

SEM41. “It’s personal – it’s (also) business”: Business communication’s interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary

11 September h. 16:00-18:30, PN 19

Convenors

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Abstract

The kaleidoscopic nature of business communication allows corporate actors to interact with a number of expert and non-expert interlocutors through an extensive range of traditional and innovative modes, content and forms of online and offline presence. In contrast with the common perception of business communication as “just business” - and therefore objective, results-driven and “self-less” - it increasingly encompasses the “human” (the identity of a person or representative of an organization), “humane” (inclusivity, ethics, cultural diversity) and “humanities” (studies of interactions and relations within a professional discourse community) (Jameson, 2022; Darics & Koller, 2019).

Research has explored and continues to probe into the human aspects of conducting business, including trust and relationship building, face giving and threatening, brand and professional name, identity and communities, teamwork and collaboration, active listening and power (a)symmetry, customer service and satisfaction, responsibility and sustainability. This increasingly personalized corporate and business culture is reflected in its language and discourse in relation to technological advances and tempers the hype of intense, high-quantity online communication (e.g. spam emails, standardized chatbots and routine automatic phone calls) with a greater focus on quality interaction, customized offers, gestures, understanding of others’ circumstances and word of mouth/mouse about personal experiences and feedback, with the intent of “keeping communication human” and being credible, accountable and trustworthy by any audience.

The seminar endeavours to create the ideal setting for an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary debate, starting from examples of and reflections on the linguistic and discursive aspects of and strategies surrounding the personal and human face of business communication. Such studies involve the boardroom and workplace, the classroom (Doerr, 2023) or the office itself (be it traditional, mobile or shared, Doerr, 2018) and the plethora of multimedia channels and approaches at company’s disposal to productively - but also humanely - interact within and outside of the organization. Possible topics for contributions include, but are not limited to:

- trust and relationship building in in-house and out-house business communication and correspondence (e.g. e-mails, press and news releases, websites)
- brand identity and strategic stance (e.g. CEO letters, institutional and financial communication)
- human presence and personal/professional identity in traditional and multimodal business communication via social media
- marketing communication and promotion (e.g. advertising, sponsorship, crowdfunding, appeals to stakeholders and business angels)
- human and humane storytelling of and by authentic self-made leaders, family businesses and testimonies (e.g. assistants, customers, employees)
- inclusion, diversity and equality in small talk and other instances of interpersonal cooperation and networking
- enforcement and/or violation of traditional politeness standards and etiquette in business and organization communication (e.g. hiring, firing, empowerment, appraisals, reprimands, complaints).

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SEM41. Papers

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- *Building trust & promoting sustainability: A discourse-analytical and ecolinguistic study of major cruise companies CEOs' letters* (Elena Intorcia, Università degli Studi del Sannio Benevento)
- *"Prompting" move structure in post-crisis corporate genres: Human(e)- vs AI-generated apologia* (Gaetano Falco, Università degli Studi di Bari Aldo Moro)
- *Relying on the humane face to build trust: Storytelling in the energy companies' web campaigns.* (Maria Antonietta Marongiu, Università degli Studi di Cagliari)
- *Neutrality vs. personal involvement? An exploration of co-constructed affect in interpreter-mediated business negotiations* (Raffaella Merlini, LUMSA Università)
- *Exploring speech for job seeking purposes* (Sabrina Francesconi, Università di Trento)

SEM 41. Abstracts

"Prompting" move structure in post-crisis corporate genres: Human(e)- vs AI-generated apologia

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A significant portion of the research conducted in the field of corporate communication has been dedicated to crisis management (Hearit, 2006; Holladay, 2008; Coombs, 2010). Investigations within this subfield have identified various strategic positions, including counterattack, legal stance, apology, differentiation, and denial (Hearit 1995, 2006), as well as rhetorical appeals to ethos, pathos, and logos, which are characteristic of the company's 'apologia' macrostrategies during and after a crisis. These approaches to corporate crisis management highlight the critical role that human agents play in addressing such situations and the move structure they adhere to in apologetic corporate genres, such as corporate social responsibility reports and letters to shareholders.

As far as the research on corporate genres is concerned, a multitude of studies have emerged, presenting distinct move structures for organisations that vary in the number of moves, ranging from three to twelve (Gillaerts, 1996; Garzone, 2004; Nickerson & de Groot, 2005). Regardless of the stance adopted by the company in an effort to preserve its image and reputation, it is evident that letters to shareholders reflect both humane qualities, including kindness and empathy, as well as the human qualities associated with biological and social authorship.

In light of this context, this paper intends to investigate whether Artificial Intelligence can fulfil the formal requirements associated with the genre structure of such letters while preserving the distinguishing voice inherent in human-authored content (Choudhury, Vanneste, and Zohrehvand, 2024). Specifically, the paper aims to address the following research questions (RQs): RQ1) Although AI demonstrates the capacity to generate contextually relevant content, can it effectively capture the intricate human and humane dimensions of authorship that are prevalent in human writing? RQ2) Is AI capable of producing the same pathos and ethos found in letters to shareholders authored by humans? RQ3) What prompts must be provided to AI to formulate a letter to shareholders that conforms with the prototypical stances required by corporations to defend their actions?

To address these research questions, we will conduct a qualitative analysis of a corpus of authentic letters to shareholders that have been issued by companies in response to an environmental disaster, a health crisis, or an accounting scandal since 2010. This collection will serve as a benchmark for studying shareholder letters generated using Microsoft Co-pilot, OpenAI, and DeepSeek. The analysis will utilize methodological tools from corporate communication (Hearit, 2006) and genre analysis (Garzone, 2004).

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Exploring speech for job seeking purposes

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This presentation seeks to explore the use of speech in a small corpus of 47 video curricula (hereafter video CV), recorded by undergraduate students in a Business English course at the University of Trento, during the 2023-2024 and 2024-2025 academic years. The students have a basic C1 level of English-language competence, according to the CEFR, and the ESP course has been integrated with a seminar offered by the university Job Guidance staff. From the perspective of genre analysis (Bhatia, 2017), the video CV can be positioned within the system of business genres that constitute a recruitment process (Waung, Hymes & Beatty 2014), which includes, among others, the cover letter or the job interview. Hence, it interestingly inscribes a personal dimension within business discourse (Darics & Koller, 2019; Doerr, 2018). Following a previous work devoted to multimodal meaning-making in the audiovisual corpus, this presentation devotes specific attention to the behaviour of speech, with an automatic transcription and quantitative and qualitative exploration of verbally-enacted self-presentation and self-promotion. The research question is the following: how do students use speech in a video CV to communicate and promote their prospective professional identities?

A first lexical-grammar level can be observed in the video texts (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004), where grammar and lexical solutions predominantly perform self-identification (i.e., I personal pronoun) and self-description (i.e., qualifying adjectives). Noteworthy are also temporal adverbs and conjunctions, past verb forms, as well as cause-and-effect logical chains, used by potential job applicants as storytelling techniques, to give narrative shape to the information they offer. Meanwhile, speech is adopted with an interpersonal role (through strategies including 'you' personal pronouns, interrogative or imperative forms), especially at the beginning and at the end of the video CV to address the potential recruiter. Speech is then used with a compositional function, to signal and shape a number of recurring genre moves (Bhatia, 2017; Coccetta, 2020), that can be arranged in the following or in similar ways: Introduction, Who we are, Aims, Educational background, Work experience, Soft, linguistic and technological skills, Conclusion. In this vein, the presentation aims to map and discuss verbal strategies in the codification and composition of the video CV, with specific attention to the intersection of personal and interpersonal dimensions in a business discourse genre.

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Building trust & promoting sustainability: A discourse-analytical and ecolinguistic study of major cruise companies CEOs' letters

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Strategic business communication is increasingly aiming at emphasizing the human aspects of conducting business, including trust and relationship building, and is often used to promote corporate sustainable practices, mainly owing to the high demands placed on contemporary businesses and corporations to meet sustainability goals and tackle climate change. Poole (2022), however, noticed how ecolinguistic analysis of corporate discourse has shed light on the greenwashing linguistic practices employed by corporations to obscure their roles and responsibilities for environmental damage.

This paper aims to investigate the strategic communication adopted by the CEOs of five major cruise companies to build trust and promote sustainable brand identity. Regarding identity and corporate strategy, CEO letters represent the most effective documents (Giordano 2019), containing both persuasive and personal elements (Gotti 2018:18). A small specialized corpus of fifty CEO letters opening the major cruise companies' annual Sustainability Reports from 2015 to 2024 was created and examined, through Critical Discourse Studies and Ecolinguistics analysis tools. Although small, the corpus is meaningful in its representativeness of the language employed by the cruise industry to discursively construct a sustainable and trustworthy brand image. The ultimate goal is to identify, through the analysis of quantitative and qualitative characteristics of the corpus, the linguistic devices, along with the communicative and legitimacy strategies applied and to what extent nature is erased from the companies' profit-oriented discourse.

Methodologically, this study mainly relies on Legitimation Theory (Van Leeuwen 2008), Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005), linguistic erasure (Stibbe 2015) and frame semantics (Entman 1993; Fillmore 1982). In particular, the framing potential of recurrent lexical items in CEO statements will be examined, pointing to the implications of lexical choices in constructing, within cruise companies' business communication, a specific discourse attempting to counterbalance and normalise the paradoxical tension between the search for profit and the ethical need for sustainability (Vanvik 2024; Ponton & Asero 2018).

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Relying on the humane face to build trust: Storytelling in the energy companies' web campaigns

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Research on corporate communication has shown that companies build a positive identity through several discourse devices (Urloi & Ruiz-Garrido, 2023; Marongiu, 2024) to earn stakeholders' trust (Giordano, 2024). Discourse is considered the most powerful tool that organisations can use to build reputation (Breeze 2013: 178), however, the hypertextual character of Web-mediated business communication requires to take into account its multimodal nature, with

all affordances simultaneously contributing with semiotic resources into a single communicative act (Campagna *et al.*, 2012: 10).

Accordingly, this study investigates quantitatively and qualitatively a corpus of forty videos currently available on the web pages of five international energy-production companies (i.e., the Italian Enel, the British Shell, the Danish Ørsted, the Chinese SINOPEC, and the American EXXON Mobil). Evaluative language and storytelling strategies are used in the videos to establish the companies' ethical and cultural identity, and altogether, to build a corporate humane face. The research examines how discourse, and precisely the storytelling strategies, contribute to the multimodal communicative act that promotes and nurtures the corporate humane face. Accordingly, the analysis of the corpus takes a *multimodal perspective* to identify the semiotic modes contributing to meaning making (Kress, 2010), and a *qualitative critical-discourse-analysis perspective* (Fairclough, Mulderrring & Wodak, 2011) to establish how language contributes to shape corporate face. The fact that at least some of the videos inspected may be translated or dubbed will be also taken into account.

In some videos, testimonials such as the company's managers and experts present the company itself, their projects in favour of sustainability, or their technological achievements; they provide figures and make statistical projections. In spite of the apparently cold data provided, the multimodal communicative event seems to be emotionally loaded, contributing to present the human character of conducting business, capable of reinforcing the company's relationship with their stakeholders. These traits, which also provide for the humane face of the company, emerge more clearly in the videos where employees and common people, members of the community where the company is active, are called to talk about the company's local achievements, how this has contributed to their wellbeing and to the welfare of their community. These testimonials seem to use positively charged lexis in higher degree. Their accounts go beyond the promotion of a trustworthy company. In their contribution to the multimodal text, they seem to conform to the purposes of engagement and entertainment.

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Neutrality vs. personal involvement? An exploration of co-constructed affect in interpreter-mediated business negotiations

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Inspired by Kaisa Koskinen's (2020) approach to translation, this paper addresses relationship building in one videorecorded interpreter-mediated trade fair encounter between an Italian shoe manufacturer and an English-speaking South African customer from the vantage point of 'affect'. Defined as a "body-mind complex that directs a person towards a desired state of affairs", the theoretical construct involves a process of "thinking-feeling [that] transcends any objective/subjective dichotomy and [...] is fundamentally relational in nature" (*ibid.*, 13). As such, it seems particularly suitable to investigate the human(e) dimension of face-to-face talk in transactional settings, where goal-orientedness has traditionally been the primary focus of attention. While, over the last two decades, studies in dialogue interpreting (Merlini, 2020) have increasingly explored the tension between emotional detachment and empathic involvement in doctor-patient consultations (Merlini, 2015; Mapson & Major, 2021), with few exceptions (Takimoto, 2006; Karanasiou, 2017) the interpreter's contribution to the co-construction of rapport in cross-linguistic/cultural business interactions is still under-researched.

On the premise that neutrality is the affective stance required of interpreters in Western codes of professional ethics, the impact on the outcome of a business transaction of the primary participants' "sticky fear" (Koskinen, 2020, 95) lest the interpreter might ally with one client and betray the other's trust is far from negligible. Since, in the specific context under scrutiny, the professionally trained interpreter is also the Italian manufacturer's daughter, the interactional data are qualitatively analysed to find out whether and in what ways impartiality is nonetheless achieved. Findings highlight the interplay of multimodal resources through which all participants manage to create a relaxed and mirthful atmosphere, with the interpreter's verbal as well as physical involvement contributing to placing primary interlocutors on a footing of equality. The interdisciplinary focus of the paper stems from conjoining the insights yielded by three strands of research: the discourse of business negotiations (Ehlich & Wagner, 1995); the literature on non-verbal communication, from gestures (McNeill, 2016) to positioning in space; and affect theory as a productive framework that foregrounds the "performative" nature of embodied interpreting practice.

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