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**Abstract**

*The paper aims at analyzing the discourse of financial and economic crisis. Focusing on the latest scandals that have affected the automobile industry, the paper illustrates the results of research that investigates the discourse strategies used by corporations to manage events of crisis and meltdown. In particular, it delves into the discursive practices used in the 'Letters to the Shareholders' by CEOs and/or Chairmen, which are representative of governance genres (Fairclough 2003; Zanola 2010). The methodology adopted in the study is principally based on contributions from pragmatics and crisis communication, as well as critical discourse analysis and corpus linguistics. In particular, it draws upon Searle's (1976) direction of fit and Hearit's (2006) Theory of Apologia. An accurate analysis of the illocutionary force conveyed by speech acts and speech act sets demonstrates that the ultimate strategy of corporations to repair their image is not so much apologizing for their wrongdoings, as providing an apologia to disclaim responsibility for the damage they caused.*

**Key words:** corporate communication, apology, apologia, speech act theory, crisis communication theory

**1. Introduction**

Since the Great Depression of the 1920s, which can be considered as the first great financial crisis in the history of world economy, the global market has experienced other important dramatic events of economic and financial turmoil. These events range from financial crises, such as the subprime mortgage crisis in 2008 and Greek government-debt crisis in 2015, to environmental disasters, such as the Exxon Valdez oil spill in 1989 and the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, to scandals involving drug companies, e.g. GlaxoSmithKline in 2013 and Valeant in 2015, to accounting frauds, e.g. the Enron scandal in 2001 and Toshiba fraud in 2015. And the list goes on and on.

Companies from all industry sectors have been involved in some form of economic and/or financial crisis, which has jeopardized the life of the company itself. One recent scandal has concerned the Volkswagen Group. In September 2015, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) caught the

German automaker and accused them of selling cars with a defeat device in diesel engines that could cheat emissions tests in the US territory.

The scandal caused the resignation of the then VW CEO, Martin Winterkorn, and the appointment in his place of Matthias Mueller, who at the announcement vowed: 'My most urgent task is to win back trust for the Volkswagen Group by leaving no stone unturned and with maximum transparency.' Mueller's declaration is a typical example of expressions used by companies that, after a critical event, are concerned with repairing their reputation.

Scandals, such as that of VW, entail not only political, social, economic and environmental interventions, but also changes in discourse practices, to the extent that it has attracted interest from various areas of research, e.g. genre studies, corporate discourse analysis, pragmatics, rhetoric, corporate communication. In the area of corporate communication, scholars have directed their attention to the strategies adopted by the management of companies before, during and after a crisis (Coombs 2010: 19-24). Much emphasis has been placed on the crisis and post-crisis phases, as the flourishing of theories on crisis communication proves: Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs and Holladay 1996), Image restoration theory/image repair theory (Benoit 1995, 1997), Contingency Theory (Cameron et al. 2008), Apologia Theory (Hearit 2006) are the most relevant.

A major field of application of these theories is represented by the CEO's and Chairman's Letter to the Shareholders, which are part of the Corporation Annual Reports. In the crisis and post-crisis phases, managers tend to use various communicative strategies in order to achieve the ultimate goal of repairing the company's reputation, e.g. by denying, bolstering, differentiating or by scapegoating, attacking the accuser, apologizing, regretting, triggering compassion. Whatever the theoretical framework, all the strategies converge towards their ultimate goals: saving their public image, winning back trust and refashioning public opinion.

'Apology' is one of the strategies to which research on crisis communication has devoted much of its attention; it is used by managers to express their responsibility, mitigate their audience's anger and repair their reputation.

This paper reports on the VW's *Letter to the Shareholders*, delivered by the CEO Matthias Mueller and published in the 2015 Annual Report, this paper shows that 'apology' is often a surface intention, behind which another strategy hides, i.e. 'apologia'. To demonstrate this, the paper adopts a methodology, which combines Hearit's theory of 'apologia' with Searle's Speech Act Theory, in particular his 'fit for purpose' notion.

The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 provides a review of the main theories on Crisis Communication, with a particular focus on Hearit's theory of 'apologia'. Section 3 deals with research on 'apology' in the linguistic domain. Section 4 describes the methodology and Section 5 is about the case study of VW's *Letter to the Shareholders*. The paper concludes with some remarks for future research.

## **2. *Apology and Apologia in Corporate Crisis Communication***

The number of studies on Crisis Communication has grown significantly over the last three decades; any attempt at reviewing all the works produced on this subject would be frustrating. Nevertheless, some authors and their research stand out in this vast scenario. This section will briefly recap some of the most remarkable theories on Crisis Communication. To begin, it must be specified that crisis communication is a form of communication which may concern individuals as well as institutions and organizations. The paper deals with crisis communication as a sub-branch of corporate communication and part of crisis management (Coombs 2010: 51). Generally, crisis communication revolves around three theoretical indices: Benoit's rhetorical Theory of Image Restoration (1995), which later turned into image repair (Benoit 1997; Benoit and Pang 2005), Coombs's (2010) Situational Crisis Communication Theory or SCCT, Cameron, Pang, and Jin's Contingency Theory (2008). Considering the purpose of the present paper, a fourth theory must be added, i.e. Hearit's (2006) Apologia Theory.

In the *Handbook of Crisis Communication* (2010), Coombs identifies three stages in the process of crisis management: pre-crisis, crisis and post-crisis. Each phase is characterized by forms of communication with a different purpose: preventing the crisis; responding to the crisis and learning from the crisis. Considering the specific topic of this paper, we will focus on the crisis phase, which represents the most important moment in crisis management since the corporation's response to a scandal or a disaster affects the stakeholders' reactions and, consequently, the future of the company itself. It follows that this response must use some strategies. Following Sturges (1994), Coombs identifies three strategies to respond to a crisis: 'instructing information', 'adjusting information' and 'reputation repair'. Notwithstanding their importance, the first two are often overlooked, whereas academic researchers tend to focus their attention mainly on 'reputation repair'. This has been investigated following three research methods (Stacks 2002 in Coombs 2010: 30): 'informal', 'transition' and 'formal'. The difference between the three relies on the approach and the quantity and availability of data, which allow the researcher to make generalizations and predictions. In the informal research method, the approach is subjective and based on single case studies, whereby data cannot be collected in a systematic way. By contrast, the formal research utilizes an objective approach based on a systematic collection of data. The transition method is halfway between these two models.

To each of these research methods can be ascribed the various theories of crisis communication. The informal method uses the tools of rhetoric to analyze data and inspires the theories of 'corporate apologia' and 'reputation restoration'/'image repair'. The transition research method is content-based; it analyzes corporate and social media messages to study the effects of crisis communication strategies on the crisis situation. Researchers who adopt this method include Caillouet and Allen (1996), Huang (2006) and Holladay (2009). Finally, the formal research method is more systematic and allows the researcher to make generalizations and predictions from data. However, the

most significant difference is that it is audience-oriented, in the sense that it is more concerned with the stakeholders' reaction to crises. This method is typical of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs 2010) and Contingency Theory (Cancel et al. 1997, 2008) in Public Relations. Both theories are less based on rhetoric than on social sciences.

Notwithstanding these differences, these theories share some common aspects. To carry out their study, each has developed a set of strategies to analyze crisis in communication; more specifically, these strategies are intended to study corporate managers' decisions at the communicative level and the rhetorical and linguistic devices used to face the crisis. Some of these strategies are unique to each theory; some are common to two or more theories. Nonetheless, the different research methods seem to agree on one strategy, 'apology', which, in general, is used by individuals as well as organizations as a way of expressing their regret, forgiveness, remorse about some wrongdoing they have been accused of. It is interesting to emphasize the fact that apology implies some action which goes beyond the meaning conveyed by the verb 'apologize', as we will see below.

## 2.1 Hearit's Theory of Apologia

*The SAGE Encyclopedia of Corporate Reputation* groups the theories of crisis communication described above under the entry 'Apologia theory' or 'Theory of apologies'. In fact, 'apologia' and 'apology' must be considered as distinct terms, as Hearit (2006) warns. The origins of apology theories can be traced back in Ware and Linkugel's (1973) rhetorical theory of apology carried out on political speeches and courtroom arguments but it was Ryan (1982) who first distinguished between the two terms, as he considered 'apology' as one facet of speeches 'apologia', the other facet being 'defense'. However, it was with Hearit (2006) that 'apologia' assumed the status of a theory in the context of crisis communication. In *Crisis Management by Apology*, Hearit specifies that apologia 'defense' or 'speech in defense' and implies a counterattack. 'Apology', by contrast, implies a 'defenseless' expression of regret for some fault (Hearit 2006: 4).

Another point of interest in Hearit's (2006: 8) theory, which is consistent with the methodology adopted in this paper, is his tribute to pragmatics, in particular to Austin (1956), as a means to investigate 'how corporate apologists frame their communicative responses to criticism'.

The rise of corporate apologia can be traced back to the growing mistrust of institutions; the multiplication of media channels and the resulting increase in the specialization of terms of business reporting; the triumph of consumerism; the fear of an economic recession, after an economic bubble; the corporations' need to recoup their investments (19). In his book, Hearit identifies five prototypical stances of apologia: 'denial', 'counterattack', 'differentiation', 'apology', 'legal stance'. Of these, particular attention deserves the 'differentiation' stance, a.k.a. 'It's not our fault' stance, which fits to our paper.

Ware and Linkugel (1973: 278) identified 'differentiation' as a 'divisive' and 'transformative' strategy in apologetic speeches, since it contributes to the

construction of a new reality from the old one, thus causing different interpretations of facts by the audience.

‘Differentiation’ is the stance of those who cannot deny their guilt, therefore they use a differentiation strategy, i.e. organizations seek to distance themselves from their wrongdoing by attempting to redefine it, explain it, account for it, or justify it. Acknowledgment of guilt is generally accompanied by a strategy of corrective action, whereby although companies apologize for their wrongdoing, they put forward arguments to hedge their responsibilities (Hearit 1995).

In general, the accusations brought to corporations may result from accidents, product safety incidents, scandals and illegalities, and social irresponsibility. In the case of VW, it was found responsible of committing illegalities.

### **3. *Apology in Pragmatics***

As mentioned in the previous section, Hearit draws upon Austin’s pragmatic methodology to investigate the choices in terms of apologies made by individuals or organizations when they have to face guilt.

In his seminal paper *A Plea of Excuses*, Austin does not mention the terms ‘apology’/‘apologia’, but he uses the word ‘excuses’ in a sense very similar to Hearit’s ‘apologia’. Austin emphasizes the multifaceted meaning that the term ‘excuses’ may have, ‘plea’, ‘defense’ and ‘justification’, and the variety of actions that it can perform, depending on the situation. In this sense, it is classified as a performative act (Austin 1956: 1):

In general, the situation is one where someone is accused of having done something, or (if that will keep it any cleaner) where someone is said to have done something which is bad, wrong, inept, unwelcome, or in some other of the numerous possible ways untoward. Thereupon he, or someone on his behalf, will try to defend his conduct or to get him out of it.

Searle, following Austin, sheds light on the performativity of apologies in his Speech Act Theory. Before zooming in on Searle’s description of apology, it is important to introduce some basic concepts about his theory, which are functional to the study described in this paper. To start with, Searle’s (1976) adoption of ‘direction of fit’, which enables us to study the different relations between words and the world.

In his *A Classification of Illocutionary Acts*, Searle (1976: 2-7) uses twelve criteria to classify illocutionary acts:

- 1) Differences in the point (or purpose) of the (type of) act
- 2) Differences in the direction of fit between words and the world
- 3) Differences in expressed psychological states
- 4) Differences in the force or strength with which the illocutionary point is presented
- 5) Differences in the status or position of the speaker and hearer as these bear on the illocutionary force of the utterance
- 6) Differences in the way the utterance relates to the interests of the speaker and the hearer
- 7) Differences in relations to the rest of the discourse

- 8) Differences in propositional content that are determined by illocutionary force indicating devices
- 9) Differences between those acts that must always be speech acts, and those that can be, but need not be performed as speech acts
- 10) Differences between those acts that require extra-linguistic institutions for their performance and those that do not
- 11) Differences between those acts where the corresponding illocutionary verb has a performative use and those where it does not
- 12) Differences in the style of performance of the illocutionary act

Particular attention must be paid to the top three in the list: the ‘illocutionary point’ or ‘purpose’ of the act, its ‘direction of fit’ and ‘expressed psychological state’, aka ‘sincerity condition’. Before defining these, it must be specified that Searle urges not to confuse ‘speech acts’ with ‘speech verbs’, since, depending on the context, a speech verb can perform different speech acts. Vanderveken, in a chapter written in collaboration with MacQueen, provides a wealth of examples relevant to speech verbs that can have different illocutionary forces, depending on their contexts of use. ‘Swear’, which can perform either an assertive speech act, e.g. when someone swears that a proposition is true, or a commissive one, e.g. when someone swears to somebody else that they will do something. Conversely, different speech verbs can perform the same speech act as ‘state’ and ‘assert’, which perform the same illocutionary force (Vanderveken 1990: 167-8).

According to Searle (1976), the illocutionary act or ‘force’ (F) of a verb can be identified by means of the 12 criteria, namely by means of the ‘illocutionary point’, the ‘direction of fit’ and the ‘expressed psychological state’ (see Table 1).

As Table 1 shows, Searle suggests four directions of fit: words-to-world ↓, world-to-words ↑, null Ø and double ↑↓. The words-to-world direction of fit is characteristic of *assertive* speech acts; world-to-words is typical of ‘directive’ and ‘commissive’ speech acts; the double direction of fit is typical of *declarations*, whereas the null direction of fit characterizes ‘expressive’ speech acts.

To put it very simply, ‘direction of fit’ metaphorically ‘refers to the way in which the utterance relates to factors in the extralinguistic world’ (Trosborg 1997: 72). For example, our ‘beliefs’ are supposed to fit to the world, as when we assert something; whereas the world is supposed to fit our desires or our intentions, as when we want someone to do something or we commit to some future action.

By ‘illocutionary point’, Searle (1985: 3) means

The point or purpose of a type of illocution ... Illocutionary point is part of but not the same as illocutionary force. Thus, e.g., the illocutionary point of request is the same as that of commands: both are attempts to get hearers to do something. But the illocutionary forces are clearly different.

The performance of any illocutionary act with a propositional content involves the speaker’s expression of some ‘attitude, state, etc., to that propositional content. [...] The psychological state expressed in the performance of the illocutionary act is the *sincerity condition* of the act’ (Searle 1976: 4).

Illocutionary Act	Examples of Illocutionary verbs	Point or purpose of the act	Direction of fit	Psychological state
Assertive	Assert, deny, claim, affirm, state, certify, attest, etc.	To commit the speaker to something being the case, to the truth of the expressed proposition	Words to world ↓	Belief
Directive	Request, ask, instruct, demand, order, command	Attempts by the speaker to get the hearer to do something	World to words ↑	Want (or wish or desire)
Commissive	Commit, pledge, undertake, engage, promise	To commit the speaker to some future course of action	World to words ↑	Intention
Expressive	Approve, compliment, praise, congratulate, thank, apologize, greet, and welcome	To express the psychological state specified in the sincerity condition about a state of affairs specified in the propositional content	N/A: The truth of the expressed proposition is presupposed $\emptyset$	Several different variables
Declarative	Declare, renounce, disclaim, disown, resign, repudiate, disavow	Declarational	Both words to world and world to words $\downarrow\uparrow$	N/A

**Table 1.** Searle's (1996) Taxonomy of Illocutionary Acts as modified with Searle and Vanderveken (1985) and Vanderveken (2009)

In Searle's (1976) and Searle and Vanderveken's (1985) grouping of speech verbs by illocutionary acts, 'apologize' is classified as an expressive speech act (Table 1). As such, its direction of fit is unavailable, as the truth of the expressed proposition is presupposed; its illocutionary point for having done act A is to express the speaker's sorrow or regret for having done A (Searle and Vanderveken 1985: 121); its expressed psychological state is variable.

Searle's approach has been largely debated by scholars as it sheds light on new aspects of performative acts. One of these is the match (or mismatch) between the propositional content and the function or force of an illocutionary act, which can be represented as  $F(p)$ , where F stands for Force and (p) for propositional content. According to this formula, the same propositional content of an utterance can be expressed with different forces; likewise, different propositional contents can be expressed with the same force. It must be noted that the illocutionary force in the utterance can be expressed not only by means of illocutionary verbs but also by means of other 'illocutionary force

indicating devices' (IFIDs), i.e. linguistic devices such as word order, verb mood, tone. Although the approach has been often criticized and deserves much more investigation, IFIDs can nonetheless be helpful to recognize the real purpose and direction of fit of utterances in corporate discourse, in the sense that the point and direction of fit of a propositional content can vary in relation to the IFID as well as from culture to culture and from language to language. This will be shown in our case study, devoted to the speech act of apologizing.

In their study on apologies, Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) argue that apology can be offered by means of an explicit IFID and/or by means of an apology speech act set based on four strategies: an explanation of the cause which brought about the offence; an expression of the Speaker's responsibility for the offence, an offer of repair and a promise of forbearance.

Speech act sets are utterances in which the 'illocutionary acts' can be performed by means of various strategies, not only through IFIDs (Blum-Kulka et Olshtain 1984; Válková 2013). Speech act sets are 'chains of smaller units (discrete speech acts), which, if produced together, contribute in a specific way to a global scenario representing a "sequentially" emergent complete speech act' (Válková 2013: 44).

As Schiffrin (2005) has shown, in uttering a sentence, a speaker can express a propositional content (p), while leaving the illocutionary verb implicit, although (p) can be part of an illocutionary act. In such case, the illocutionary act is expressed through an assumed subordinator (i.e. an assumed illocutionary force followed by 'that', 'whether' and 'if') + the propositional content. For example, the proposition 'Mandy will have a drink' can be the (p) of different illocutionary acts and, as such, will have different illocutionary points, directions of fit and psychological states (Schiffrin 2005: 45):

- 'I **assert** that Mandy will have a drink.'
- 'I **order** that Mandy will have a drink.'
- 'I **promise** that I [Mandy] will have a drink.'
- 'I **ask** whether Mandy will have a drink.'

This strategic model represents the *fil rouge*, which binds Searle's pragmatics and communication theories as tools of investigation in the field of crisis communication. So far, corporate communication theories have mainly been concerned with apology as a major corporate strategy to win trust back and repair the company's reputation. The pragmatic analysis adopted in this paper will show that corporate messages are only apparently apologetic.

#### **4. The Letter to the Shareholders**

Letters to the Shareholders are statements or messages whereby the CEOs and/or the Chairmen of corporations address to their stakeholders. They are one of the major documents which make up the Annual Reports. Linguistically speaking, the *Letters* and the other documents included in the Annual Report, e.g. the *Financial Statements* and their *Notes*, can be viewed as genres that enact different communicative purposes in order to represent in a diverse, often conflicting way, the same reality.



The Annual Report's documents are generally classified in two categories: the 'management' and 'financial statements'. The latter are aimed to provide a true representation of the financial condition of the company. By contrast, the 'management narrative' includes strategic texts, such as the *Letter to the Shareholders*, that are intended to give a positive and healthy image of the company, even when it experiences adverse events. This tactic is known as the Pollyanna effect and is the main subject of many linguistic studies. Rutherford (2005) and Bhana (2009), for instance, have focused on the linguistic strategies used by CEOs and Chairmen to achieve the Pollyanna effect; in particular, they are concerned with the managers' use of language to manipulate corporate communication in order to provide a highly positive image of the company's financial conduct. This image can even be inconsistent, if not conflicting, with the company's real financial status.

Bhatia (2007) analyzes the Pollyanna effect through interdiscursivity; he studies how different semiotic resources, i.e. textual, semantic, socio-pragmatic, and generic resources, are enacted at different levels (Bhatia 2007). He takes the case of corporate disclosure genres, to study how different semiotic resources are used to subordinate the informational and reporting functions to the promotional one (Bhatia 2008).

Considering the hybrid nature of ARs, resulting from the variety of competencies involved, and of the mixing of genre systems, Zanola (2010) proposes an integral and integrated approach which might help study both the texts concerned with the financial figures, and those adopting a more narrative style.

Particular attention has been paid to the CEO letters. Notwithstanding the methodological differences between the various schools that have investigated the *Letters to the Shareholders*, most scholars seem to unanimously recognize their promotional status, whereas they disagree on the number of moves which, in general, characterizes its generic structure: moves may range from three (Garzone 2004), to five (Gillaerts 1996), to twelve (Nickerson and de Groot 2005). The instability in the format has been ascribed to cultural differences (de Groot 2008; Conaway and Wardrope 2010; Skorczynska and Giménez-Moreno 2016), or to historical facts, as when financial contingencies, environmental scandals or other negative events occur (Chakorn 2008).

In her inquiry of a corpus of Chairman's Messages delivered by Thai corporations that had experienced a crisis, Chakorn (2008) identifies an 8-move structure. Table 3 compares the management letters before and after the crisis. For the sake of simplicity, I will assume, here, a 4-move-structure for the *Letters* before the crisis, and an 8-move-structure, for the *Letters* after the crisis, as suggested by Chakorn. The two structures differ because of Moves 2, 3 and 7, which evidently refer to the negative events, while they share the other moves. Thus, the question is: is the 'negative performance' resulting from crisis foregrounded only by integrating the genre conventionally used for featuring 'positive performance' with extra apologizing moves?

More specifically, is, for instance, Move 4 concerned with simply providing a financial data summary in both pre- and post-crisis messages to the chairman or, rather, do we need to go beyond the mere investigation of the

communicative purpose conveyed by the move, as genre analysis generally claims?

<b><i>Before the crisis</i></b>		<b><i>After the crisis</i></b>
Giving an overview of the economy and/or the company	Move 1	Giving an overview of the economy and/or the company
	<b>Move 2</b>	<b>Admitting corporate negative effect(s) caused by the crisis</b>
	<b>Move 3</b>	<b>Redeeming corporate credentials to mitigate the said negative effect(s)</b>
Providing financial data summary	Move 4	Providing financial data summary
Giving information on the company's policies/measures/strategies/ actions (past, current, future)	Move 5	Giving information on the company's policies/measures/strategies/ actions (past, current, future)
Expressing thanks/ gratitude/ appreciation	Move 6	Expressing thanks/ gratitude/ appreciation
	<b>Move 7</b>	<b>Signaling anticipation for continued support</b>
Visualizing positive prospects	Move 8	Visualizing positive prospects

**Table 2.** Letters to the Shareholders *before* and *after* the crisis

Although genre-based approaches to the *Letters to the Shareholders* have proved helpful in the field of corporate discourse, they show some drawbacks because, as we will see in a moment, they are rather concerned with the generic structure and the purpose than with strategies. Therefore, we suggest a review of this approach adopting the notion of genre used in Discourse Analysis rather than in Genre Studies. The approach broadly relies on Searle's notion of direction of fit and Hearit's 'apologia' theory.

## **5. Methodology**

The methodology adopted in this study is based primarily on discourse analysis and pragmatics, and exploits the investigative tools provided by corpus linguistics as well as contributions from corporate crisis communication, in particular Hearit's 'apologia'.

As far as discourse analysis is concerned, the research draws upon CDA-based studies carried out in the domain of economic policies (Bhana 2009; Portero Muñoz 2011; Howcroft 2012). In particular, this paper makes use of Fairclough's (2003: 218) notions of 'interdiscursivity', i.e. 'how different genres, discourses or styles are articulated (or 'worked') together in the text', and of 'recontextualization', i.e. 'the appropriation of elements of one social practice within another, placing the former within the context of the latter, and transforming it in particular ways in the process' (Fairclough 2003: 32), which characterize genres of governance.

The analysis of interdiscursivity implies the study of the relationship between the external and internal levels of texts (Fairclough 2003: 65-86). The external level includes the relations between texts, which are seen as social events, language, i.e. the social structure, and orders of discourse, i.e. the networks of social practices. Orders of discourse consist of three elements, i.e. genres, discourses, and styles; the relations between these components are interdiscursive relations, in the sense that they can be 'mixed', that is to say articulated and textured in such way as to meet new social needs. Briefly, genres are ways of interacting, discourses are ways of representing the world, and styles are ways of being.

The concept of genre deserves special mention, since it is central to this paper. Much research on the *Letter to the Shareholders* has relied on the notion of genre 'as compris(ing) a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes' (Swales 1990: 58). This notion of genre, which was developed in Genre Studies, by Swales (1990) and Bhatia (1993), is in part criticized by Fairclough, since it tends to over-privilege purpose. In line with Habermas's distinction between 'communicative' and 'strategic' action, to Fairclough, genres are not only interactions oriented towards achieving (mutual) understanding – i.e. they are not only purpose-driven – but they are interactions oriented towards achieving results. In other words, they have a strategic character. Strategic and communicative interactions tend to 'occur in combination, in various ways' (Fairclough 2003: 72).

Likewise, as far as 'generic structure' is concerned, although textual 'staging' is evident in the *Letters to the Shareholder*, we must remember that texts and interactions are not organized in terms of a clear generic structure, but they tend to float between two contrasting forces: instability, variability, flexibility, on the one hand, and pressure towards social control, stabilization and ritualization, on the other. This tension is a result of the social transformations of new capitalism.

As a consequence of social changes, including for example economic and financial meltdowns, environmental scandals, etc., genres (as ways of interaction) and discourses (as ways of representation) can change too. The *Letter to the Shareholders* is a case in point since, although some conventional generic structure is recognizable, it tends to mix different genres and discourses and, indeed, to introduce new ones, as a result of some unexpected result. As we will see, the communicative purpose can remain unchanged; what changes is, in fact, the strategic action. This may be the result of their status as 'genres of governance', whose aim is to regulate and manage other social chaotic practices.

This paper tries to delve into these variations using Searle's speech act theory. The assumption is that a survey of the illocutionary acts performed in the *Letter* can shed light on the strategy enacted by the management. In particular, studying the 'illocutionary point', the 'direction of fit' and the 'expressed psychological state' conveyed by illocutionary acts can contribute to identifying differences, in terms of interaction and of representation of the world, between the *Letters* before and after the crisis. In brief, the paper aims at demonstrating that the illocutionary force performed by speech verbs of apology in the VW's Chairman Letter is not only expressive but also assertive.

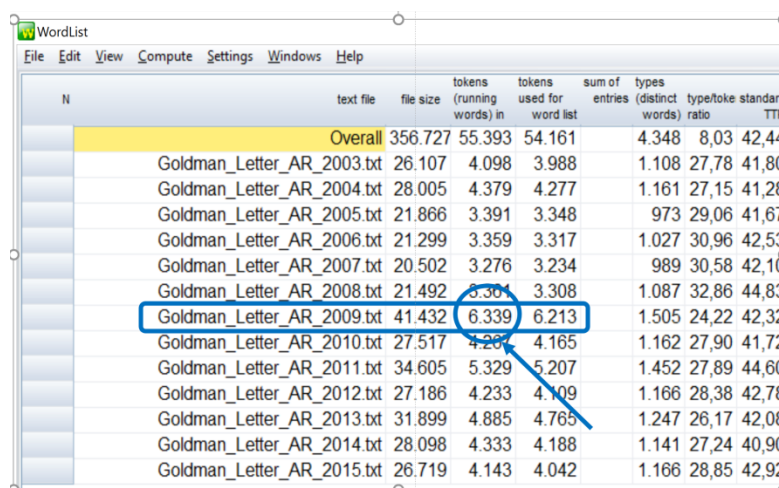
This implies a change in the ultimate strategy of the VW corporate communication.

## 6. Research and Results

The study was carried out on a corpus of Annual Reports issued by some corporations that had been accused of some wrongdoing: Goldman Sachs (2003-2015), AIG (2005-2010), CITI GROUP (2008-2010), BP (2008-2011), Toshiba (2010-2016), Volkswagen Group (2010-2016). Time spans and number of texts vary depending on the crisis event and the availability of ARs for each company. So, Goldman Sachs, AIG and Citi Group experienced the financial crisis in 2008; BP was involved in the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010; Toshiba faced its accounting scandal in 2015, the same year as Volkswagen was accused of Dieselgate.

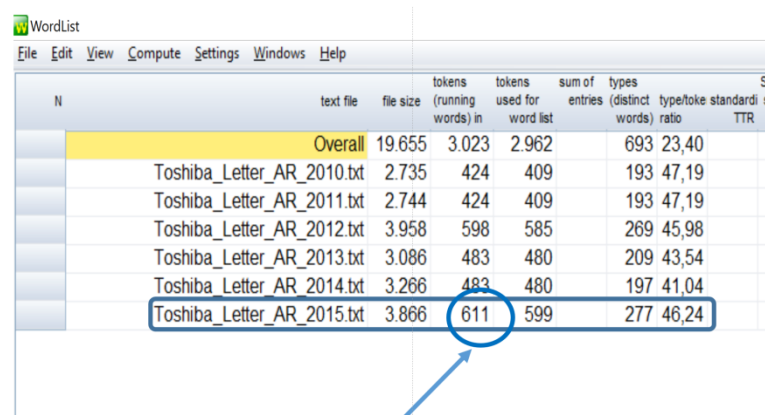
The corpus was organized in sub-corpora, one of them consisting of the companies' *Letters to the Shareholders*, delivered before, during and after the crisis. The aim was to investigate the different corporate strategies by focusing on the changes in the direction of fit occurring in speech acts and speech act sets. The sub-corpus of *Letters* was surveyed quantitatively and qualitatively using WordSmith Tools 7.0; in this paper we zoom in on the results of the analysis carried out on the *Letter to the Shareholders* delivered by the VW Chairman, Matthias Müller, in the 2015 VW Annual Report.

Interestingly, quantitative data showed an increase in running words in the Letter to the Shareholder delivered soon after the occurrence of the critical event that hit each company. By way of illustration, we report the number of tokens in the Letter to the Shareholders for Goldman Sachs 2003-2015 (Figure 1), Toshiba 2010-2015 (Figure 2) and Volkswagen 2010-2015 (Figure 3).



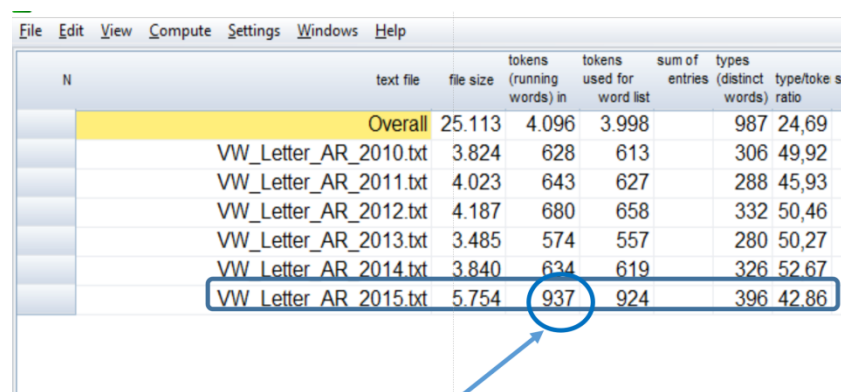
N	text file	file size	tokens (running words) in	tokens used for word list	sum of entries	types (distinct words)	type/token ratio	standard TTR
	Overall	356.727	55.393	54.161	4.348	8,03	42,44	
	Goldman_Letter_AR_2003.txt	26.107	4.098	3.988	1.108	27,78	41,80	
	Goldman_Letter_AR_2004.txt	28.005	4.379	4.277	1.161	27,15	41,28	
	Goldman_Letter_AR_2005.txt	21.866	3.391	3.348	973	29,06	41,67	
	Goldman_Letter_AR_2006.txt	21.299	3.359	3.317	1.027	30,96	42,53	
	Goldman_Letter_AR_2007.txt	20.502	3.276	3.234	989	30,58	42,10	
	Goldman_Letter_AR_2008.txt	21.492	3.304	3.308	1.087	32,86	44,83	
	Goldman_Letter_AR_2009.txt	41.432	6.339	6.213	1.505	24,22	42,32	
	Goldman_Letter_AR_2010.txt	27.517	4.267	4.165	1.162	27,90	41,72	
	Goldman_Letter_AR_2011.txt	34.605	5.329	5.207	1.452	27,89	44,60	
	Goldman_Letter_AR_2012.txt	27.186	4.233	4.109	1.166	28,38	42,78	
	Goldman_Letter_AR_2013.txt	31.899	4.885	4.765	1.247	26,17	42,08	
	Goldman_Letter_AR_2014.txt	28.098	4.333	4.188	1.141	27,24	40,90	
	Goldman_Letter_AR_2015.txt	26.719	4.143	4.042	1.166	28,85	42,92	

**Figure 1.** Goldman Sachs's Letter to the Shareholders – running words 2003-2015



N	text file	file size	tokens (running words) in	tokens used for word list	sum of entries (distinct words)	types (distinct words) ratio	standard deviation	TTR
	Overall	19.655	3.023	2.962	693	23,40		
	Toshiba_Letter_AR_2010.txt	2.735	424	409	193	47,19		
	Toshiba_Letter_AR_2011.txt	2.744	424	409	193	47,19		
	Toshiba_Letter_AR_2012.txt	3.958	598	585	269	45,98		
	Toshiba_Letter_AR_2013.txt	3.086	483	480	209	43,54		
	Toshiba_Letter_AR_2014.txt	3.266	483	480	197	41,04		
	Toshiba_Letter_AR_2015.txt	3.866	611	599	277	46,24		

**Figure 2.** Toshiba's Letter to the Shareholders – running words 2010-2015)



N	text file	file size	tokens (running words) in	tokens used for word list	sum of entries (distinct words)	types (distinct words) ratio	standard deviation	TTR
	Overall	25.113	4.096	3.998	987	24,69		
	VW_Letter_AR_2010.txt	3.824	628	613	306	49,92		
	VW_Letter_AR_2011.txt	4.023	643	627	288	45,93		
	VW_Letter_AR_2012.txt	4.187	680	658	332	50,46		
	VW_Letter_AR_2013.txt	3.485	574	557	280	50,27		
	VW_Letter_AR_2014.txt	3.840	634	619	326	52,67		
	VW_Letter_AR_2015.txt	5.754	937	924	396	42,86		

**Figure 3.** Volkswagen Letter to the Shareholders – running words 2010-2015

Intriguingly, the qualitative data shows significant differences as far as the speech acts enacted in the *Letters* are concerned. Using the list of illocutionary verbs provided by Searle and Vanderveken (1985) (Table 1 above), we focused on speech acts in their function as IFIDs ('illocutionary force intending devices') and as processes following *I* and *We* or *The Group*.

The verbs were then grouped by illocutionary acts as identified by Searle and Vanderveken (1985). On average, provisional findings showed a high occurrence in the Letters of 'assertive', 'directive', 'commissive' and 'expressive' speech acts, whereas, at least apparently, there was no evidence of 'declaratives'.

Considering the circumstances in which the *Letters* had been delivered and the companies' direct involvement in the wrongdoings, we also expected to find a high frequency of expressive speech acts conveying the meaning of apology, i.e. expressing 'sorrow or regret (sincerity condition) for something judged bad and that the speaker is responsible for (preparatory condition)' (Vanderveken 1990: 219).

In fact, only 9 occurrences of utterances were found in the corpus of Letters, that contained speech acts with the meaning of 'apology', including the verbs *apologize*, *regret* and *be sorry* (Figure 4).

GOLDMAN\_SACHS\_TXT+ AIG\_TEXT+ CITI\_TEXT+ BP\_TEXT+ CEO\_LETTERS\_files\_APOLOGIZE, REGRET, REGRETFULLY, REGRETS.cnc

N	Concordance	Set	Tag	Word #	Sent	Sent	Para	Para	Hea	Hea	Sect	Sect	File
1	of the Volkswagen Group I would like to apologize to you, our shareholders, that	APOLOGIZE		99	2	46'	0	10'			0	10'	VW_Letter_AR_2015.txt 20
2	you our annual report for FY2014, and apologize for the delay in its publication	APOLOGIZE		102	4	76'	0	17'			0	17'	Toshiba_Letter_AR_2015.txt 20
3	delay in its publication. Toshiba deeply regrets betraying the trust of our	REGRETS		111	5	10'	0	10'			0	10'	Toshiba_Letter_AR_2015.txt 20
4	with sincerest apologies that we have regretfully decided not to pay a	REGRETFULLY		261	11	10'	0	10'			0	10'	Toshiba_Letter_AR_2015.txt 20
5	and therefore were essential. I deeply regret that they also resulted in	REGRET		911	51	10'	0	10'			0	10'	CITI_LETTER_AR_2009.txt 20
6	to the financial services industry. Regrettably, the burden of rebalancing	REGRETTABLY		393	22	10'	0	10'			0	10'	CITI_LETTER_AR_2008.txt 20
1	sadness that 11 people died. We are deeply sorry for the grief felt by their families and			54	2	10'	0	10'			0	10'	BP_Group_c 2016/ago/31 2%

**Figure 4.** Occurrences of speech acts with the meaning of *apology*

As mentioned in Section 3, to Searle, *apologize* is an ‘expressive illocutionary act’, and as such, it has no direction of fit, since the expressed proposition is presupposed to be true. The point or purpose of the act is to express regret for some fault (Searle 1976: 12). The performance of the act relies on two preparatory conditions: the speaker must be responsible for the wrongdoing and the hearers must acknowledge the negativity of the speaker’s misdeed (Vanderveken 1990).

As Searle (1976: 12) observes, in English, all these facts are evident in the syntax of expressive verbs:

[they] will not take *that* clauses but require a gerundive nominalization transformation (or some other nominal). One cannot say:

*\*I apologize that I stepped on your toe;*

rather the correct English is,

*I apologize for stepping on your toe.*

Yet, the *Letter* delivered by Volkswagen reads as follows:

On behalf of the Volkswagen Group I would like to apologize to you, our shareholders, that the trust you placed in Volkswagen has been broken.

It uses the unusual pattern *apologize to sb that something has occurred*, whereas the favorite preposition for *apologize* is *for* in the patterns *apologize for* + noun phrase and *apologize for* + verb-ing<sup>1</sup>.

Considering that the original version was drafted in German, it can be hypothesized that the wrong syntax for *apologize* in the American English version is the result of a naive translation of the German expression ‘bitte ich Sie ... um Entschuldigung dafür’, in the original version:

Im Namen des Volkswagen Konzerns bitte ich Sie, unsere Aktionärinnen und Aktionäre, um Entschuldigung dafür, dass auch Ihr Vertrauen in Volkswagen enttäuscht wurde.

An English native speaker would say ‘we apologize for disappointing you’; in this case, the illocutionary act performed by *apologize* would be an ‘expressive’ one, the direction of fit would be null and the truth of the expressed proposition presupposed.

However, considering that the English version is intended for the American market, which was significantly affected by the defeat software in the diesel engine, we have to consider the text as it is in English, because this is the

version that is available online for the public. The text available online sounds like:

I ask you to excuse that your confidence in Volkswagen was disappointed.

The prevalent speech act is *ask*, which performs a ‘directive’ rather than an expressive illocutionary force. Therefore, the ‘direction of fit’ is not null but ‘world to words’. In terms of the illocutionary point, the Chairman is attempting to get the Shareholders to do something, i.e. to keep on trusting the company. This purpose is clearly forwarded in the conclusion of the letter:

A letter of this kind usually ends by asking shareholders for their trust. Now more than ever, that trust must be earned. And we are working on that. Which is why, this year, I am asking above all for your continued loyalty to Volkswagen in spite of the present pressures, and hope you remain at our side as we make the journey into the future.

In this case, too, we have a ‘world to word’ direction of fit. So, the purpose is to win the shareholders’ trust back.

What is, then, the global strategy adopted to achieve this goal? An answer to this question can be found elsewhere in the text. There are in fact other parts in the *Letter* in which the direction of fit is as ambiguous as in the example shown above. A case in point is Move 4 in the *Letter*, which is common to *Letters* before and after the crisis: ‘providing financial data summary’. The ‘direction of fit’ in this Move is supposed to be ‘words to world’ (↓), since the Chairman’s propositional content is expected to match the world. Considered in an interdiscursive perspective, this Move recontextualizes the same communicative purpose as the *financial statements* and the *Notes*. The illocutionary act is ‘assertive’.

As Move 4 is common both to the letter before the crisis and to the letter after the crisis, our expectation is that the communicative purpose is providing financial data summary in both. This is true for the letter before the crisis, but needs in-depth analysis in the letter after the crisis due to the presence of unusual acts for this move.

An intriguing aspect in Move 4 is represented by the same prepositional phrase, *without these special items*, which occurs twice:

without these special items, the operating result would have slightly exceeded the prior-year level  
Without the special items we would once again have been able to talk about a successful year overall.

Both propositions are examples of speech act sets. This is a case in which the illocutionary act is expressed through an assumed illocutionary force followed by *that* + the propositional content (p). We may hypothesize that the assumed subordinator for the acts above is *We claim that* as in:

(*We claim that*) *without these special items, the operating result would have slightly exceeded the prior-year level;*  
(*We claim that*) *without the special items we would once again have been able to talk about a successful year overall.*



Ergo, we may argue that the speech verb of the assumed subordinator is *claim*, that Searle and Vanderveken classify as an ‘assertive illocutionary act’. This has a ‘word-to-world’ direction of fit, i.e. the propositional content of the illocution fits an independently existing state of affairs in the world.

The expression *special items*, which is part of the prepositional phrase, is used by the Chairman to strategically name the VW’s wrongdoings; special items is an implicit reference to the negative effects produced by the diesel emissions. By renaming wrongdoings, both individuals and organizations somehow obey to the criterion of truthfulness, i.e. they use words that bear some resemblance to the reality of facts, while deflecting it. These words are not neutral since they are uttered with a specific goal in mind, i.e. persuading the addressees (Hearit 2006).

In the VW Chairman’s Letter to the Shareholders, Move 4 re-contextualizes the content of the *Notes to financial statements*, i.e. the assertive speech acts par excellence. In the *Notes*, the negativity of the ‘operating result’ is associated with the impact of the ‘special items’. In fact, data findings (Fig. 5) show that *special items* tends to collocate with the pattern *operating result*. In the *Notes to the financial statements*, the co-occurrence of *special items* with *operating result* affects the latter negatively, as the sampled concordances show (Fig. 6). In other words, the chairman is justifying the negative data concerning the operating outcome, ‘as resulting from external factors over which s/he has no (or very little) control’ (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain 1984: 208).

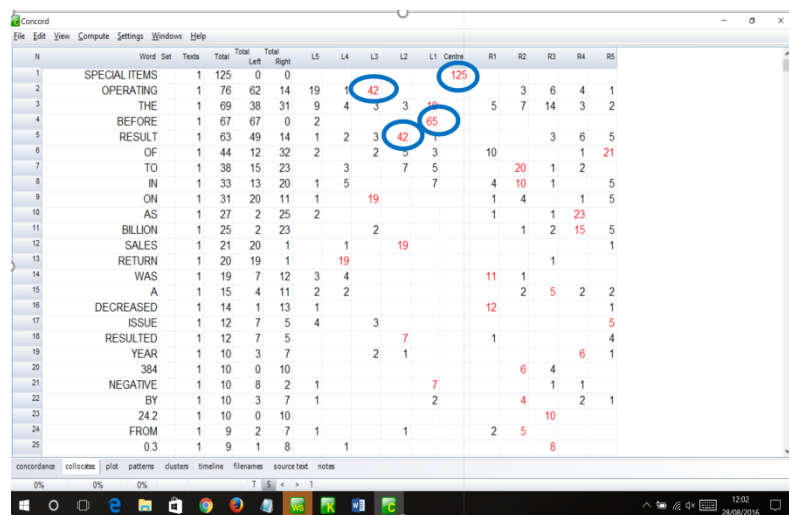


Figure 5. Collocates of special items

N	Concordance	Set	Tag	Word #
128	in the reporting period was up 10.9% on the prior-year figure. Operating result, by contrast, decreased 34.9% to €110	0	0	0 0% 0 0% 0 0% VW
129	in the reporting period was up 10.9% on the prior-year figure. Operating result, by contrast, decreased 34.9% to €110	0	0	0 0% 0 0% 0 0% VW
130	bonus, which is calculated on the basis of the average operating result, by up to 50% by applying individual	0	0	0 0% 0 0% 0 0% VW
131	by upfront expenditures for new products in particular. The operating result declined by €51 million to €-245 million. As	0	0	0 0% 0 0% 0 0% VW
132	expenses to sales revenue remained unchanged. The other operating result declined by €10.9 billion to €- 6.8 billion.	0	0	0 0% 0 0% 0 0% VW
133	expenses to sales revenue remained unchanged. The other operating result declined by €10.6 billion to €- 7.3 billion,	0	0	0 0% 0 0% 0 0% VW
134	Negative special items totaled €16.9 billion. As a result, the operating result declined sharply to €- 4.1 (12.7) billion; the	0	0	0 0% 0 0% 0 0% VW
135	segment. Gross profit rose by 5.6% to €5.4 billion. The operating result decreased to €0.7 (0.9) billion, while the	0	0	0 0% 0 0% 0 0% VW



**Figure 6.** Co-occurrence of special items and operating result

In the *Letter*, *special items* is pre-modified by *without* + determiner. This pattern is part of the strategy of the Chairman. In fact, a survey of the pattern *Without the/this/these \* would have* via Sketch Engine shows that whenever the prepositional phrase occurs with a unit which conveys a negative discourse prosody, it has the meaning of a defense of some failure, as the example shows.

There is an almost equally amusing alternative second possibility: the UK as a whole votes to STAY, but it is Scotland's votes to STAY that sway the balance in favour of STAY, and without these the little Englanders would have succeeded in achieving a LEAVE vote.

So, our question is now: Is Mr. Müller, the VW Chairman, offering his apologies or is he fashioning an apologia of the company's deeds? Is he expressing regret for the VW's wrongdoing or, rather, is he speaking in defense of the company?

In fact, the Chairman's message is fundamentally an apologia, i.e. a persuasive story that makes use of apologies in order to persuade his addressees by altering his accounting of facts. In a word, he is disclaiming the company's fault. Again, Searle's 'direction of fit' can support our conclusions.

In their taxonomy of illocutionary acts, Searle and Vanderveken (1985) classify DISCLAIM as a DECLARATIVE. This illocutionary act has a double direction of fit  $\downarrow\uparrow$ , whereby the speaker wants to bring about a change in the world by representing the world as so changed. By reporting the truth of the expressed proposition, the Chairman is in fact DISCLAIMING his Company's responsibility for the loss in the operating result. His message is a speech in defense of the company; it is a 'counteroffensive' against accusations of wrongdoings. Therefore, it is not simply 'apology', which implies expression of fault without defense; it is in fact 'apologia' (Hearit 2006). This is enacted in the VW Chairman's letter by means of two stances: a) 'differentiation', whereby the Chairman tries to hedge the company's guilt, as he does in Move 4; and, b) 'apology' itself, whereby the Chairman admits the company's wrongdoings and tries to repair their reputation, by promising not to do it again, as he does in Moves 2, 3, 7 and 8.

## 7. Conclusion

In compliance with the principles of Critical Discourse Analysis, this paper has shown the importance of a critical, multidisciplinary approach in order to investigate the relations between the multifarious discourse practices that are enacted in texts. To analyze the specific case of the *Letters to the Shareholders* delivered by corporations caught in some wrong, we have combined corporate communications theories and speech act theory while benefiting from corpus-based empirical approach and adopting a critical stance towards previous genre-oriented studies. Searle's 'direction of fit', in particular, is proven as an efficient criterion to investigate how language may be manipulated to persuade the audience. Although, at first sight, discourse manipulations may seem accidental, e.g. the result of some translation mismatches or

inappropriate use of language, a critical view show that they are indeed the outcome of conscious communicative strategies. As the study has shown, in corporate communications, individuals and organizations tend to 'strategically name' their wrongdoing in order to defend themselves from any accusation of guilt and repair their corporate image. To understand these strategies, we cannot restrict our research to explicit illocutionary force indicating devices, but delve deeper in order to catch the illocutionary point of the speech acts performed in a text. Therefore, an approach based on the study of speech act sets may prove a more sophisticated model. As far as apologies are concerned, we have seen that these consist not only of speech verbs, but also of other components, each of which could perform its own speech act. These components can shed light on the true communicative strategies enacted by the speaker. In 'genres of governance', such as the *Annual Reports*, which mix different genres, the study of how these components and their illocutionary force are re-contextualized may, in fact, give a boost to research on corporate communication.

## Notes

- 1 As the text was written for an American audience, I used the *Open American National Corpus*, written and oral, as a reference corpus.

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