy of facing a problem vs. that of relativising a problem, each with several well-defined subtypes. The quantitative analysis reveals e.g. that negatively connotated phenomena tend to be neutralised by lexis of the opposite polarity which, if not referring to facts, refer at least to attitudes, illustrating the company´s competence and determination (*…the uncertainties…have <u>temporarily</u> influenced investment activity…; Aftermarket demand for engines….is reducing <u>in line with expectations</u>, …right now are <u>solving</u> the hard problems of…, …been stepped up to a higher voltage to <u>avoid</u> losses, …risk <u>mitigation</u> in areas exposed to higher threat…*).

The concept of metadiscourse with its interpersonal and interactive dimensions (Hyland and Tse 2004) helps to establish how credibility is boosted by text organisation, employment of authorial stance, i.e. attitude to the text, to its subject and to the readers, including self-mentions and engagement markers. A positive tone associated with self-mentions and credibility-boosting content is expectable (*We are <u>continuing</u> to deliver <u>consistently strong</u> results in our core automotive business…, Our plan for creating value going forward is <u>simple and straightforward: continue our expansion</u>…, Our core business is <u>a strength we are building on</u>…*).

Thus, although objective and explicit information is expected in the discourse of business reporting, it standardly contains also an implicit or explicit emotional appeal and expression of beliefs. Such attempts to arouse sympathy are constitutive components of pathos. The aim of the paper is to demonstrate that effective persuasion in this specialised discourse is based on achieving balance between providing reliable and systematic facts, conveying achievements and trust, and appeal to readers´ emotions and preferences. Both form and content are rather standard and expectable, which is supported by the data obtained by corpus analysis.

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