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## A model of trust-repair discourse

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### Abstract

This article proposes a novel theoretical framework for examining trust-repair discourse. The model identifies two fundamental discourse strategies available to the trust-breaker when trust is at stake (i) to engage with and act upon the discourses that represent a potential source of distrust – *neutralize the negative*, (ii) to communicate a trust-worthy discourse identity – *emphasize the positive*. These strategies are realized in discourse through the use of dialogic engagement and evaluative/affective language, respectively. The ultimate communicative goal of the strategies is that of promoting the addressees’ positive (re-)assessment of the speaker’s *ability*, *integrity* and *benevolence*. The model is applied to the analysis of the CEO letter published by BP one year after the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. The analysis has the twofold purpose of demonstrating the viability of the model and determining the discourse strategies deployed by the CEO to repair trust in the company after the accident.

Keywords: *trust, evaluation, affect, dialogism, ability, integrity, benevolence, CEO letters, BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill*

## 1 Introduction

Trust is pervasive in social life and a basic element of both intimate and distant interpersonal relations. As social relations are subject to change, trust is a dynamic interpersonal construct; it is constantly negotiated and renegotiated through social and communicative interaction (Cook, 2001; Gillespie, 2011; Ingenhoff and Sommer, 2010; Linell and Marková, 2013; Marková and Gillespie, 2008).

Certain events or behaviors can undermine trust. When this happens, compensatory action by the trust-breaker (TB) is expected. Trust can be repaired by modifying one’s behavior, but it can also be renegotiated through discourse. Discourse plays a particularly prominent role in situations where the deceived party cannot monitor the TB’s behavior directly. One such case is the relation between companies and their stakeholders.

Trust is a valuable asset for business organizations (Barney and Hansen, 1994; Ingenhoff and Sommer, 2010; Pirson and Malhotra, 2011). However, some actions or events initiated by a company can damage trust between the company and its stakeholders, creating distrust and threatening its social legitimacy and survival (Poppo and Schepker, 2010). A recent and widely reported case of this kind is the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, which was provoked by the explosion and sinking of an offshore oil platform operated by the British multinational oil and gas company BP in the Gulf of Mexico on the 20th of April 2010. The accident killed eleven crewmembers and caused a major oil spill that has had profound consequences for the environment and the economy of the Gulf of Mexico. The spill triggered a wave of public distrust in BP, due to the company's responsibility in the accident and the controversial way in which it handled both the situation itself and communications about it.

What happens when trust is broken? How is trust re-negotiated in discourse? In order to seek answers to these questions, this article proposes a novel theoretical framework for examining trust-repair discourse and applies it to the analysis of the CEO letter included in BP's 2010 annual report, published one year after the spill. The analysis is qualitative and performed through a systematic close reading and interpretation of the text. It focuses on the linguistic resources that can be directly associated with two main types of trust-repair discourse strategies, (i) engaging with and acting upon the discourses that constitute an actual or potential source of distrust – *neutralize the negative*, (ii) constructing and communicating a trustworthy discourse identity – *emphasize the positive*. The former strategy draws on the resources for dialogic engagement (Martin and White, 2005; White, 2003, 2012), involving expressions of epistemic modality, attribution and denial. The latter is mainly realized through evaluative and affective language (Bednarek, 2008; Hunston, 2011; Martin and White, 2005). The use of these resources in discourse 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 repairing trust by promoting the addressees' positive (re-)assessment of the TB's *ability, integrity* and *benevolence*.

The main purpose of this study is to improve our understanding of the discursive and pragmatic dynamics of trust, by providing the conceptual tools for systematically analyzing and explaining how trust is (re-)negotiated in discourse. In addition, it offers a novel perspective on BP's communicative response to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. While this topic has generated substantial scholarly interest (e.g. Breeze, 2012; Choi, 2012; Diers and Donohue, 2013; Harlow et al., 2011; Harlow and Harlow, 2013; Howell et al., 2014; Muralidharan et al., 2011; O'Connor, 2011; Schultz et al., 2012; Smithson and Venette, 2013; Wickman, 2013), none of the previous studies has, in fact, investigated it from the point of view of trust repair.

The article is organized as follows. Section 2 discusses previous work on

trust. In section 3, our model of trust-repair discourse is described. Section 4 illustrates the model through a detailed analysis of several excerpts from BP's CEO letter and provides a concise overview of the analysis results. Finally, section 5 discusses the main findings and section 6 makes some concluding remarks.

## 2 Trust

This section presents the background to this study. It starts with an overview of the model of interpersonal trust developed by Mayer et al. (1995), which serves as the starting point for our model of trust-repair discourse. This is followed by a review of previous work focusing on the relationship between trust and discourse.

### 2.1 Mayer, Davis and Shoorman's model of trust

Being a pervasive and critical element of social relations (Luhmann, 1979; Misztal, 1996), trust has been widely investigated across a range of disciplines, yielding a number of conceptualizations and definitions. One of the most influential models of interpersonal trust is the one developed by Mayer et al. (1995). The model originally stems from the business management literature, but it has been extensively applied in a number of different areas, including marketing, accounting, psychology, sociology and communication (Schoorman et al., 2007).

Mayer et al. (1995: 712) define trust as “the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party”. Central to this definition is the idea that risk-taking in an inescapable aspect of trust relations. Trust necessarily involves risk-taking, as individuals may exploit their position of trust for personal gain. Therefore, when we trust someone we become vulnerable to their potential opportunistic behavior. As Mayer et al. (1995) explain, we generally trust other people under the assumption that they will behave in a way that is beneficial to us. In turn, this belief hinges on our assessment of their *trustworthiness*.

According to Mayer et al. (1995), we assess other people's trustworthiness on three main criteria: a) *ability*, b) *integrity* and c) *benevolence*. Ability concerns the trustee's skills and expertise in a specific domain, i.e. how competent he or she is in handling a particular task or situation. Integrity relates to the trustee's moral and ethical values, e.g. how honest, fair and sincere he or she is. Finally, benevolence refers to the trustee's care and goodwill to the trustor, i.e. the extent to which the trustee is believed to have the trustor's interests at heart, beyond egocentric concerns. Each of these factors, as Mayer et al. (1995: 717) argue, “contributes a unique

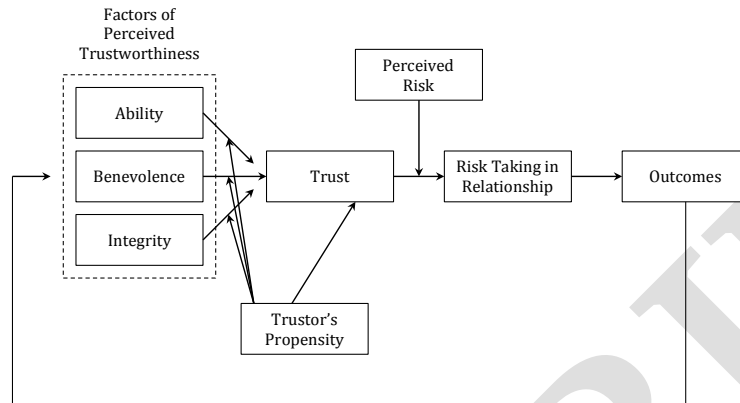


Figure 1: Mayer, Davis and Shoorman’s model of trust (Mayer et al., 1995: 715).

perceptual perspective from which to consider the trustee, while the set provides a solid and parsimonious foundation for the empirical study of trust for another party”.

Fig. 1 provides a visual representation of Mayer et al.’s (1995) model. As the diagram shows, the trustor’s assessment of the trustee’s trustworthiness is mediated by their propensity to trust. Accordingly, the amount of trust the trustor has in the trustee is positively correlated with both their assessment of the other party’s ability, integrity and benevolence and their (dis)inclination to trust others (Mayer et al., 1995). In addition, the feedback arrow indicates that the outcomes of a relationship will affect and dynamically shape the trustor’s impressions of the other party’s trustworthiness and, in turn, the trust relationship itself.

While Mayer et al.’s model of trust was devised to explain trust in dyadic interpersonal relations, i.e. between two individuals who know each other personally, it can easily be generalized to account for the relationship between a company and its stakeholders (e.g. Caldwell and Clapham, 2003; Greenwood and Van Buren III, 2010; Ingenhoff and Sommer, 2010; Schoorman et al., 2007; Xie and Peng, 2009). As Ingenhoff and Sommer (2010: 342) note, “[t]he origin of trust lies in the individual, whereas the referent, the trusted party, can be both individual and collective”. Nonetheless, a fundamental difference distinguishes these two types of trust relation. Whereas two individuals who know each other personally can have direct knowledge and experience of their counterpart, this is rarely the case for stakehold-

ers and organizations (Ingenhoff and Sommer, 2010; Poppo and Schepker, 2010). As a consequence, the ‘distance’ that separates organizations and their various audiences entails that the information imbalance that characterizes trust relations in general is, in this case, maximized. Information about a company can, in fact, be hard and costly to obtain. It can be partial, inaccurate and easily manipulated by various agents. Most importantly, this also means that stakeholders’ knowledge and impressions of a company’s actions, behavior and intentions are, in most cases, entirely mediated through discourse.

## 2.2 Previous work on trust in discourse

Trust and distrust are intimately tied to language and communication (Linell and Keselman, 2011; Linell and Marková, 2013). Yet, whereas the notion of trust has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention from a range of disciplines, linguistic research on this topic is still relatively sparse. Trust, as noted by Linell and Marková (2013), is virtually absent in the work of prominent theorists in the field of pragmatics, except for sporadic references to it as a background condition for verbal interaction. A similar situation exists in the domain of Critical Discourse Analysis (e.g. Fairclough 2003; Fairclough and Wodak 1997; Hart 2011; Wodak and Meyer 2009). Despite the ubiquitousness of trust in social interaction and its importance in the dynamics of persuasion and social influence, it has not, to our knowledge, been the subject of systematic investigation in this area.

Several authors have discussed the role of discourse as a vehicle for negotiating trust but without attempting to provide a comprehensive and systematic account of its linguistic underpinnings. Palmieri (2009) focuses on the role of argumentation in UBS bank’s attempt to retain stakeholders’ trust in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. The author analyses a press release announcing the appointment of a new Chairman as part of the bank’s strategy to overcome the crisis. While the analysis provides useful insights into the rhetorics of trust-building, it is restricted to argumentation and no attention is paid to other features of the text. The author notes, for example, that the Chairman’s persona is exploited as a persuasive device, but he does not analyze how his *ethos* is discursively constructed, nor does he specify what linguistic means are involved in this process. Also, the analysis fails to problematize the rhetorical strategies identified in the text in relation to the construct of trust.

Linell and Keselman (2011) examine how trust and distrust are discursively managed during an asylum interview between a Russian asylum seeker and a Swedish officer. The main aim of the study is to investigate how, in a social situation characterized by uncertainty, ambiguity and mutual skepticism, distrust arises and is dealt with by the interactants. Linell and Keselman’s (2011) study clearly shows the centrality of discourse in the

negotiation of interpersonal trust. The authors' chief focus is, however, on face-to-face interaction. This is one of the reasons why their findings are difficult to integrate into the present study, which focuses on trust repair in written discourse. Another reason is that Linell and Keselman (2011) adopt a primarily descriptive approach and do not formulate any specific hypotheses as to what linguistic resources may play a role in eliciting or discouraging trust. Two observations that the authors make are, nonetheless, relevant for the present study. First, they note that in a situation where trust is at stake, the theme of trust is likely to surface in discourse, i.e. trust is *topicalized* (Marková and Gillespie, 2008: 19). Second, Linell and Keselman's (2011) study highlights the dynamic and *sequential* nature of trust; trust and distrust dynamically transform as the interaction unfolds and as events or discourses trigger sequences of responses and counteractions. We suggest that this type of sequential development can be observed in the case of the Deepwater Horizon spill too, where BP's actions and discourses in the aftermath of the accident triggered a reaction of distrust from stakeholders, which, in turn, prompted the company's trust-repair discourse (see section 3.1).

Gillespie and Cornish (2013) analyze the case of 'bank run' that struck the British Northern Rock in 2007, focusing on the communicative actions undertaken by the bank and the British government to halt depositors' precipitous withdrawal of their funds. While the study is not primarily concerned with discourse analysis, Gillespie and Cornish (2013) do, if just briefly, analyze a text published by Northern Rock that could be considered as an instance of trust-repair discourse. The text is a message from the bank's CEO included in a print advertisement published in the main British newspapers after the announcement that the government would guarantee all the deposits held at Northern Rock. The authors discuss several interesting features of the CEO's message. Most notably, they highlight his effort to establish *rappor*t with the audience through his 'sincere' apologies to the bank's customers and his attempt to bolster the credibility of the bank's strategy by appealing to the authority of an external entity, i.e. the British Chancellor. Some of these findings are highly relevant and mirror some of the discursive strategies observed in BP's CEO letter. However, Gillespie and Cornish (2013) do not go beyond pointing out some interesting aspects of Northern Rock's advert. The study does not offer a systematic account of the discursive mechanisms of trust repair, nor does it explain how discourse features connect to the bank's communicative intents.

In sum, while discourse has been recognized to be a fundamental vehicle for trust, the current literature does not provide a clear understanding of how linguistic phenomena relate the construct of interpersonal trust. The model of trust-repair discourse proposed here seeks to fill this gap.

### 3 Trust-repair discourse

Our understanding of the concept of trust is profiled against a number of different knowledge representations. An important part of those representations includes knowledge formed on the basis of experiences of situations where trust is at stake. As mentioned before, trust is not a stable phenomenon but a relation in a state of flux, and it is constantly up for negotiation in discourses where trust is involved. Trust relations have two principal actors, the trustor and the trustee. They experience trust from two different perspectives. The trustor is the risk-taker, who estimates the trustworthiness of the trustee.

Another important part of the knowledge structure is the opposition of trust and distrust. Human beings cannot conceive of trust without seeing it in contrast to distrust (Linell and Marková, 2013; Marková and Gillespie, 2008). This opposition may be viewed along a scale from trust to distrust (Paradis and Willners, 2011), featuring degrees of trustworthiness with respect to the trustee’s ability, integrity and benevolence. In the case of a catastrophe like the one we are analyzing here, there is good reason for the trustee to fear that there is a risk of potential loss of trust from the trustor. This loss has to be re-established in action and re-negotiated in discourse.

This section deals with trust-repair discourse. It starts by discussing the conditions that determine the need for trust repair, using the BP case study as an example. Then, the model is described and illustrated with examples from BP’s CEO letter.

#### 3.1 Dynamics of trust violation and repair

Mayer et al.’s (1995) model posits that the outcomes of a relationship affect and contribute to shaping the trustor’s impressions of the trustee’s trustworthiness and, accordingly, the amount of trust they have in the trustee. The need for trust repair arises when trust is perceived to have been violated. An act of trust violation constitutes a negative outcome of a relationship that changes the trustor’s impressions of the trustee’s trustworthiness and thereby erodes trust.

As Lewicki (2006: 107) explains, trust violation occurs when “we obtain information that does not conform to our expectations of behavior for the other”. When confronted with significant disconfirming evidence, the trustor is pushed to reconsider their initial assumptions about the relationship and the trustee (Lewicki, 2006: 107). Following an act of trust violation, the trustor undergoes “a cognitive reappraisal of the relationship” (Gillespie and Dietz, 2009: 133). As part of this process, they re-evaluate the trust breaker’s ability, integrity and benevolence, possibly downgrading their initial assessment (Tomlinson and Mayer, 2009).

After a violation, the trustor’s trust in the trustee will be lower than



the initial level. The resulting level of trust may range from lower trust to absolute distrust. Following Shul et al.’s definition (2008, 1293), “distrust denotes a perception of vulnerability due [...] to fear of the other’s motives, intentions, and prospective actions”. It is a psychological state characterized by hypervigilance (Gillespie and Dietz, 2009), suspicion (Kramer, 1999), and a tendency to attribute sinister intentions to the other party’s behavior (Lewicki et al., 1998).

In response to this situation, the trust-breaker will adopt measures to counteract distrust and restore trust. Their trust-repair efforts will be directed at improving the trustor’s impressions of their trustworthiness. To this end, they will both address salient negative expectations arising from the trust-breaking event and attempt to (re)establish positive expectations about their future trustworthiness (Gillespie and Dietz, 2009; Kim et al., 2004). The dynamics of trust violation and trust repair described here are summarized in Fig. 2.

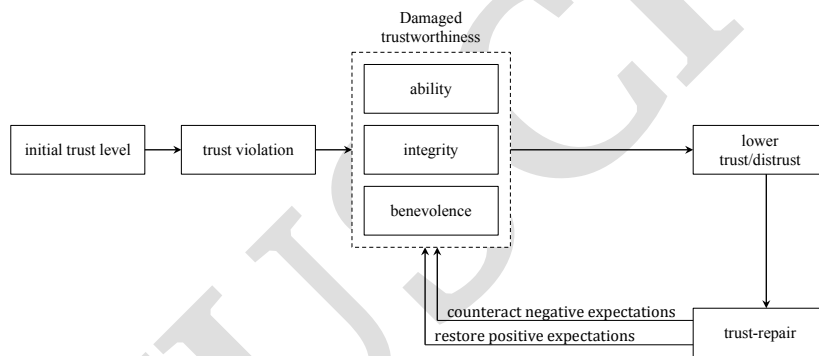


Figure 2: Dynamics of trust violation and repair

The dynamics illustrated above can be observed in the case of BP’s Deepwater Horizon oil spill. While generalizations are difficult to make given that different stakeholder groups have different interests, agendas and degrees of vulnerability (Swift, 2001: 21), and that individual variability exists (Mayer et al., 1995), stakeholders’ attitude towards BP before the accident may be described as one of *lack of distrust*<sup>1</sup> (Swift, 2001). Lack of distrust refers to stakeholders’ belief that impersonal structures such as laws, regulations and controls are sufficient to guarantee the predictability of a company’s behavior (see also McKnight et al.’s (1998) notion of *institution-based trust*). Indirect evidence of this type of attitude can be derived from BP’s ability to successfully obtain drilling licenses in the Gulf of Mexico<sup>2</sup>, steady financial support from investors and a robust business performance. The absence of noteworthy stakeholder-led initiatives aimed at influencing the company’s decision-making and behavior, e.g. protests, lobbying, product

boycotts (Frooman, 1999; Hendry, 2005), may also be seen as an indication that stakeholders' trust in the company was not at stake before the spill.

However, this state of affairs quickly changed after the accident. BP's repeated failed attempts to stop the oil leak exposed its unpreparedness for such events, causing frustration among the public opinion and the U.S. government. In addition, BP's initial attempts to downplay the consequences of the spill (Webb, 2010), its inaccurate estimates of the amount of oil escaping from the damaged well (O'Connor, 2011), its denial of the existence of large plumes of dispersed oil underneath the sea surface (Shogren, 2011) raised serious concerns about the company's transparency and accountability (Ritchie et al., 2011: 8). The situation was made worse by BP's poor public relations (Shogren, 2011; Sylves and Comfort, 2012). A series of gaffes and improper comments by major BP representatives overshadowed the company's efforts to express regret for the incident, casting doubt on its sincerity and goodwill (O'Connor, 2011). In particular, the now infamous 'I want my life back' comment made by BP's former CEO Tony Hayward in an interview at the peak of the crisis, alluded to the idea that the CEO and, by extension, BP placed other priorities ahead of solving the crisis (O'Connor, 2011). Tony Hayward's pronounced British accent and public behavior exacerbated the negative effects of such a comment, giving rise to a perception of an ingroup/outgroup distinction between BP and the American public along ethnic and social class lines (O'Connor, 2011). This perception was further reinforced by Swedish BP Chairman's gaffe at a press conference (O'Connor, 2011), during which he declared that, contrary to commonly held beliefs, BP cares about "the small people".<sup>3</sup>

On the basis of these observations we may infer that, following the accident, BP's trustworthiness was at stake on all three levels of Mayer et al.'s (1995) model. First, the company's ability was called into question due to its failed attempts to seal the leaking well. Second, BP's integrity was undermined, among other things, by its initial failure to fully acknowledge the effects of the spill and by its attempts to downplay its consequences. Finally, BP's efforts to show benevolence were hampered by the controversial public statements of its president and CEO, which contributed to an impression of BP as an out-group member, who, as such, did not genuinely care about the victims of the spill and, more generally, about Americans.

The widespread feeling of distrust in BP in the aftermath of the spill can be detected in the results of two nationwide polls conducted at the height of the crisis, which revealed that most Americans blamed BP for the accident and disapproved of the way the company handled it (Muralidharan et al., 2011: 228). Similarly, a survey conducted by Gill et al. (2012: 12) four months after the accident with residents of Alabama, one of the affected States, showed that BP was the least trusted among the parties involved in the disaster. Signs of distrust in BP can also be seen in the behavior of other key stakeholders. Confronted with the severe damage provoked by the spill

and BP's incapacity to rapidly bring it under control, U.S. President Barack Obama enforced a temporary moratorium on offshore drilling, introducing tougher regulations and controls at the same time (O'Connor, 2011). Clear signs of distrust came from the company's investors as well. Following the disaster, BP's stocks reached a fourteen-year low, halving the company's pre-crisis market value (O'Connor, 2011).

More importantly for our purposes, signs that trust in BP was at stake can be detected in the company's public discourse after the spill. Marková and Gillespie (2008: 19) observe that "when trust becomes explicitly verbalized and thematized, it normally means that [...] it is no longer taken for granted and it may have been partly or totally destroyed". This effect can be clearly observed in BP's discourse after the spill. For instance, in his letter to shareholders, the company's Chairman puts significant emphasis on the company's need to restore trust after the accident. In one place he declares:

BP is able to help meet the world's growing need for energy, but we can only do this if we have the trust of society. To achieve this, we must ensure that safety and responsibility are at the heart of everything we do. We must show that we can be trusted to understand and manage our risks.

This discourse is echoed in the CEO letter, where Robert Dudley asserts that "part of BP's task right now is to show we can be trusted to handle the industry's most demanding jobs". These examples reveal the company's awareness of the crisis of trust that the accident provoked and indicate that repairing trust is one of its main communicative priorities.

### **3.2 The model of trust-repair discourse**

This section describes our model of trust-repair discourse. The model aims to provide a comprehensive framework for the analysis of trust-repair discourse by establishing a connection between the communicative goals of trust repair, the discursive strategies that can be deployed to pursue these goals and their concrete linguistic realization. The model is thus articulated at three levels of analysis: (i) sought effect, (ii) communicative action and (iii) discourse-as-text. An overview of the model is schematically represented in Fig. 3.<sup>4</sup>

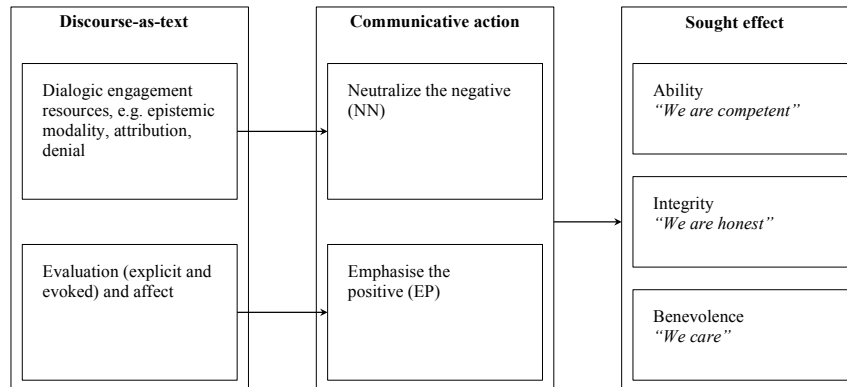


Figure 3: A model of trust-repair discourse

The diagram in Fig. 3 combines the three levels of analysis accounted for in the model. In the right-hand box, the sought effects of trust-repair discourse are shown. At the level of communicative action, these goals are pursued through two basic discursive strategies, i.e. neutralize the negative (NN) and emphasize the positive (EP). At the level of discourse-as-text, these strategies are realized in text through the resources listed under the discourse-as-text heading. These three levels of analysis are described in turn below.

### Sought effect

The basic assumption underlying the present framework is that language is a form of social action (Austin, 1962; Fairclough, 1992; Gärdenfors, 2014; Levinson, 1983; Paradis, 2005, In press). In a broad sense, we use language to ‘do things’ in social contexts, i.e. to influence other people’s states of mind, beliefs and behavior in accordance with our goals and needs. In the case of trust-repair discourse, the main communicative goal of the trust-breaker (TB) is to change the interlocutor’s impressions and beliefs about their trustworthiness and restore trust.

Trustworthiness is a complex and multifaceted construct. As noted earlier, however, it is possible to classify the factors that account for someone’s trustworthiness in terms of ability, integrity and benevolence (Mayer et al., 1995). When a trust-breaking event occurs, it will affect the trustor’s impressions of the TB’s trustworthiness along one or more of these dimensions. Accordingly, trust-repair discourse will be geared towards acting on and restoring the trustor’s impressions of the TB’s ability, integrity and benevolence.

### Communicative action

There are two fundamental discursive strategies that the TB can enact to achieve this communicative goal. On the one hand, the TB can act on the source of distrust by engaging with and responding to the actual and potential discourses that create, promote or sustain it. We term this strategy *neutralize the negative*. This does not necessarily mean that the TB will confront or reject all adverse discourses. On the contrary, the TB could respond positively to them by showing agreement and understanding. In either case, the TB seeks to neutralize the negative effects that unfavorable discourses might have on their trustworthiness. Alternatively, the TB can discursively construct and communicate a trustworthy identity, emphasizing and providing evidence for their positive qualities and virtues. We name this strategy *emphasize the positive*. These communicative strategies can be enacted simultaneously and interact in a single instance of trust-repair discourse.

### Discourse-as-text

At the discourse-as-text level, i.e. at the micro-level of language forms and meanings (Fairclough, 1992), it is possible to identify a core set of linguistic resources that realize the two discursive strategies discussed above. This enables us to investigate them systematically and empirically via text analysis. The resources are described and illustrated below, using examples from the CEO's letter.<sup>5</sup>

#### *Neutralize the negative*

The neutralize-the-negative strategy is realized through the linguistic resources for dialogic *engagement* (Martin and White, 2005; White, 2003, 2012). This category includes all the devices that speakers use to take a stance on the current topic and through which they position themselves vis-à-vis alternative viewpoints and potential responses from their interlocutors (White, 2012: 61). The range of resources included in this category is broad, comprising epistemic modals (e.g. *believe, think, be certain that*), markers of evidentiality (e.g. *see, hear, show that*), expressions of attribution (e.g. *say, claim, argue*), adversative discourse markers (e.g. *yet, but*) and negation/denial (Martin and White, 2005). What these resources share is a dialogic functionality in the sense of Bakhtin (1981). They are used in discourse to mark the speaker's intersubjective positioning with respect to the backdrop of propositions and competing stances that every text is profiled against (Martin and White, 2005).

An example of BP CEO's use of one of these resources, namely negation/denial, to confront and neutralize an unfavorable discourse about the company is the following.

- (1) Our fundamental purpose is to create value for shareholders, but we also see ourselves as part of society, not apart from it.

Through the use of the negation marker *not*, the CEO evokes and simultaneously strongly rejects the – actual or anticipated – claim that the company would privilege investors’ interests at the expense of society. By doing so, he seeks to neutralize this unfavorable discourse and protect BP’s integrity from the negative effects that it could produce. If we combine the three levels of analysis of the model we arrive at the analysis represented schematically in Fig. 4. Thus, the communicative goal of the statement in (1) is to promote a positive view of the company’s integrity. This goal is pursued through the neutralize-the-negative strategy, which is realized in discourse via negation/denial.

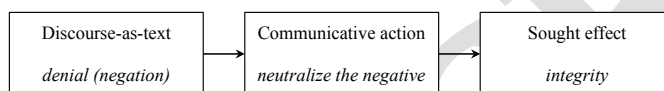


Figure 4: A schematic representation of example 1

According to Martin and White (2005), engagement resources can be broadly subdivided into those that act to challenge or refute different viewpoints, termed *dialogic contraction*, and those that open the dialogic space of the text to competing perspectives, termed *dialogic expansion*. Example (1) is an instance of dialogic contraction, as the negation marker acts to contract the dialogic space for alternative positions, thereby ‘fending-off’ the adverse discourse it evokes (i.e. that the company *does* see itself as apart from society). The following is an example of dialogic expansion from BP’s letter.

- (2) Then came the unthinkable. A subsea blowout in deep water was seen as a very, very low-probability event, by BP and the entire industry – but it happened.

The implications of the CEO’s statement in (2) are substantial, given that a subsea blowout was the event that provoked the explosion of the Deepwater Horizon platform. The CEO uses the verb *see* to frame the proposition that ‘subsea blowouts in deep water are highly unlikely events’ as grounded in the company’s own subjective opinion. Therefore, he presents the company’s viewpoint as one among a range of possible positions on the subject matter at hand.<sup>6</sup> By explicitly marking his statement as a subjective proposal and allowing for alternative stances, the CEO anticipates and seeks to preempt the skepticism and suspicion that an utterly categorical claim on such a highly controversial issue could provoke in the reader. In other words,

*see* serves to protect the company’s integrity from potential allegations of responsibility denial that could derive from it.<sup>7</sup> The analysis of (2) can be thus represented schematically in Fig. 5.

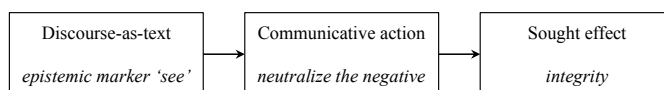


Figure 5: A schematic representation of example 2

### *Emphasize the positive*

The emphasize-the-positive strategy is directly connected to the linguistic resources that speakers use to express *evaluation* (Bednarek, 2006; Hunston, 2011; Hunston and Thompson, 2000; Martin and White, 2005) and *affect* (Bednarek, 2008; Besnier, 1990; Martin and White, 2005; Ochs and Schieffelin, 1989).

Evaluation refers to the linguistic expression of positive or negative subjective assessments of people, objects or events. Although adjectives and adverbs are primarily associated with this language function, evaluation is not tied to any specific set of language forms, but it can be conveyed through an open-ended range of expressions. Evaluations may have positive or negative *valence* and may be based on a number of different criteria and parameters (Bednarek, 2006; Martin and White, 2005). For instance, individuals may be praised or criticized for their skills and abilities, tenacity or moral integrity (Martin and White, 2005). Evaluations, and in particular self-evaluations, are a crucial means through which speakers construct their discourse identity (Fairclough, 2003; Fuoli, 2012).

In BP’s CEO letter, evaluative language is used at different points to convey a positive image of the company and its members, as shown in (3).

- (3) The sound underlying performance across our business continues to give us a solid foundation, and speaks volumes for the inner strengths of BP and our people.

Unlike the examples of neutralize-the-negative strategy discussed above, the CEO does not overtly engage with and respond to any adverse discourse challenging the company’s trustworthiness in (3). His assessment is formulated as a declarative sentence and contains no marker of dialogic engagement. Rather, he uses highly positive evaluative expressions (underlined items) to emphasize the company’s stability despite the crisis resulting from the spill. At the sought effect level, these positive assessments promote a positive impression of the company’s ability. The analysis of this example is represented schematically in Fig. 6.

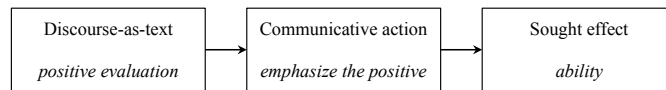


Figure 6: A schematic representation of example 3

Martin and White (2005: 61) point out that evaluation can not only be expressed through the use of manifestly positive or negative words or expressions, such as those underlined in example (3), but it can also be conveyed though factual information that has the capacity, in a given culture or context, to elicit a judgmental response in the reader. The authors term the former *inscribed* evaluation and the latter *invoked* evaluation. The following is an example of invoked evaluation from BP’s CEO letter.

- (4) We have accepted and are implementing the report’s recommendations. We are also sharing what we have learned with governments and others in our industry, and we are co-operating with a series of other investigations, inquiries and hearings.

Example (4) provides a factual account of BP’s actions after the accident and does not include any specific words that carry an explicit positive assessment of the company. Yet, this statement invites a positive appraisal of BP, whose actions can be interpreted as a sign that the company is fully committed to the value of transparency and aligned with the stakeholders’ desire for truth about the accident. In part, this effect is due to the positive meaning of the words *accept*, *share*, *learn* and *co-operate* and to the fact that the company’s actions are readily identified as appropriate, given the ethical norms that implicitly regulate human behavior in this type of situations. Nevertheless, no overt assessment of BP or its members can be identified, thus (4) can be said to invoke rather than inscribe evaluation. The distinction between inscribed and invoked evaluation is particularly relevant for the analysis of trust-repair discourse, as implicitness might, in a communicative context characterized by skepticism and distrust, be actively exploited by the TB as a persuasive strategy.

The other category of resources that are directly relevant to the emphasize-the-positive strategy is *affect*. Affect refers to the linguistic expression of emotions. Similarly to evaluation, it can be either positive or negative and can be realized through an open-ended range of language resources, including adjectives (e.g. *happy*, *anxious*), verbs (e.g. *want*, *fear*), nouns (e.g. *anger*, *love*) and adverbs (e.g. *reluctantly*, *surprisingly*). Affect can refer to both the emotions expressed by the speaker – *authorial* affect – as well as to the linguistic expressions that describe emotions felt by third parties – *non-authorial* affect (Martin and White, 2005). In discourse, affect plays



a central role in establishing empathy and communicating proximity with the interlocutor. In this sense, it is an important resource for realizing the emphasize-the-positive strategy, as in (5).

- (5) The explosion and fire on the Deepwater Horizon rig shocked everyone within BP, and we feel great sadness that 11 people died.

The use of negatively loaded emotion words in this passage serves to show that the company shares the suffering that the victims of the spill experienced. By demonstrating the company’s sensitivity, understanding and care for those affected by the accident, this passage can be seen to communicate benevolence. This analysis is represented in Fig. 7. Similarly to example (3) above, this example counts as an instance of emphasize-the-positive strategy rather than of neutralize-the-negative strategy because no dialogic engagement with other viewpoints or discourses is overtly signaled. The CEO’s statement is formulated as a simple declarative sentence.

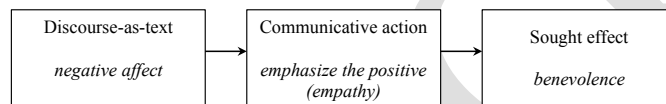


Figure 7: A schematic representation of example 5

## 4 Analysis

The model outlined above was applied to the analysis of BP’s 2010 CEO letter. The letter was included in BP’s 2010 annual report<sup>8</sup> and was signed by the newly appointed CEO Robert Dudley, an American and former chief of BP’s Gulf Coast Restoration Organization.

The main goal of the analysis is to demonstrate the descriptive and explanatory potential of the model through a systematic examination of the text. In addition, it aims to provide an in-depth account of the discursive strategies adopted by BP’s CEO to repair trust in the company after the spill. The letter, which is 2,177 words long, has been analyzed in full. However, due to space constraints, only a limited number of representative examples is discussed in detail in sections 4.3 to 4.5. The complete analysis can be found in the Appendix. Section 4.2 provides a concise overview of the results. The next section briefly describes the genre of CEO letters.

### 4.1 CEO letters

CEO letters are a common feature of the annual report, a document produced by public companies and made available online. The report provides information about the companies’ financial position and performance. CEO

letters are generally laid out as signed, personal letters, and are included at the beginning of the report. They are voluntary and unaudited documents in which the CEO summarizes and evaluates the company's performance during the preceding year and outlines its strategy for the future. Whereas the annual report fulfills both an informative and promotional function, CEO letters are essentially promotional in nature; they are written to persuade shareholders of the validity of their investments in the company and to promote a positive corporate image (Breeze, 2013; Hyland, 1998). Given that CEO letters are the most widely read section of the annual report, they play an important role in shaping the readers' impressions of a company's performance, strategy and conduct (Hyland, 1998: 224).

CEO letters are rarely the product of one single person but the result of a collaborative process that may involve, in addition to the CEO, the chief financial officer and the chief legal officer (Thomas, 1997). However, it is ultimately the CEO who assumes responsibility for the letter and the person who the readers will likely hold accountable for its content. CEO letters primarily address a company's shareholders and investors but, given their easy accessibility, the potential readership of these documents is broader and includes the news media, government agencies, employees and members of society at large (Breeze, 2013: 84).

## 4.2 Overview of results

Table 1 synthesizes and summarizes the findings of the complete analysis of BP's CEO letter reporting the main discursive moves made by the CEO to repair trust in BP after the spill. The moves are organized according to their strategic functions, i.e. emphasize the positive *versus* neutralize the negative, and their communicative goals, i.e. repairing ability, integrity or benevolence. The subsequent sections discuss some of the discourse moves included in table 1 in more detail.

	Emphasize the positive (EP)	Neutralize the negative (NN)
Ability	BP activated an extraordinary oil spill response BP has a sound underlying performance and solid foundation 2011 will be a year of consolidation for BP	Consolidation in 2011 is <i>expected</i>
Integrity	BP committed to an immediate and detailed internal investigation BP is striving to learn from the accident BP aims to become an industry leader in risk management	<i>Yet</i> , prior to the spill BP had put safety at the center of everything The spill was unthinkable ( <i>but</i> it happened) No single factor caused the accident BP's priorities remained clear despite the criticisms Hazards cannot be completely eliminated BP will not engage in opencast mining BP <i>does</i> understand that business-as-usual is not an option In spite of what happened, deep-water drilling is necessary
Benevolence	BP's employees and American retirees worked hard to solve the crisis BP is shocked, saddened and deeply sorry for the accident The CEO is personally attached to the Gulf of Mexico The decision to suspend dividends to shareholders was very difficult	BP <i>knows</i> nothing can restore the loss of the victims of the accident

Table 1: Overview of results

### 4.3 Repairing ability

As noted earlier, BP's handling of the spill was a major source of controversy. The company's repeated failed attempts to stop the leak contributed to create the impression that the company did not have a clear strategy or the necessary technical means to cope with the spill. In his letter, the CEO does not mention nor does he try to justify BP's failures. Instead, strong emphasis is placed on the company's efforts to remediate the effects of the spill.

- (6) On 22 April 2010 the Deepwater Horizon sank, and a major oil spill response was activated. At its peak this involved the mobilization of some 48,000 people, the deployment of around 2,500 miles of boom and the coordination of more than 6,500 vessels. Field operations brought together experts from key agencies, organizations and BP. Thousands of our people flew in from around the world and stayed and worked for weeks and months. Nearly 500 retirees from BP America called up to say they wanted to help. This was an extraordinary response.

The actions undertaken by the company in the aftermath of the accident are positively evaluated in terms of scope (*a major oil spill response*) and quality (*an extraordinary response*). These evaluative expressions provide the interpretive frame for the 'hard facts' included in the paragraph. Through the

interplay between evaluative language and factual information, the *superlativeness* (Bednarek and Caple, 2012) of the response is brought to the fore. The ‘staggering’ figures reported boost the rhetorical force and credibility of the CEO’s account and foreground BP’s organizational skills and know-how. The credibility and appropriateness of BP’s actions are reinforced by referring to the presence of *experts* from *key* agencies, organizations and the company itself. Prominence is given to the commitment and determination of its employees, who stayed and worked in the areas hit by the disaster *for weeks and months*, and to the generosity and altruism of its *American* retirees, who participated in the spill efforts because they *wanted* to. If we apply the model to (6), we observe that the CEO deploys the emphasize-the-positive (EP) strategy to show that the company acted in a competent manner after the spill. He does not try to explicitly and directly counteract the discourses that challenged the company’s ability, but instead chooses to offer an alternative version of the spill response ‘story’ in which the company is depicted as well organized and maximally committed to solve the crisis. As shown above, at the discourse-as-text level, this strategy is realized through a combination of positive inscribed and invoked evaluation.

A similar strategy is used to reassure BP’s shareholders about the company’s ability to overcome the crisis. The CEO devotes the second half of the letter to detailing the new strategy that the management has put in place to “realize greater value” for investors. The credibility of the new strategy is discursively constructed through the use of positive evaluative wordings (EP strategy). BP is said to have gained access to “a *wide range of new* upstream resource *opportunities*”. In January 2011, the company signed the “*first major* equity-linked partnership between a national and international oil company” with the Russian oil giant Rosneft and, in February 2011, the company announced “a second *historic* agreement”. The company is represented as dynamic and forward-thinking. According to the CEO, BP is taking “*an even more active approach* to buying, developing and selling upstream assets” and is “*moving swiftly* to address its weaknesses and build on its strengths”. To reinforce this positive message and promote confidence in BP’s future, the CEO concludes this part of the letter with an optimistic statement.

- (7) As to the immediate future, I expect 2011 to be a year of consolidation for BP, as we focus on completing our previously announced divestment programme, meeting our commitments in the US and bringing renewed rigour to the way we manage risk.

Example (7) shows again the EP strategy in action. Notably, however, the CEO’s optimistic forecast is introduced by *expect*, which, by framing the proposition that ‘2011 will be a year of consolidation for BP’ as grounded in the CEO’s subjective assessment, performs a dialogically expanding function (see section 3). In this sense, this verb can be seen to convey a prudent

stance of detached objectivity, which reinforces the credibility of the CEO's claim, while at the same time lowering the interpersonal cost of potential misjudgments ('anticipatory' NN strategy).

#### 4.4 Repairing integrity

The main challenges to BP's integrity that the CEO addresses in his letter relate to: a) the company's alleged disregard for safety before the accident; b) its priorities in the aftermath of the spill; c) the company's measures to prevent similar events from recurring. The CEO confronts the first of these challenges by stressing that, contrary to what the disaster seems to suggest (discourse marker *yet* - NN strategy), before the spill "the company had put safe and reliable operations at the centre of everything". Further, to counter the negative 'negligence' discourse, the accident is represented as unpredictable (example (2)), a view that is claimed to be shared by *the entire industry*. This 'endorsement' has a dialogic contracting effect and serves, on the one hand, to grant credibility to a potentially controversial claim (NN strategy: neutralize skepticism) and, on the other, to buffer its interpersonal consequences by partially shifting responsibility for it to other players in the context of the spill. Finally, the causes of the accident are described as complex and as involving multiple factors and agents.

- (8) Our investigation report was published on 8 September 2010, and found that no single factor caused the accident. The report stated that decisions made by multiple companies and work teams contributed to the accident, and these arose from a complex and interlinked series of mechanical, human judgement, engineering design, operational implementation and team interface failures.

In (8), the CEO adopts a NN strategy through denial (marked negation *no*) and the evidential marker *found*, which construes the results of the company's internal report as credible, scientifically established 'facts'. Both these linguistic devices function as contractive dialogic operators in this context, acting to 'fend off' the idea that BP is the sole company to blame.

To respond to the second concern mentioned above, the CEO strongly emphasizes that, even during the toughest days of the crisis, BP's actions were driven by unequivocal priorities.

- (9) We also found ourselves in the midst of intense political and media scrutiny. We received incredible support and faced tremendous criticism, but our priorities remained clear – provide support to the families and friends of those 11 men who died, stop the leak, attack the spill, protect the shore, support all the people and places affected.

(9) shows an example of NN strategy instantiated by the adversative marker *but* which, like other *counter* formulations is "dialogistic in the same way

as denials in that [it] invoke[s] a contrary position which is then said not to hold” (Martin and White, 2005: 120). The “tremendous criticisms” that were leveled at the company after the spill are set in contrast to the proposition that “BP’s priorities remained clear”. The voices questioning BP’s priorities are thus confronted with a ‘positive’ claim and, at the same time, by representing criticisms as equally legitimate to the “incredible support” that the company also received.

One of the most important yet complex goals that the CEO had to accomplish to repair stakeholders’ trust was that of convincing them that the company will operate safely in the future. Trust is, in fact, future-oriented (Linell and Keselman, 2011: 156), i.e. one’s decision to trust another person is crucially related to their *expectations* about the trustee’s future behavior (see also Gambetta, 1988; Hardin, 2002; Möllering, 2006). The CEO concludes the letter by explicitly addressing stakeholders’ concerns in this respect.

- (10) I have heard people ask “Does BP ‘get it’?” Residents of the Gulf, our employees and investors, governments, industry partners and people around the world all want to know whether we understand that a return to business-as-usual is not an option. We may not have communicated it enough at times, but yes, we get it.

In (10), the CEO engages in an imagined dialogue with stakeholders and directly responds to their preoccupation with the legacy of the spill and BP’s future conduct. He sets out a very articulated NN strategy that is realized through a rhetorical question, two negation markers and the adversative conjunction *but*.<sup>9</sup> Through the interplay of these dialogically contractive resources, the CEO aims to neutralize the negative discourse according to which the company does not fully realize the implications of the spill and the need for change that it prompted. By engaging with and ‘fending off’ these adverse viewpoints, he ultimately aims to reassure stakeholders that BP ‘has learned its lesson’ from the spill and repair the company’s integrity.

#### 4.5 Repairing benevolence

BP’s benevolence towards the victims of the spill and, more generally, towards Americans came under intense scrutiny after the spill. One element of the CEO’s strategy to repair this aspect of BP’s trustworthiness consists in showing that the company shared people’s concern about the detrimental effects of the spill and desire to bring the situation back to normal. This can be seen in (6), where the CEO emphasizes the scope and urgency of the company’s spill response efforts, and in (9), where he attempts to ‘set the record straight’ about BP’s priorities. Demonstrating alignment of intents, however, could be insufficient to be perceived as benevolent, as *truly* concerned about the trustor’s own interests and welfare. The former CEO’s ‘I

want my life back' incident clearly shows this. What was missing in that infelicitous attempt to apologize for the disaster was an acknowledgment of the victims' perspective and an attempt to establish *empathy* with them. The CEO seeks to re-build this type of alignment in his letter. The very first paragraph is entirely devoted to showing that the disaster and the deaths it caused have deeply affected all members of BP, and that the company recognizes and cares for the suffering of the victims and their families.

- (11) The tragic events of 2010 will forever be written in the memory of this company and the people who work here. The explosion and fire on the Deepwater Horizon rig shocked everyone within BP, and we feel great sadness that 11 people died. We are deeply sorry for the grief felt by their families and friends. We know nothing can restore the loss of those men.

Empathy is communicated in (11) through the repeated use of negative affect terms – *tragic, shocked, great sadness, deeply sorry, grief*. These choices serve to foreground the company's emotions towards the accident and to show that BP shares the suffering of the families and friends of the victims. These aspects of the CEO's discourse can be interpreted as constituting an EP strategy. By exposing the company's own vulnerability and demonstrating empathy for the victims of the spill, the CEO seeks to establish a common ground of shared feelings with them that can contribute to the promotion of an image of the company as truly caring and benevolent. Example (11) includes an instance of NN strategy as well, which is realized through the dialogic contractive markers *know* and *nothing*. Through the use of these devices, the CEO engages with and seeks to neutralize the – actual or potential – adverse discourse according to which BP does not fully realize the gravity of the accident and its impact on the victims' lives.

As noted earlier, one of the main sources of distrust in BP's benevolence resided in the perceived distance and conflict between the company and the American public that BP's PR failures had contributed to create. To counter these negative impressions, the CEO puts to the fore his American identity and strives to show that he personally cares for the areas and people hit by the spill.

- (12) And it all started in a part of the world that's very close to my heart. I grew up in Mississippi, and spent summers with my family swimming and fishing in the Gulf. I know those beaches and waters well. When I heard about the accident I could immediately picture how it might affect the people who live and work along that coast.

Example (12) can be interpreted as an instance of EP strategy, whereby the CEO's sense of belonging and emotional attachment (as in *very close to my heart*) to the areas affected by the spill are foregrounded, promoting a

positive perception of his – and by extension, the company’s – benevolence towards the inhabitants of the Gulf and, in general, towards Americans. By stressing his American roots and portraying himself as a member of the community (he could *immediately picture* the impact the spill would have on the local people’s lives), the CEO also seeks to establish his credibility as a trustworthy interlocutor, a task that his predecessor failed at.

So far the discussion has focused on the CEO’s attempt to display benevolence towards the victims of the spill and, more broadly, towards the American public. Crucially, however, the letter is primarily addressed to BP’s shareholders, whose interests were also severely impacted by the disaster. Shareholders’ concerns are addressed by stressing the company’s ability, as discussed in section 4.3. The CEO, however, seeks to show benevolence to them as well. This can be observed at two points in the text. The first of these is the salutation. The CEO addresses his readers as equals using the formula *Dear fellow shareholders*<sup>10</sup>, evoking in this way a discourse of solidarity and companionship (Breeze, 2012: 11). The second is when he comments on the board of directors’ decision to suspend dividend payments for several months after the spill.

- (13) As part of our response, we took the decision to cancel further dividends in 2010. While we know that many shareholders rely on their regular payments, we also had to protect the company and secure its long-term future. The board of BP took this decision with a heavy heart, but I believe it was the right thing to do in truly exceptional circumstances.

Affect (as in *with a heavy heart*) is used here to underscore BP’s care about shareholders’ interests. The fact that suspending dividends was a difficult and emotional decision proves that the board of directors is truly concerned about the investors’ financial security (EP strategy). In fact, that decision was made in consideration of a shared goal, that of securing the company’s long-term future. Given the *exceptional* circumstances in which BP found itself, the board’s decision was the best possible, not to deceive, but to fulfill shareholders’ interests.

## 5 Discussion

Table 1 shows that the CEO adopts a combination of the EP and NN strategies for all the three facets of trustworthiness. Interestingly, however, considerable differences can be observed in the use of these strategies across the facets. While attempts to repair trust in BP’s ability and benevolence are mainly pursued through the EP strategy, the opposite pattern emerges for integrity. The CEO’s discursive efforts to repair the company’s integrity are, in fact, almost entirely based on the NN strategy. Different hypotheses could be proposed to explain this finding. First, while the accident,



as discussed above, impacted all three aspects of BP's trustworthiness, the company's integrity problem was arguably more complex and far-reaching in its implications, and it also had a legal dimension. The actual and potential sources of distrust in BP's integrity were multifarious as both the company's conduct before and after the spill fell under intense public scrutiny and the accident had generated concern about its future actions. Tackling these multiple sources of distrust may thus have constituted a communicative priority over emphasizing the company's positive ethical qualities. Second, it might be questioned whether a more pronounced reliance on the EP strategy to repair BP's integrity would have been a viable option at all. Indeed, precisely in view of the numerous challenges to this aspect of the company's trustworthiness, being overly positive about its integrity may have provoked the opposite effect of attracting suspicion and generating even more distrust.

These considerations raise the question as to why the NN strategy is not as widely employed for repairing the other facets of BP's trustworthiness. As far as ability is concerned, one possible explanation for this might reside in the fact that neutralizing the negative discourses would have required focusing on the technical details of the spill control operations, the discussion of which would probably have been unsuitable in this context. Another possible explanation is that, given the obvious nature of BP's technical difficulties in controlling the spill, any attempt to confront the negative inability discourses would not have been perceived as particularly credible. As Linell and Marková (2013: 220) point out, "to speak means to take risks by exposing one's own discourse to doubt". Sound evidence or arguments are needed to support the credibility of one's claim or any attempt to successfully counter alternative or adverse viewpoints, particularly in a situation where the trustworthiness of the speaker has been damaged. In the face of considerable evidence for BP's ill-preparedness to an event of the magnitude of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, any attempt to neutralize the negative would have been arduous, if not impossible. Not surprisingly, the CEO avoids mentioning the well-relief operations altogether and shifts the focus of attention to the spill response, which he describes and positively evaluates providing detailed information in support of his claims (example in (6)). As far as benevolence is concerned, the CEO's preference for the EP strategy might be explained on similar grounds, namely that the interpersonal costs and risks involved in directly confronting the adverse discourses would have been too high to make this a viable strategy. Given the widespread sentiments of anger and frustration that the disaster had created, offering positive evidence instead of trying to counter commonly-held negative views may have represented a comparatively safer option.

So far we have concentrated on the discursive strategies that the CEO deploys at different points in his letter to target different potential challenges to BP's trustworthiness. If we focus on how these strategies are expressed and, in particular, on the use of dialogic engagement resources, we can ob-

serve an interesting pattern. Most of the markers of engagement used in the letter are dialogically contracting. In other words, most of these markers can be seen to serve the purpose of disallowing potential disagreeing opinions and protecting BP and the CEO's statements from criticism. Particularly striking in this sense is the frequent use of denial, which is a maximally contracting dialogic operator, e.g. in (8) and (10). The frequent use of dialogically contracting markers can be seen to configure what we may call a *defensive stance*. Having been subject to intense public and media scrutiny and having received strong criticism from different quarters, the CEO needed to protect the company's image from further damage. Yet, such a defensive stance appears to be in contrast with the strong emphasis on learning, transparency and humility that emerges in other parts of the letter, e.g. (4). We suggest that this apparent contradiction is the result of the CEO's need to cater for and respond to multiple competing requirements stemming from different audiences, an aspect to which we now turn.

The analysis presented above has been carried out under the assumption that, despite explicitly addressing BP's shareholders, the CEO's message was intended for a broader audience. The findings of the analysis support this assumption as they show that the CEO responds to a variety of concerns in his letter, some of which go beyond the specific prerogatives of the company's owners. But, how can these two perspectives be reconciled? Clark's (1992) concept of *audience design* offers a viable solution to this apparent incongruity. Audience design refers to the process, inherent in every language act, whereby speakers identify different hearers, assign roles to them, and design their utterances in accordance with their assumptions about the different hearers' knowledge, beliefs and suppositions (Clark, 1992: 217). Put differently, audience design is the process by which speakers display a sensitivity and orientation towards the different audiences they envisage for their message. According to Clark (1992: 217), there are three main types of hearer roles: *participants*, *addressees*, and *overhearers*. Participants are the hearers who the speaker intends to take part in the communicative exchange (Clark, 1992: 218). Among the participant, addressees are those who are vocatively designated as the recipients of the message (Clark, 1992: 218). In other words, they are the hearers that the speaker addresses directly and explicitly. Finally, overhearers are the hearers who are not thought of as participating in the exchange by the speaker but that happen to eavesdrop (Clark, 1992: 218).

Following Clark's classification, we propose that the shareholders are the addressees of the CEO's letter. As seen above, they are the primary target audience of CEO letters and they are explicitly addressed at the beginning of the text. The victims of the spill, the American public opinion and the government are the participants. They are not conceived of as mere overhearers of the CEO's message, but they are implicitly addressed as active partakers in the communicative exchange initiated by the letter. Based on the results

of the analysis, we suggest that much of the CEO's message is designed with the participants in mind, rather than the addressees. As Clark (1992: 214) notes, "[o]n many occasions, government officials, television newsmen, and others are ostensibly addressing certain hearers, but their primary aim is to inform the on-looking public of what they are saying to these hearers". It is precisely this complex dialogic arrangement that can be seen to constitute the source of the contradictions discussed above. Thus, protecting the company's image from further damage and showing that the situation is under control was necessary for the sake of the shareholders. Concurrently, the CEO also needed to show transparency, openness and understanding to respond to the legitimate demands arising from other stakeholders and the public opinion. The result is a skillful exercise in diplomacy, whereby the CEO projects a positive, trustworthy corporate image to the stakeholders, at the same time as he conveys firmness to investors.

## 6 Concluding remarks

This article has introduced a novel conceptual framework for the analysis of trust-repair discourse that connects the construct of interpersonal trust (Mayer et al., 1995) with a linguistic analysis at the level of discourse-as-text (Fairclough, 1992). The application of the framework has been demonstrated through a systematic analysis of BP's CEO letter published after the Deepwater Horizon oil spill of 2010. The model predicts that, when trust has been damaged, the trust-breaker – in this case BP – adopts one or a combination of two alternative discursive strategies. The TB can either dialogically seek to neutralize the discourses that create distrust or, alternatively or in combination, emphasize the positive aspects of his actions and his persona. These strategies are manifested in text by the use of dialogic engagement and evaluative/affective language respectively. Drawing on Mayer et al. (1995), the communicative goal of these strategies is that of improving the trustor's assessment of the TB's ability, integrity and benevolence and repair trust.

This study emphasizes the central role played by discourse as a vehicle for negotiating and repairing trust. It contributes to the existing literature on the topic of trust in discourse and communication by shedding some light on the discursive and pragmatic dynamics of trust and by providing a coherent and comprehensive conceptual framework for the analysis of trust-repair discourse. From the point of view of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill case, this article offers some insights into how BP discursively responded to the accident and attempted to renegotiate trust after the spill, thus contributing to the growing body of literature focusing on this implication-rich case study.

Clearly, more research is needed to test the wider applicability of the model proposed here and to develop it further. Future work could focus on

expanding the model, by investigating the trust-building potential of linguistic features and discursive strategies that have not been accounted for here. For example, in the text analyzed above we could identify several instances of *personalization* strategies (Van Leeuwen, 1996), whereby the identity of specific individuals or groups is foregrounded. This can be observed in example 6, where the CEO refers to the company's employees as *our people* and mentions the *retirees from BP America*, in 11, where he recounts the sorrow felt by *everyone within BP*, or in 12, where the CEO's own identity and personal history are put to the fore. These choices seem to underpin an EP strategy aimed at humanizing an otherwise faceless corporation. This, in turn, may contribute to the improvement of the company's perceived benevolence, on the grounds that 'actual people' can understand other people's needs and feelings better than an impersonal organization. Future research could also compare similar cases of trust-repair discourse to add empirical robustness to the model. Considering similar instances of trust-repair discourse might also contribute to explaining when and how EP strategies are preferred or, indeed, preferable to NN strategies. In sum, much remains to be explored to better understand the dynamics of trust in discourse. We hope this article will stimulate more research in this area.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>It is important to note that lack of distrust does not entail high trust (e.g. Lewicki et al., 1998; Schul et al., 2008; Swift, 2001).

<sup>2</sup>It is noteworthy to mention that the final report of the National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Offshore Drilling, which was established by U.S. President Barack Obama in the aftermath of the spill to investigate its causes, highlights that one of the main factors that contributed to create the conditions for the disaster was the U.S. government officials' excess of trust in BP and the other oil companies engaged in deepwater oil drilling in the Gulf. The report states that: "The accident of April 20 was avoidable. It resulted from clear mistakes made in the first instance by BP, Halliburton, and Transocean, and by government officials who, *relying too much on industry's assertions of the safety of their operations*, failed to create and apply a program of regulatory oversight that would have properly minimized the risks of deepwater drilling" (National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Offshore Drilling, 2011: 127, emphasis mine).

<sup>3</sup>This phrase, a mistranslation of the Swedish idiom 'den lilla människan', which corresponds to 'common people' in English, fueled public indignation, despite the Chairman's

subsequent apologies and explanations.

<sup>4</sup>Although the discussion of the model and the analysis included in section 4 will proceed, for ease of illustration, from the sought effect level to the discourse-as-text level, the latter is shown on the left-hand side of Fig. 3, in order to mark it as the most basic level of analysis within our framework.

<sup>5</sup>For the sake of clarity, the discussion of each example focuses on one relevant linguistic phenomenon only. However, it is important to note that some of the examples do, in fact, contain more relevant linguistic features. A full account of these extracts is included in the Appendix.

<sup>6</sup>The dialogic expanding effect of the use of the epistemic *see* can be perceived by comparing example (2) with its artificially constructed monoglossic version: *A subsea blowout in deep water is as a very, very low-probability event.*

<sup>7</sup>While the CEO's statement in (2) might be positively interpreted as implying that, given that the accident was unconceivable the company acted 'in good faith', it does not include any clearly identifiable positive assessment of the company or its member. Therefore, example (2) cannot be classified as an instance of the emphasize-the-positive strategy.

<sup>8</sup>Freely available through the company's online archive at: <http://www.bp.com/en/global/corporate/investors/annual-reporting/archive.html>

<sup>9</sup>The last sentence includes an example of a recurring arrangement of a conceding/concurring proposition (*We may not have communicated it enough at times*) followed by a countering proposition (*but yes, we get it*). Martin and White (2005: 124) label this type of discursive patterns 'concede + counter' pairings, whereby the speaker first presents him/herself as agreeing with the putative reader and subsequently rejects the inferences that naturally derive from the first utterance to promote their own viewpoint on the matter at hand. From a rhetorical perspective, the first utterance serves to acknowledge and legitimize the putative reader's viewpoint, construing alignment and solidarity with him or her. This, in turn, can favor the reader's acceptance of the speaker's opinion. Therefore, the use of a 'concede + counter' pairing in this context can be seen to boost the persuasive force of the CEO's discursive strategy by favoring and inviting consensus.

<sup>10</sup>It is noteworthy that this type of salutation was never used in previous years' letters to shareholders, nor is it used by the company's main competitors in their letters to shareholders published the same year (Breeze, 2012).

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