

Reviews

Ruth Breeze. 2013. *Corporate Discourse*. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 209.

Because of its monumental importance for our everyday lives –marked, from their onset, by the activity of trading of goods and services for other goods and services– the language of corporations has been the focus of some interest for applied linguists, discourse analysts and communication theorists over the years (Goodman, 2000; Bhatia 2004; Bhatia and Lung 2006; Orts, 2006; Gotti, 2011; Evangelisti Allori and Garzone, 2011). In the face of an increasingly critical and mistrustful public opinion, recent studies have further endeavoured to analyse how corporations seek to construct and promote their image through the deployment of their genres, discursive practices and communicative events, both to create a planned self-representation suiting their own interests and to exercise persuasion (Beder, 2012; Fox and Fox, 2004, among others). Even if it is somewhat in the line of what has been termed as “organizational discourse analysis”, Breeze’s work is not set to provide radical criticism of an economic or socio-political nature, but to investigate how companies interplay through language, not only with employees and stakeholders, but also with target markets, existing customers and the world at large, so as to shape the overall public perception that such companies have. In this sense, the author transcends the traditional, neutral envisaging of business genres and texts as the products of a discursive community to be mastered by newcomers, as it has been the practice of second-language scientists and practitioners in recent years. In contrast, she pushes us researchers and educators out of our comfort zone to tackle the analysis of those genres and texts as sets of social practices, which are not limited to those very genres and texts, but which include new complex realizations that are also conceived as part of the corporate discourse system, in all its complexity and power of reverberation and regeneration. In a scholarly account of what discourse is, and what corporate discursive studies represent, Breeze embraces classical philosophical works like those by Foucault and Bakhtin, but also revises the work of pragmatists like Grice, Beaugrande and Leech, ethnographers like Hall and Hofstede, applied linguists like Swales, Hyland, Biber and Bhatia, rhetoricists like Burke, Bazerman and Perelman, critical discourse analysts like Fairclough and systemic functional linguists like Halliday and Hasan, among many others. With such a theoretical framework as a background, the author aims to offer her own interpretation of discursive phenomena in corporate communication, for which

she also draws upon her quantitative findings from several set of corpora and various in-depth studies of different corporate genres.

Corporate discourse is organized around seven chapters. The first one is introductory, as it puts together a theoretical framework for the exploration of corporate discourse. It is, thus, dedicated to define what corporations are today and what they were in their inception, discussing the status they hold in our world, and how their identity and image are constructed and revealed to internal and external audiences in the creation, propagation and maintenance of –basically– utilitarian values. These values, Breeze argues, are fostered through the same communicative, semiotic processes which nurture the selection, training and maintenance of company staff, brand creation and investors' persuasive techniques. Such processes take place in the frame of a discursive “dialogue” between the corporation and its intended audience, where a hierarchy of power between genres and texts exists, but where an unambiguous, uniform image of what the organization is meant to represent is conveyed to that audience.

The second chapter constitutes a discussion of what the different approaches to corporate discourse are, as undertaken by applied researchers to develop more effective practices, by theorists to dilucidate what the state of affairs in corporate discourse is, and by English-language trainers in order to supply non-natives with tools enabling them to take an active role in the international business world, dominated by the *lingua franca*. The author describes the different textual (i.e., corpus, genre and multimodal) approaches to corporate discourse, as well as the social ones (i.e. ethnographic and intercultural), the common ground underlying these approaches being that corporate discourse is increasingly understood as a powerful force in the late capitalist society, aimed both at special-interest groups and at public opinion at large, intended to depict the company in a positive light, dialogic in the constructing and projecting of particular types of reader, leaning on intercultural differences but dominated by English as the international tool of communication, and, finally, closely bound up by corporate practices, the discourse being the practice itself, and vice versa.

The next four chapters of the book form the nucleus of the author's hands-on analysis of her corpora, where she discusses her empirical findings in the light of her previous research from many different areas of discourse analysis. The first of these chapters, *Communicating with Employees*, attempts to explain how, in

the ongoing communication between the corporation and its staff, their roles and their mutual relationships are moulded, and even constructed, through discourse. From job advertisements and interviews, to induction seminars and guides, the management seeks to shape the identity of employees, colonizing their subjectivity and transforming their values, as they are expected to get immersed into the corporate culture and actively contribute to the company's welfare. Job advertisements and postings, for example, argues Breeze, have a dual function, whereby some of their aspects go beyond recruitment purposes to promotional ones, aimed, as they are, at generating a positive corporate image or "brand image". The enhancement of such image plays a consequential role in the way corporations are perceived today, providing a mirror for candidates to see themselves in a positive light. Additionally, the company uses discourse in many areas in order to send messages to its employees, and particularly to those recently recruited, in an increasing desire to manage employer-employee relationships, to project a positive image and, at the same time, to wield power and control; among these, employee websites, orientation sessions, induction videos and testimonies, constitute techniques for an "employee branding" process that promotes the values of the company and fosters full participation of the staff in the corporation community.

Communicating with Investors, the following chapter, looks at such an aspect of corporate discourse through a classic tool: the Annual Report for shareholders. According to Breeze, the existence of a document that has to be made available to all shareholders provides an excellent chance to exercise what she calls "financial public relations": an array of activities used by the company to communicate its financial position to shareholders, prospective investors and the world at large. A hybrid text type, the Report reflects in its structure its status as both a reporting and a promotional genre, since its first part shows sections that are freely composed by the company, whereas the financial sections at the end have to be drafted by external auditors. Naturally, the first half displays a variety of self-promoting multimodal devices such as metaphor, iconicity, magazine design, highlighted key information, number displays and photographs, seemingly in an attempt to distract readers from the hard facts that the Report may contain. By means of corpus linguistics methods, the author shows that not only these devices, but also stance (the usage of the first person, or "solidarity" plural, to align the company with environmental and social responsibility values) and lexis

(in the use of both a positive vocabulary to convey a confident, optimistic message about the company, and of a technical vocabulary to make its hard facts sufficiently opaque for its readers) positively frame the identity of the company for the benefit of its shareholders. Lastly, the author argues, the CEO letter at the beginning of the Report deploys the three methods of persuasion in Aristotelian rhetoric, *ethos* (a CEO needs to present a reliable, honest, ethical *persona*), *pathos* (the message should be warm, direct and sincere, befitting the style of a “personal” letter) and *logos* (the CEO makes a rational appeal making arguments seem plausible and logic). All in all, this text type is much prone to what is termed as “genre bending”, since a naturally informative message often ends up misinforming or disinforming readers as to the facts in it purported.

Chapter five is devoted to advertising discourses as instances of corporate messages to the world. A complex genre by virtue of its own lack of definition and infinite variation, advertising vampirizes other discourses and genres to achieve its own, very obvious, purpose: product and company promotion. Three constant features are always present in this genre: maximum impact, immediate appeal and multifariousness in the usage of rhetorical figures, all of them being directed to send the audience a “culturally encoded” message about the merits of the product. The internationalization of production does not pre-empt for products to be culturally defined and for the resources used to create their promotion to be culturally embedded, since values and expectations differ from culture to culture. Nevertheless, and despite the fact that some adverts play with the appeal of strong local connotations, there are undeniably globalizing tendencies in advertising. Prototypical examples of this are the campaigns of Coca Cola and Shell, which instead of engaging in particular values and associations, send a common, simple and positive message to be understood and liked by everyone. In this chapter, the author discusses other interesting aspects of advertising, such as advocacy advertising (sometimes brought to mend damaged corporate images in the public eye, as in the case of companies which have created environmental disasters), hybrid genres like advertorials, which mimic the credibility of news media, as well as the creation, through advertising, of “brand communities”, as people increasingly search for their own identity in consumption patterns. All in all, advertising presents challenges to the analyst and to the educator, since both must deconstruct its discourses, unveiling the distortions exerted in our system of values, aimed at changing our vision of the world. As

we have already seen, such distortions, created for promotional purposes, are also pervading the rest of the genres in corporate discourse.

The second series of genres aimed at larger audiences to find out about the company's data and activities are described in chapter number six of the book, *Websites, Reviews, Sponsorship*. The website is a major PR means for companies to make the information they convey mirror the excellence of their image. Several different features are normally included in it, namely, product advertisement and information, career opportunities, investor information, customer support, and others, with different levels of interactivity with users, such interactivity depending on the kind of relationship –dialogic or monologic– that the company may choose to build with the company. Of special interest is the “About us” section of the website, which at some points bears a striking resemblance to the Annual Report, sharing with it an identical inclination to advocate for sustainability, good business practices, standards and codes, as the usual means of corporate legitimation pursued by companies in the Western world. Together with this, other features like the solidarity first person plural, a positive lexicon and multimodality, make this section of the site very similar to the Report. Corporate mission statements and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Reports are also analyzed by the author. The former constitute the official discourse for the company to persuade employees and stakeholders to vouch for the company's value, muscle and proficiency. On the other hand, CSR Reports deal with similar topics, ie. the environment, social issues, efficiency and sustainability, doing so by means of personal testimonies and declarations from independent bodies to potential and existing stakeholders. Ostensibly similar to the Annual Report is the Annual Review, an emerging genre of which the goal is to persuade investors of the company's quality, efficiency and corporate responsibility. Finally, the author discusses sponsorship activities, closer to PR than to marketing, but related to both. As Breezes puts it, sponsorship is “advertising carried one stage further” and is crucial in the image-branding process of the company, linking it to meaningful events, sports and charitable bodies or causes, and creating an inevitable association with “good” values, such as health, youth, responsibility, and social concern.

The last chapter constitutes a sombre, fascinating wrapping up of the points made throughout the book about the discourse of corporations. All of the genres discussed, claims the author, belong to a common voice, an utmost power: that of corporate discourse, a type of Aristotelian epideixis that embraces utilitarian

values and creates a sense of commonality among the members of the audience that this discourse is aimed at –employees, investors, and the public at large–, who subsequently become likely to accept and support the company’s actions. The credibility of the company, the corporate *ethos*, is built through a combination of strategies, ideological mechanisms, which are designed to create self-enhancement (through the celebration of “established” or “accepted” values) and self-defence (to pre-empt and defuse criticism), thus perpetuating the combination of circumstances that allow companies to shirk a veritable rendering of accounts to its stakeholders and the world. The circumstances Breeze talks about, as she finally takes the angle of critical discourse analysis, are those that take place in a post-capitalist, globalized world with a dearth of real ethical, deep-down honourable values; where a soft, utilitarian morality has emerged, based upon healthy lifestyles, environmentalism and a blurred concept of global citizenship. In this panorama, genres are blended together with intentionally manipulative aims, and the audience –not human beings anymore, but just consumers and producers– is misled into believing that people and things are commodities, liable to be commercialized and substituted.

But there is still hope, Breeze assures us, and this is where educators and scientists are brought into play: we must help our future professionals to deconstruct discourse, so that they learn how to read between the lines, discovering false values and rejecting them when necessary. Only when the human being is invested with real meaning and taken again to the centre of the economy, will there be hope for reconstruction, employment and welfare.

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