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***“We are prepared to play our part...”*: A case study of the use of first-person references in e-releases from two oil companies**

Abstract

This study looks into the meta-pragmatics of e-releases by providing corpus-based data on variations in the use of first-person references in e-releases from two oil companies: BP and Repsol. Previous research on corporate press releases had approached this particular feature (Jacobs, 1999a, 1999b), but no further attempts have been made to look into their usage in press releases published on corporate websites of different organizations. Two corpora of nearly 100,000 tokens have been examined for first-person pronouns and determiners in order to identify their frequencies and their referents. The results reveal an interplay of multiple first-person voices that enhance the dialogic nature of e-releases and possibly their persuasive effectiveness. The variations detected show that BP uses first-person references far more frequently than Repsol, yet lower frequencies seem not to correlate with higher frequencies of third-person references. The range of referents identified is also broader for BP. The differences suggest distinct approaches to exploiting the communicative potential served by the use of first-person references, and thus different communication strategies applied by companies operating on a global scale but within the same industry.

Keywords: corporate e-release, first-person reference, meta-pragmatics

1. Introduction

This study builds upon the research on meta-pragmatics of corporate press releases (Jacobs, 1998, 1999a, 1999b, 2014) by providing corpus-based data on the use of first-person references. How these references are used in the news concerning organizations can reveal the intricacies of constructing their public image in the media. A close examination of first-person pronouns and determiners in press releases can further determine whose voices are allowed to be heard and how such multiple voices shape the perception of an organization in public settings. A comparison between two large oil companies, attempted in this study, also serves to identify variations in the use of these voices in an industry that makes continuous efforts to counterbalance the criticisms of public opinion.

From a broad perspective, this research draws upon the concept of person deixis and participant role in linguistic pragmatics (Goffman, 1976; Goodwin, 1979, 1981; Levinson, 1983, 1988; Jacobs, 1999a), as well as the idea of the dialogic nature of discourse (Bakhtin, 1935/81). This dialogism or the coordination between the writer and the reader in establishing an interpretation frame (Gumperz, 1982) is reflected in the contextual and discursive features of press releases, which are written in a manner that would facilitate the journalists' task of being retold in the media. Jacobs (1998, 1999a, 1999b, 2014) points out that the main meta-pragmatic feature of press releases, preformulation, is carried out by means of self-reference, that is, the references to the organization issuing a press release through third-person forms. First-person self-references are rare in press releases, as is the authorial presence expressed through 'I' or 'we'. The exceptions are quotations where first-person references are more frequent. Even though Jacobs (1999a, 1999b) described the use of quotations using a corpus of press releases, and in doing so, discussed first-person references, he did not provide a quantitative perspective allowing for the description of usage patterns which otherwise may remain undetected (Tognini Bonelli, 2010: 18)ⁱ. Most of the previous research on press releases tended to take a qualitative approach and examined selected texts from larger collections of this text type (e.g. Jacobs 1999a, McLaren & Gurău, 2005; Lassen, 2006; Catenaccio, 2007, 2008). Studies attempting to apply corpus linguistics methods and obtain quantitative data were fewer (Pander Maat, 2007; McLaren-Hankin, 2008; Author, 2016), and none of them analysed first-person references. The corpus linguistics approach adopted in this type of studies ensures that representative samples of language use are analysed in order to compute relevant data. This improved reliability complements the so-called

“horizontal-reading methodology of pragmatics”, consisting of “weighing and interpreting individual occurrences within their contextual environments” (Rühlemann, 2019: 7).

This research provides a comparative perspective on the use of first-person references, not existing in the literature as far as is known. The main research question in this study is whether companies operating within the same industry, in this case, oil extraction and petrol production, use the same pattern of first-person reference usage. British Petroleum and Repsol were selected for this study, as they are comparable in terms of the type and scope of their operations. The impact of the oil industry on countries’ economies and environment, as well as the need for transition to cleaner energies are issues of both global and local concern at the present time. How such companies communicate news concerning themselves to the public may reveal the strategies used to gain both social acceptance and investors’ interest.

The more specific research questions in this study are the following:

- What are the voices corresponding to the first-person personal pronouns, possessive pronouns and determiners in BP’s and Repsol’s e-releases?
- What role do they play in the construction of the public image of BP and Repsol?

This study will also address the press release participation framework (Jacobs, 1999a) and the concept of audience-directness with reference to so-called e-releases (Strobbe & Jacobs, 2015). The availability of e-releases to the general public may have implications for press release meta-pragmatics, especially in the case of first-person references, as they seem to reflect more clearly the dialogic nature of these texts. The present study, however, cannot provide a comparative perspective with traditional press releases, as the previous research did not report quantitative data on the use of first-person references, and therefore, it is impossible to estimate the impact of the availability of e-releases on the usage of this particular feature.

2. Discourse characteristics of press releases

Press releases, according to Jacobs (2014), are short written texts sent to the media by companies, government agencies, political parties or non-profit institutions, in order to provide the general public with news concerning these organizations. The

cited author places them on the borderline between media discourse and professional communication, as they have been approached from both perspectives. Press releases have also been considered as socially relevant (Jacobs, 2014), since they serve as a “media channel” (Lassen, 2006, p. 527), through which information is transmitted for a range of socially determined communicative objectives.

In the case of corporate press releases, the variety of communicative purposes for which they are written, such as making an announcement, building a positive image, expanding scientific knowledge, attracting investors or encouraging a particular political stance, led many scholars to regard them as a hybrid genre (e.g. Jacobs, 1999a, 1999b; McLaren & Gurău, 2005; Pander Maat, 2007; Catenaccio, 2008). However, the combination of marketing and news reporting characteristics in this type of text serves principally to build a positive image of the company. Indeed, the study of airline press releases by Pander Maat (2007) revealed that the use of promotional language is a pervasive feature of these texts.

The fact that press releases are an indirectly targeted, projected type of discourse (Jacobs, 1998, 1999a; McLaren-Hankin, 2007), in which “the journalists who receive press releases serve as mediators and the journalists’ own readership as absent ultimate destination” (Jacobs, 2014, p. 586), has an important influence on the language used. The use of self-reference, self-quotation and explicit semi-performatives has been noted as being very common meta-pragmatic features of these texts, which are also called preformulation resources (Jacobs, 1999a, 1999b). The widespread use of technology to disseminate corporate news has certainly influenced the textual form and the linguistic features of press releases (Catenaccio, 2007; Jacobs, 2014; Strobbe & Jacobs, 2015). The so-called ‘e-releases’, published on corporate websites and aimed both at journalists and the general public, combine the traditional preformulated characteristics of paper press releases with a more direct type of discourse featuring superlatives, direct reader address, imperatives and capitalised typography (Strobbe & Jacobs, 2005). The appearance of these features seem to reflect the transformation of e-releases into more promotional texts, used as marketing tools to reach clients with a clearly persuasive message (Catenaccio, 2007).

2.1. Self-reference in press releases

The person deixis (Levinson, 1983), or reference encoded in personal pronouns, is a complex phenomenon and has been the object of much linguistic research, especially with regard to academic (e.g. Harwood, 2005a, 2005b, 2006, 2007; Hyland, 2001, 2002) and political discourse (e.g. Fetzer, 2014; Fetzer & Bull, 2012; Kranert, 2017). Mülhäusler & Harré (1990) argued that practically any pronoun can be used for any person: for instance in reporting direct speech, 'I' may index not only the speaker, but also other participants. In communicative settings related to organizations, such as workplace meetings, various identities can be enacted depending on the context in which they are invoked (Fasulo & Zucchermaglio, 2002). 'You', which has a singular and plural reference in English, has an obvious addressee referent, but it can also be used in a generalised way (Whitley, 1978; O'Connor, 1994; Stirling & Manderson, 2011). 'We' is the only pronoun that can be inclusive or exclusive and can claim both authority and communality (Pennycook, 1994: 176). Its meaning is often vague, according to Biber et al. (1999: 329): it refers to the speaker/writer and the addressee (inclusive 'we'), or to the speaker/writer and some other person or persons associated with him/her (exclusive 'we'). In oral workplace contexts, this complexity increases, as multiple inclusive and exclusive 'we' identities can be indexed (Vaughan & Clancy, 2013): professional, departmental/subgroup, procedural and other. However, such complexity of reference can be resolved, according to Vaughan & Clancy (2013) by investigating the person deixis in context, that is, by examining small, domain-specific corpora reflecting particular communicative settings, as is the case of the present study.

When applied to the press release communicative context, the pragmatic framework of participation involving the person deixis is also complex. Levinson (1983) argued that in a speech event, the speaker is not always the same as the source of an utterance, the recipient can be distinct from the target, and the hearers or bystanders can be different from addressees or targets. The speaker or writer (also referred to as sender in Hymes (1971)), as the most probable referent of first-person reference in press releases, would correspond to the press officer. The source of utterance (addressor for Hymes) would be the organization itself or a member speaking on behalf of it. In applying Goffman's (1974, 1981) participation framework, consisting of animator, author and principal, Jacobs (1999a) attributed the role of the principal to the organization issuing a press release, and considered it as the institutional voice present in this type of text. The press officer in such a scheme would be the animator, or the person that actually writes the text, and the author would be mostly absent. However, he finds Scollon and Scollon's (1995) relationship between the actual writer

and reader on the one hand, and the implied writer and reader on the other, as the most appropriate participation framework for press releases. In this case, the press officer would act as the actual writer with the journalist being the actual reader of a press release. The media readers, in turn, would be implied readers of a press release, while the journalist would be its implied writer.

Jacobs (1998, 1999a, 1999b), and also Jacobs and Sleurs (2005) claimed that press releases are written following the principle of preformulation, which allows journalists to use them without many modifications in their newspaper reports. Jacobs (1999a) in particular found that, except for quotations, first-person self-references were notably few in his corpus of about 500 press releases issued by Belgian companies and Belgium-based international companies between 1994 and 1996. Self-referencing, that is referring to the company issuing a press release by its author, was carried out through the use of the third person, that is, the company's proper name, by means of third-person pro-forms (e.g. 'company' or 'organization'), the impersonal pronoun 'one', the passive or passive-like constructions, and through nominalizations. This type of self-referencing was predominant in Jacobs's corpus, where the authorial presence, usually signalled by 'I' or 'we', was practically disguised in favour of the organization and its institutionalised voice (Jacobs, 1999a, p. 86). The use of third-person self-reference is dictated, according to the author, by the audience- or reader-directedness of press releases: they are written for journalists, who will publish selected pieces of news in newspaper reports. In this sense, audience-directedness is also motivated by the dynamics of press release writing and publication in the media.

Occasionally, however, "frame breaks", as Jacobs (1999a, p. 100) calls them, take place. This happens when first-person pronouns, usually 'we', are unexpectedly introduced and combined with third-person references. This type of referential switch might be disorientating, according to the author, but may also be used strategically. In this sense, Jacobs (1999a) suggests that other types of discourse, such as sales letters or advertisements may be echoed in press releases for the purposes of enhancing their persuasiveness. Moreover, the occasional use of first-person references may serve other functions. 'We' referring to people in general may help create empathy with the immediate reader, that is the journalist, as well as with the ultimate newspaper reader. Jacobs (1999a, p. 115) interprets such inclusion of first-person references as "asserting common ground" or "stressing solidarity with the reader".

As can be seen, self-referencing in press releases is a complex phenomenon: third-person self-references very often have the first person as their referent, and first-person references frequently point to inclusive identities. The authorial voice as such is absent to favour the institutional voice, which for the purposes of preformulation takes the form of the neutral third-person reference.

2.2. Quotations in press releases

First-person references in Jacobs's study (1999a, p. 148) were used mainly in quotations, so-called "pseudo-direct speech" or "constructed quotations". The author refers here to cases where the original of a quotation could not be traced back and verified, and where there was indication that the press release writer made it up (e.g. the same quotation was attributed to different authors), or did not reproduce it literally. Apart from being constructed, quotations in press releases were defined as self-referential and reflexive (Jacobs, 1999a), since the writer of the press release and the quoted source, usually the company's chairman or an executive manager, represent one and the same institution. In addition to the reflexive type, a few non-reflexive quotations, that is, those introducing an external source, were also found by Jacobs (1999a). Finally, the "mixed forms" of quotations (Jacobs, 1999a, p. 153) expressed the views of co-operating organizations, and therefore, sounded very much like reflexive self-quotations.

In Jacobs's view (1999a), the direct speech introduced in press releases, which he considers not genuine or real, plays a preformulating role, exactly in the same way as third-person self-reference does. Press release writers shift their perspective to that of journalists by adopting their point of view and facilitating the incorporation of the news in newspaper reports. What is more, pseudo-direct speech may suggest and reinforce a specific interpretation of the news. According to the author (Jacobs, 1999a, p. 176), "press releases are *double-voiced*: the reporter can simply penetrate inside the other's words because they happen to be his or her own", and in this way can encourage a particular reading of the news.

In Jacobs's corpus, quotations were sometimes incorporated without quotation marks or any other type of signalling (Fairclough, 1988), resulting in the author's narration absorbing someone else's words. Jacobs (1999a) highlights that these cases, denominated as dissemination, together with self-quotations reveal that the

separation between quoted words and the author's narration is at times inconsistent and inexistent, yet quotations in general are visible and are meant to play a range of different functions, such as dramatic, distancing, reliability and attitude functions. Regarding the dramatic function, quotations render press release livelier and in this way facilitate the retention of information. As they include many first-person references, they help build a more personalized view of an organization and picture its active role. The distancing function of quotations helps enhance the objectivity of the news reported. Even though pseudo-speech is the product of the writer's creativity, it does reflect facts, and in this sense provides press releases with the necessary reliability. Quotations also allow the writer to position him/herself towards the reported news in a positive way: the opinions expressed by authoritative and expert voices are used as evidence to support the writer's view.

Apart from Jacobs's research on self-reference, there were no other attempts at a more thorough and systematic study of first-person references. This research remedies the lack of such attempts and examines the corpora representing e-releases from two oil companies.

3. Corpora and method of analysis

Two corpora of a similar size were compiled for this study. The texts were found and downloaded from the companies' main webpages: <https://www.bp.com/> and <https://www.repsol.com/en/index.cshtml>. In the case of BP, press releases are published in the 'Media' section, where they can be easily searched for and then downloaded. Repsol's global webpage includes English-language press releases in the 'Press room' section with a similar search and download facility as BP's website. English versions of Repsol's press releases are mostly translations from Spanish, but there are also texts originally written in English if they are related to the company's activities in the English speaking countries, according to the Communication Division at Repsol. In this corpus, between 30 and 40% of the texts were English versions of Spanish texts. Two reasons related to the comparability of the corpora motivated the decision to include these texts for the present study. The first and main reason is that the press releases published in English on Repsol's webpage aim at a global audience, in the same way as BP's press releases do. In this sense, the two corpora are comparable in terms of their intended readership, the thematic scope, as well as the communicative context. The second reason relates to

the differences in the use of pronominal subjects in English and in Spanish. The use of pronominal subjects in Spanish is a complex phenomenon as speakers and writers can drop or use them depending on the context (Aijón-Oliva & Serrano, 2010; Luján, 1999; Serrano & Aijón-Oliva, 2010). Pronominal subjects in formal written English, as is the case of press releases are never dropped, and therefore, in the English versions of Repsol's texts, *we* and *I* are added in case of being dropped, as in the examples below:

Estamos muy orgullosos de formar parte de este equipo y renovar una alianza que ha dado tantos frutos, en el ámbito deportivo y en el tecnológico. Contamos con dos pilotos excepcionales, Marc Márquez y Dani Pedrosa, que representan a la perfección los valores de Repsol, como el trabajo en equipo y el espíritu de superación. (7/12/16)

We are very proud to be part of this team and to renew an alliance that has borne so much fruit in the fields of sports and technology. We have two exceptional riders in Marc Marquez and Dani Pedrosa, who perfectly represent Repsol's values such as teamwork and the spirit of improvement. (7/12/16)

In other words, as opposed to the Spanish versions, the English versions of Repsol's press releases provide a common ground for comparison with BP's press releases without influencing the results of the present research.

As Table 1 shows, the two corpora include the same number of texts (110) and are similar in size (nearly 100,000 tokens). The average number of tokens per text is also similar.

Corpus	Tokens	Texts	Tokens/text
BP	94,876	110	863
Repsol	96,093	110	874

Table 1. BP and Repsol corpora

The two corpora cover the same period of time from 2010 to 2017 with a balanced (from 12 to 15) number of texts per year. The texts were selected to cover the broadest possible range of topics, reported over those years, such as oil field discoveries, expansion of operations, mergers and acquisitions, financial results, corporate social responsibility, and human resources management. Both BP and Repsol experienced dramatic reversals in the period covered by the corpus. BP suffered the Deepwater Horizon spill in the Gulf of Mexico in April 2010, while Cristina Kirchner's government expropriated Repsol's Argentinian subsidiary, YPF in May 2012. The references to these events and their consequences are balanced in the

two corpora with about 30 cases each. Therefore, in this sense, the corpora are also comparable.

The corpora were electronically queried for the first-person references, that is, personal pronouns (I, we), possessive determiners (my, our), possessive pronouns (mine, ours), and reflexive pronouns (myself, ourselves). After obtaining the frequency data, the identified instances were divided into those found in quotations and others used in the text without any anticipation or signalling, in which case they were denominated as 'direct uses'. In the following step, the quotations were grouped according to their authorship, for instance, if it was a company member or someone from outside who said the words quoted. Finally, all of the referents identified were further classified.

Person deixis is a complex system that often makes language data analysis highly problematic, especially in the case of conversational discourse. In this sense, written formal discourse generally shows a lower degree of difficulty. In both cases, however, the identification of first-person referents can be assisted by a close examination of their context of use in small specific-domain corpora (Vaughan & Clancy, 2013). Regarding the corpora used in this study, 'we' might refer to one of the companies under study, to other companies but with some kind of relationship with BP or Repsol, or to the oil industry in general (exclusive 'we'). In addition, 'we' could also include the writer and the reader, or refer to people in general (inclusive 'we'). Similarly, 'I' could refer to BP's or Repsol's chief executive, but also to a public figure from a different field. All these multiple voices were identified and quantified in order to determine their patterns of use in the two corpora and to evaluate their variations.

4. Discussion of results

This section will first look into the frequency data of first-person references identified in the two corpora. After the discussion of the first-person plural references in the BP corpus, an analysis of this type of reference will be conducted for the Repsol corpus. The final sub-section will approach the variations in the use of first-person singular references in both corpora.

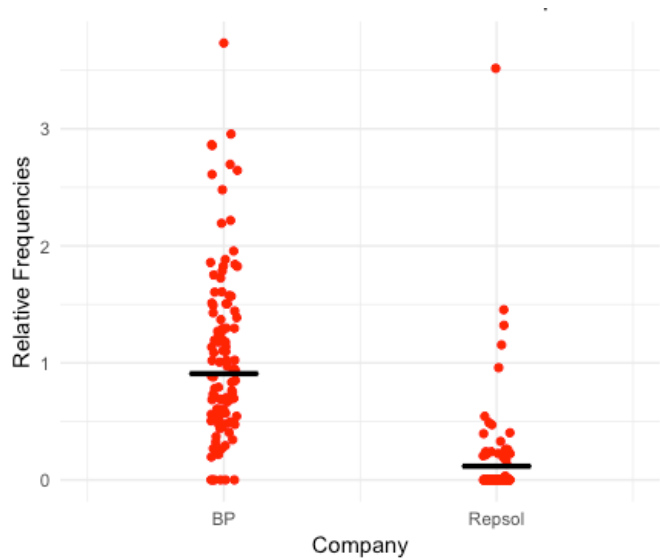
4.1. Frequencies of first-person references in the BP and Repsol corpora

Table 2 shows the frequencies of the first-person pronouns and determiners identified in the two corpora. The total frequencies of the items studied differ remarkably in the two corpora: 0.908 occurrences per 100 words in the BP corpus and 0.117 occurrences per 100 words in the Repsol corpus. This means that BP press officers use first-person personal pronouns and determiners nearly seven times more often than their colleagues in Repsol, which is a notable and intriguing finding. The frequencies of individual items (seven in each corpus) also vary in a significant way. The most considerable difference can be observed for 'we', which registered 0.411 uses per 100 words in the BP corpus: nine times more often than in the Repsol corpus (0.046). Similar variations can be noted for 'our' (0.404 in the BP corpus and 0.034 in the Repsol corpus), and to a lesser degree for 'us' (0.041 and 0.016 respectively) and 'I' (0.039 and 0.017 respectively).

Pronoun/determiner	BP	per 100 words	Repsol	per 100 words
I	37	0.039	16	0.017
my	3	0.003	3	0.003
me	6	0.006	-	-
myself	-	-	1	0.001
we	390	0.411	44	0.046
our	383	0.404	33	0.034
us	39	0.041	15	0.016
ourselves	2	0.002	1	0.001
total	861	0.908	112	0.117

Table 2. Normalized frequencies of first-person references in the BP and Repsol corpora

Graph 1 shows the categorical scatterplot of first-person references in each corpus. Red dots represent the relative frequency of every reference identified in each text of the two corpora, while the horizontal black lines indicate the total relative frequency in the corpus per 100 words.

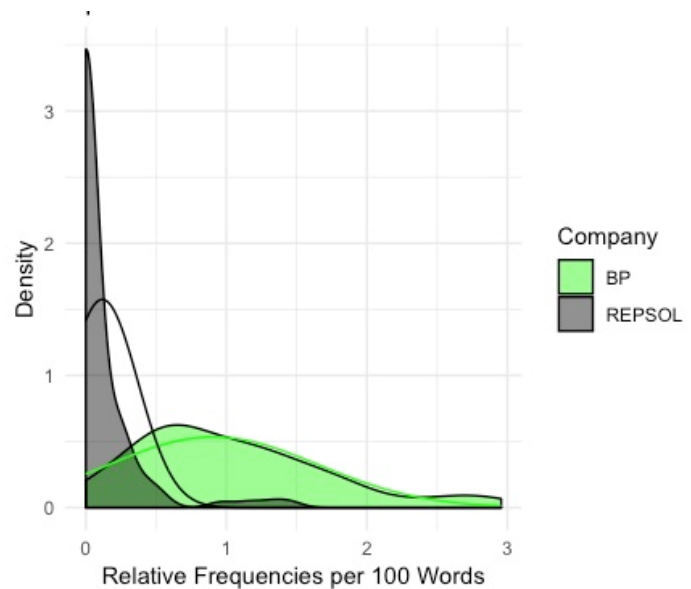


Graph 1. Distribution of relative frequencies per 100 words of first-person references in the BP and Repsol corpora

As can be seen in Graph 1, the frequencies of the first-person references in the BP corpus are more evenly distributed than in the Repsol corpus. This data also reveals that many of Repsol's press releases did not use any first-person references, while one of them registered a particularly frequent use. As will be pointed out later, this particular text includes statements made by Repsol's MotoGP riders about an upcoming race. The press release in question was not excluded from the corpus in the statistical testing section, nor was a similar case in the BP corpus (see the top left of the graph for BP). The texts for the corpora were chosen randomly and the data reveals that bursts of first-person reference use exist in the two corpora, and so should be considered for the study. However, this observation was excluded when generating Graph 2; the logic for this is stated further below.

The frequency data reported here has been tested for its statistical significance. As for p-value testing, a standard Welch two-sample t-test for a difference of means resulted in a t-value of $t = 12.914$ with degrees of freedom $\nu = 133.52$, yielding an extremely low p-value of $p < 2.2 \times 10^{-16}$. This extremely low p-value might be an indication of extreme non-normality in the data. As can be seen in Graph 2, the distribution of the relative frequency of the first-person references in the BP corpus could be approximated via Gaussian distribution, but the same cannot be said about the Repsol data. Graph 2 shows the empirical smoothed distribution (shaded) versus the theoretical Gaussian distribution with the same mean and variance as the sample. It can be observed that for BP, the empirical is close to the Gaussian, but for Repsol not so much. If we included the extreme observation for the Repsol data, we would

see that the empirical distribution is much more skewed and further away from the Gaussian. In fact, this data point lies 8.22 standard deviations away from the mean, an observation extremely unlikely in a sample of $n = 110$ observations drawn from the Gaussian with these sampled parameters.



Graph 2. Density distribution of empirical relative frequencies of first-person references in the BP and Repsol (shaded) corpora versus Gaussian distributions with same mean and variance.

This particular finding was the motivation for a non-parametric Wilcoxon rank-sum test, which does not require the assumption of normality (with a continuity correction in this case). The alternative hypothesis is that the location shift for the distributions is not zero. That is, there is no difference in the location of the means of the distributions, or no difference in the relative absolute frequencies of first-person pronouns in the BP and Repsol corpora. The Wilcoxon test statistic yielded $W = 11\ 106$, with the again extremely low p-value of $p < 2.2 \times 10^{-16}$. Therefore, the null hypothesis that the relative frequency of the first-person references is the same in both corpora can be confidently rejected in favour of the alternative hypothesis that the relative frequencies differ. The data reported clearly shows that the relative frequency is higher in the BP corpus.

The frequency data unveils clear differences in the use of first-person references. BP writers use them far more frequently and apparently, in a more systematic way, with nearly one use every 100 words and in most of the texts in the corpus. In Repsol, the usage pattern is clearly different and may suggest that its press officers [use](#) third-

person references instead, in a classical way of formulating self-reference (Jacobs, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c; Sleurs & Jacobs, 2005).

However, a simple query for the companies' names in the corpora revealed that the occurrences of "British Petroleum" and "BP" were even slightly higher in its corpus (1,698) than "Repsol" in its corresponding corpus (1,553), with average frequencies of 1.790 and 1.616 per 100 words respectively. Furthermore, another simple query for "company" produced different results with 319 occurrences in the BP corpus and 851 in the Repsol corpus, and average frequencies of 0.336 and 0.886 respectively. It should be noted that for "company", due to the scope of this study, the references to other companies were not filtered out. In spite of that, this brief look at the usage of some of the third-person references in the corpora show that in the BP corpus both first-person and third-person references are more frequent than in the Repsol corpus, and that fewer first-person references in the latter do not correlate with more frequent third-person references.

4.2. First-person plural references in the BP corpus

This sub-section will discuss the use of first-person plural pronouns and determiners ('we', 'us', 'our', 'ourselves') in the BP corpus, while the following sub-section will do the same for the Repsol corpus. The data in Table 3 shows that only a small proportion of these references (namely 6.3%) were used directly in the text, denominated as 'direct use', with all the remaining occurrences found in quotations. This finding confirms Jacobs's (1999a) conclusion about his data, stating the practical absence of first-person self-references (quotations excepted) in favour of third-person self-references.

Table 3 also includes the type of referent identified. As can be seen, five different referents were detected for the items studied: BP, other organizations, BP and other organizations, energy industry, and finally, people in general. The data also reveals that the referent distribution per pronoun and determiner is not uniform: 'we' and 'our' registered five referents, 'us' registered three referents, and 'ourselves', only two. This unequal distribution seems to correlate with the usage frequency of the pronouns and determiners under study (see Table 2): the number of referents increases with the rise in the frequency of the items analysed.

referent	insertion	we		us		our		ourselves	
			%		%		%		%
BP	quotation	274	70.62	28	71.8	251	65.5	2	100
	direct use	4	1.03	-	-	43	11.2	-	-
total BP		278	71.65	28	71.8	294	76.7	2	100
other organizations	quotation	57	14.69	7	17.9	32	8.3	-	-
energy industry	quotation	43	11.08	-	-	33	8.6	-	-
people	quotation	9	2.33	4	10.3	18	4.7	-	-
	direct use	-	-	-	-	4	1.04		
BP and other organizations	quotation	1	0.26	-	-	2	0.66	-	-
total		388	100	39	100	383	100	2	100

Table 3. First-person plural references in the BP corpus: number of tokens and percentages

BP was the main referent for all the pronouns and determiners: 71.65% of uses for ‘we’, 71.8% for ‘us’, 76.7% for ‘our’ and 100% for ‘ourselves’. It is clear from the data that first-person plural references to the company are systematic and widespread in BP press releases. This type of the company’s voice was included mostly in quotations and was transmitted through the chairperson or the executive directors, who spoke on behalf of the organizational community in order to convey collective views and feelings. According to Jacobs’s (1999a) standpoint on pseudo-speech and constructed quotations, the use of first-person plural references would be the result of the press officer’s creative efforts rather than the faithful reproduction of someone’s original statement. The company’s voice transmitted as a community’s voice certainly humanizes an organization’s image. First-person references as a rhetorical choice are extraordinarily relevant for the public discourse of organizations whose industrial activities produce compromising effects. A frequent and systematic inclusion of quotations, and within them, of first first-person plural references, leads to viewing a press release as a container for first-person narration, which turns out to be particularly useful in the case of publicly available e-releases. The possibility of using the company’s collective voice to tell a successful story reflects not only the dialogic nature of this type of discourse, but also how the delivery of highly persuasive contents is rendered to be pragmatically effective.

‘Direct uses’ or “frame breaks” (Jacobs, 1999a) happen when the first-person references are inserted outside quotations. ‘Our’ was frequently used in this way (11.2% as compared to 1.03% for ‘we’) in the final section of the press release, called ‘Notes to editors’ (example 1), but also in the body of press releases (example 2). The

sentence in example 1, even though addressed to editors, could also be intended for anyone interested in the news, as the references to social media suggest.

- (1) Note to editors: The BP Energy Outlook 2030 is available online at www.bp.com/Energyoutlook2030. **We** will be live tweeting the presentation of the report from **our** Twitter handle: http://www.twitter.com/BP_America. (17/01/12)
- (2) BP Target Neutral will calculate the amount of carbon from each journey and offset the emissions by investing in low carbon development projects across the globe. Working with **our** partners Forestry Commission Scotland, Woodland Trust Scotland and the Commonwealth Woods, one of the legacy projects of the Games, the initiative will also see a tree donated for each journey registered. (15/05/14)

The direct uses of the first-person plural references are somehow confusing according to Jacobs (1999a), especially when the reader is continually exposed to such references in quotations. If not considered as errors, but as intended uses, they could point to occasional authorial presence, which is meant to merge with the collective voice of the company. In this way, the author is only partially and occasionally present, and practically absent, as he or she blends his or her voice with that of the company. The direct uses of the first-person plural references might serve to build the author's own credibility as well as to enhance the reliability of the information published in a press release.

The second most frequent referent for first-person plural references is 'other organizations' (17.9% for 'us', 14.69% for 'we' and 8.3% for 'our'), with all the uses detected in quotations. Examples 3 to 5 mention co-operating organizations, such as Baota Chemical Fibre Co., which signed an agreement to license BP's latest PTA technology, the London Organising Committee of the Olympic Games running a two-year personal development scheme supported by BP, and the University of Manchester involved in a joint research project.

- (3) Mr. Gao Guozheng, Chairman of Ningxia Baota Chemical Fibre Co., Ltd. and Chief Executive of Baota Petrochemical Group, Ningxia Region said: "This investment is highly strategic for **us**, fulfilling the local requirements for PTA at the lowest possible cost and contributing to the economic development in Ningxia region.(...)". (14/09/15)
- (4) Seb Coe, Chair of London 2012, said: "As part of our original bid for London 2012, **we** made a commitment to deliver a programme that would engage and inspire young people. It is therefore with deep gratification that **we** see these young people graduate from the Young Leaders Programme today. **We** are proud to say that the volunteers will play a pivotal role in making London 2012 a great Games. (...)". (10/4/12)
- (5) "This further investment by BP significantly advances **our** long standing relationship with the company across a wide range of engineering and management programmes" said Professor Colin Bailey, Dean of the Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences at Manchester. (9/02/10)

Other organizations' voices play a significant role in the construction of the company's public image. They are not only first-hand testimonies of BP's favourable impact on other organizations, but also provide an outsider's perspective, which endorses the company's

commitment with a range of socio-economic agents. These external voices combining with the company's own voice seem to broaden BP's community, as they incorporate multiple identities corresponding to co-operating partners.

The energy industry is another notable referent for first-person plural pronouns and determiners, registering 11.08% for 'we' and 8.6% for 'our'. BP is depicted as one of the leading members of the energy industry, as can be seen in the fragment (example 6) of a letter from oil and gas majors (BG Group plc, BP plc, Eni S.p.A., Royal Dutch Shell plc, Statoil ASA and Total SA), making a call for carbon pricing.

- (6) As the chief executives write: "**Our** industry faces a challenge: **we** need to meet greater energy demand with less CO₂. We are ready to meet that challenge and **we** are prepared to play **our** part. (...):" (1/06/15)

On fewer occasions, the first-person plural pronouns and determiners referred to 'all people' or 'BP and other organizations'. 'All people' (inclusive 'we') was identified both in quotations and in direct uses (see example 7). In the latter case, all the instances were found in Notes to Editors, as was the case of first-person plural references corresponding to BP.

- (7) Welcoming over 3 million visitors a year, the Museum aims to make sense of the science that shapes **our** lives, inspiring visitors with iconic objects, award-winning exhibitions and incredible stories of scientific achievement. (21/5/15)

Finally, 'BP and other organizations' as the referent for 'our' was used with reference to BP establishing a strong relationship or a joint project with another company (example 8).

- (8) Bob Dudley, BP group chief executive said: "(...) At the same time, we look forward to continuing our work with Rosneft in **our** Sakhalin joint venture, running **our** new joint German refining business, and considering other future project." (17/5/11)

The data reported here shows multiple voices corresponding to first-person plural references in the BP corpus. Most of them were found in quotations referring to the company itself. Other referents identified were incorporated in BP press releases to strengthen its role as a leader in the energy industry, as an attractive business partner and investor, and finally, as a generous benefactor to a broad range of entities and organizations. The multiplicity of the first-person plural voices, including all other companies from the energy industry (exclusive 'we') as well as people in general (inclusive 'we'), allows the press release writers to present BP as an intrinsic and necessary part of society, and in this way render news reports more convincing and appealing to investors, shareholders and the public in general.

4.3. First-person plural references in the Repsol corpus

This section focuses on first-person plural references in the Repsol corpus. As has been previously shown (Table 2), first-person plural references were remarkably less frequent in the Repsol corpus in comparison to the BP corpus. However, they followed a very similar pattern of use in terms of the percentages per pronoun and determiner. The main referent identified was the company itself with percentages that strongly resemble those of the BP corpus: 70.46% (71.65% in BP) for ‘we; 73.4% (71.8% in BP) for ‘us; 78.8% (76.7% in BP) for ‘our’; and, 100% for ‘ourselves’.

referent	insertion	we		us		our		ourselves	
			%		%		%		%
Repsol	quotation	25	56.82	11	73.4	25	75.8	1	100
	direct use	6	13.64	-	-	1	3	-	-
total Repsol		31	70.46	11	73.4	26	78.8	1	100
other organizations	quotation	12	27.27	2	13.3	6	18.2	-	-
people	direct use	1	2.27	2	13.3	1	3	-	-
total		44	100	15	100	33	100	1	100

Table 4. First-person plural references in the Repsol corpus: number of tokens and percentages

‘Our’, as used outside quotations was relatively frequent in the BP corpus, especially in the Notes to Editors. In the Repsol corpus, however, such a case was only found in the lead of one press release. Example 9 illustrates this particular use, also showing the combination of the direct ‘our’, at the very beginning of the lead, and a number of third-person references within the same sentence of the lead and in the rest of them. The third-person references include not only the name of the company, which was repeated three times, but also “company of the year” and “a more international company”, all of them serving to attract the reader’s attention. Surprisingly in this example, ‘our’ was not used in the quotation, which appears at the end of the lead, but at the very beginning of its first sentence. The unexpected use of ‘our’ also renders the lead more effective as the attractor of attention.

- (9) - For **our** contribution to further developing business relations between both countries following the acquisition of Talisman Energy **Repsol** voted company of the year by Canada-Spain Chamber of Commerce.
- This is the second time that **Repsol** has won this award.
 - Josu Jon Imaz: "This award recognizes the importance of an operation that has turned **Repsol** into a more international Company that is better positioned for the energy transition". (30/09/15)

As can be observed in example 9, different communicative goals have been achieved here: the identification of the company through its name, the recognition of its position as an international company, and its image as a community reaching for common aims and objectives.

The direct uses of 'we' in the Repsol corpus registered more occurrences, namely six, in comparison to the BP corpus (four), also more in terms of its relative percentage (13.64). In addition, they were found in the body of the text and not in the Notes to Editors, as was the case of the BP corpus. Example 10, in the same way as example 9, shows a combination of first- and third-person references used within the same sentence.

- (10) Currently **Repsol** is also taking an active part in the exploration of the Colombian Caribbean, where **we** operate the offshore blocks RC-11, RC-12 and Gua-off in association with Ecopetrol, and **we** participate as non-operators in the Tayrona field (operated by Petrobas). (3/02/14)

'Other organizations' was the second most frequent referent in the Repsol corpus (27.27% for 'we', 18.2% for 'our' and 13.3% for 'us'), in a similar manner to the BP corpus. All of the pronouns and determiners with this referent were found only in quotations. Example 11 is a statement by the General Manager of Race Operations Management Division at Honda in the context of extending a MotoGP contract between Repsol and Honda until 2018.

- (11) Tetsuhiro Kuwata: "**We** are delighted with the renewal of the agreement with **our** title sponsor Repsol through the end of 2018. (...)This record demonstrates the great value of this partnership which, in addition to including a great sponsorship agreement, has also benefitted **us** with crucial technological development. ". (7/12/16)

Finally, 'all people' (inclusive 'we') as the referent for first-person plural pronouns and determiners was used in the corpus on a very few occasions (example 12).

- (12) Repsol's CEO, Antonio Brufau, chaired the presentation, during which guests could take a virtual tour of Spain with the gastronomic and tourist content included in the Guide, using augmented reality technology. It is a cutting-edge technology which mixes reality with virtual images which **we** can see using a screen. (12/12/12)

Despite the referents such as 'Repsol and other organizations' including cooperating entities, no first-person plural references to the energy industry were identified in the corpus. This is a notable difference to the BP corpus, where the company often appeared as a leading organization speaking on behalf of the energy industry on the global level. No such role for Repsol was articulated through the first-person plural references in the corpus.

As has been previously pointed out, the main variations in the use of the first-person plural references correspond to their frequencies, which were notably higher in the BP corpus. The number of referents identified was also larger in that corpus and revealed a

broader range of identities, emerging as a network of partnerships and relations between BP, other organizations, and in which BP plays a leading role. In the case of Repsol, the first-person plural references are made to the company itself with few mentions of other organizations and rare references to society as a whole. As has been previously argued, these dissimilarities suggest distinct strategies and aims in building the company's public image. There is clearly more focus placed on the organization as part of a larger system, either industrial or social in the case of BP. In Repsol's press releases, the first-person plural references are practically exclusively for the company itself, suggesting a rather different approach to defining its identity and presence.

4.4. First-person singular references in the BP and Repsol corpora

This section will describe and compare the use of first-person singular pronouns and determiners in the BP and Repsol corpora. As has been shown in section 4.1, the frequency data for the first-person singular references was significantly lower than for the first-person plural references in both corpora (see Table 2). What is more, not all of the singular references were used in the two corpora: 'myself' was not found in the BP corpus, and 'me' was not detected in the Repsol corpus. The frequencies of the items studied were also either lower in the Repsol corpus or similar in both corpora. For instance, 'I' registered 0.017 occurrences per 100 words in the Repsol corpus and 0.039 in the BP corpus, while 'my' had the normalized frequency of 0.003 in both corpora. In this sense, the data presented mirrors the variations of the first-person plural references in the two corpora.

referent	I		me		my		myself	
		%		%		%		%
BP								
BP chief executive	18	48.6	2	33.3	-	-	-	-
A public figure from the cultural/sports world	12	32.4	3	50	3	100	-	-
A public figure from the political/governmental sphere	5	13.5	1	16.7	-	-	-	-
Member of another organization	2	5.4	-	-	-	-	-	-
total	37	100	6	100	3	100	-	-
REPSOL								
A public figure from the cultural/sports world	12	75	-	-	2	66.7	1	100
Repsol chief executive	3	18.8	-	-	1	33.3	-	-
A public figure from the political/governmental sphere	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Member of another organization	1	6.2	-	-	-	-	-	-
total	16	100	-	100	3	100	1	100

Table 5. First-person singular references in the BP and Repsol corpora: number of tokens and percentages

Table 5 includes the data for the BP and Repsol corpora. The following referents for the pronoun 'I' were identified in the BP corpus: BP chief executive (e.g. a group chief executive or a division chief executive), a public figure from the cultural and sports world, a public figure from the political and governmental sphere, and a member of another organization. The BP chief executive was the most frequent referent for the pronoun 'I' (48.6%) in this corpus.

- (13) Erginbilgic, Chief Executive of BP Downstream, attended the opening ceremony. He said: "This is a milestone for both BP and BP Zhuhai. I'm very proud to witness its opening. At BP, we are committed to becoming the leading downstream business. (3/07/15)
- (14) "The start-up of this project in the Gulf of Mexico is one of BP's key operational milestones for 2012, one of six high-margin projects we expect to come on stream this year," said Bob Dudley, BP group chief executive. "I expect that the operational progress we are now making will deliver increasing financial momentum for BP as we move into 2013 and 2014." (11/06/12)

Examples 13 and 14 are comments by the group and division chief executives. They use 'I' to express an individual point of view, which also serves to reinforce their leading role within the organization. However, the same quotation, and even the same sentence (14), also contains a plural reference ('we'), pointing to BP. This is another case of reference

mix, discussed previously, which conveys the idea of multiple voices pertaining to the organization. The same person introduces an individual voice corresponding to the organization leader alongside a collective voice of the organization's community.

In examples 15 and 16, public figures from the governmental sphere talk about the positive impact of BP's involvement in research activities and joint projects in other countries.

- (15) "I have been very impressed by the commitment of every member of the Research Board to create the sustainable processes that now underpin a program of the highest possible scientific quality," said Rita Colwell, the Chair of the Research Board. (25/04/11)
- (16) Welcoming this milestone, His Excellency AbdulKareem Luaibi the Minister of Oil, said: "This production increase is an important step for Iraq and demonstrates the success of the contracts awarded, I am very pleased to see the progress for Rumaila and we wish BP, the South Oil Company, PetroChina and all the companies involved further success over the coming years." (11/01/11)

'Me' was the first most frequent referent for a public figure from the cultural/sports world, the second most frequent for the BP Chairman, and the third, for a public figure in the political/governmental sphere. In contrast, 'my' referred only to a public figure from the cultural/sports world. It is important to note that both items were used on rare occasions and were found in a limited number of press releases.

- (17) Stef Reid London 2012 Paralympic Games silver medallist in the long jump said: "BP's on-going support has made a huge difference to **me** personally, allowing **me** to stay focused on my training. (...)". (24/06/13)
- (18) Speaking at the Science Museum today, fifty years after this historic event, Cosmonaut Alexei Leonov said, "There were many problems during **my** first flight. Many of those were impossible to test on Earth, for example, how would the space suit react in the vacuum of space? But I had to do it. (...) (21/05/15)

Examples 17 and 18 contain 'me' and 'my' referring to two public figures from the cultural/sports world: an athlete and a cosmonaut. While example 17 includes an explicit comment on the impact of BP's support for a Paralympic athlete, example 18 is a description of a personal experience of the first man who walked in space and who visited a BP-funded cosmonaut exhibition at the Science Museum.

Regarding the Repsol corpus, fewer referents were identified for first-person singular pronouns/determiners (Table 5), which were also used less often than in the BP corpus. Three referents for the items studied were found: Repsol chief executive, a public figure from the cultural and sports world, and a member of another organization. There were no references to public figures from the political and governmental sphere, which is an intriguing finding. The press officers might be instructed to avoid talking about connections with politics and the government, as this may harm the organization's image and its credibility.

Of the referents mentioned, a public figure from the cultural and sports world was the most frequent with 12 occurrences, accounting for 75% in the case of 'I'. 'Me' was not found in the corpus, and 'my' together with 'myself' registered a similar pattern of use with athletes as their referents (examples 19 and 20).

(19) He (Dani Pedrosa) added, "I'm really looking forward to starting the preseason as at the tests in Valencia, after the last test of the Championship, it was raining and we couldn't do much. I can't wait to get to Malaysia and have a few days to test the bike, enjoy it, and familiarize **myself** with the parts we are going to use in the first race". (24/01/13)

(20) After the chairman's speech, the Repsol Honda team riders showed their support for the initiative and talked about their experiences following Repsol's values. "I would highlight the human value of **my** team, transparency which gives you confidence in critical situations, flexibility and an open mind", claimed Márquez. (28/01/14)

It should be pointed out, however, that all of the cases of this referent were found in two press releases dealing with Repsol's support of the Honda racing team and its two Spanish bike riders: Dani Pedrosa and Marc Márquez. Even though Repsol's record of sponsoring the Spanish bike riders is long and widely reported in the media, it is difficult to view the cases identified as representative of Repsol's press releases in general.

Finally, the attention should be drawn to the rare occasions, namely four, in which Repsol's chief executive, Antonio Brufau, speaks as someone in charge of the company using a first-person reference for that purpose. Brufau's quotations including these references are infrequent and seem to have been substituted by indirect speech and third-person references in the classical, preformulation-governed style of press releases (Jacobs, 1999). In comparison to a direct and more individual-focused type of news reporting in the BP corpus, Repsol's press officers seem to rely more on preformulation techniques possibly to ensure that the views expressed would be faithfully reproduced in the media. This results in a more neutral and less involved type of reporting, which searches to convey objectivity and reliability (Jacobs, 1999a), rather than aiming at increasing persuasive effects and the writer's credibility, on the one hand, and the reader's interest, on the other.

In summary, the first-person singular references show significant variations in both corpora, in a similar manner to the first-person plural references. While the frequencies in the Repsol corpus were either similar or lower than in the BP corpus, the referents were fewer too. Overall, the voices included in the press releases served to reinforce the leading role of BP's and Repsol's chief executives, and to a lesser degree of other organizations' leaders. The success of widespread sponsorship of these two companies in the cultural and sports world was also reflected in quotations by well-known personalities. Opinions expressed by politicians and members of the government were, however, limited to BP and its scope of action.

5. Conclusions

This study has looked into variations in the use of first-person singular and plural references in the press releases issued by two oil companies: BP and Repsol. Two corpora in English, of comparable size and content were used to this end. The results obtained from the analysis of the corpora showed a number of similarities and differences between the two companies, but also confirmed their predominant use in quotations, as discussed in Jacobs (1999a).

The first-person references did not correspond to the authorial (press officer) presence in the text, but rather pointed to other voices included in the texts published on the corporate websites. The press release participation framework adopted by Jacobs (1999a) from Scollon and Scollon (1995) and involving the actual writer and reader on the one hand, and the implied writer and reader on the other, certainly needs to be slightly adjusted to better reflect the context of e-release publication. While actual writers continue to be press officers, implied readers, that is, readers of press releases re-written for publication in the media would also be actual readers, as they can access press releases on a corporate website. This adjustment in the participation framework, reflecting e-release accessibility is essential for the understanding of first-person referencing, especially in the case of BP. The opportunity to directly reach the implied reader may enhance the persuasive effectiveness of this type of text (Strobbe & Jacobs, 2005; Catenaccio, 2007; Jacobs, 2014). The inclusion of multiple first-person voices, audible through quotations is essential in this sense. Furthermore, the directness mentioned best reflects the dialogic nature of BP's e-releases, which becomes evident and more significant. Finally, the purpose of using quotations is not only to protect press releases from undue transformations by journalists (Jacobs, 1999a, 1999b), but also to enhance first-person description of personal experiences and perceptions. Therefore, the interpretation of audience-directness, as defined by Jacobs (1999a), turns out to be slightly distinct in this context, as the scope of the audience is clearly broader.

The findings obtained in this research suggest that companies may resort to first-person references in different ways, and that a less frequent use of this type of reference is unlikely to be correlated with a higher use of third-person references, considered as a predominant pre-formulation feature of this type of text. Overall, first-person references were more frequent in the BP corpus than in the Repsol corpus, with the direct uses of the plural forms or "frame breaks" (Jacobs, 1999a) accounting for a notably low percentage of all uses. However, these direct uses suggest that the press release actual

writer and his or her authorial voice is still present in the text, but skilfully disguised in the collective voice of the company. In both corpora, the plural forms included in quotations referred to the company itself and composed the first-person narration delivered by the organization's leading figures. Other referents for the plural forms varied more in BP than in Repsol. Moreover, the multiple first-person voices representing BP's co-operating organizations and entities suggest that this company intends to be depicted as deeply nested in society at the local and global levels. Finally, first-person singular references were significantly less frequent in both corpora and were only included in quotations. As with plural forms, a more varied range of referents representing different social and economic agents was identified in the BP corpus than in the Repsol.

The variations described in this study demonstrate that similar companies operating within the same industry may choose different styles of press release reporting regardless of the advantages in reaching all types of reader that e-releases offer in today's globalized world. The use of first-person references, and therefore first-person narration, enhances the credibility of the news, in addition to increasing its impact as a marketing tool, as happens in many advertisements including someone's personal comments and views. In this sense, the data related to BP seem to reflect the tendency towards the use of an explicitly advertising tone and towards an explicit advertising resource (Pander Maat, 2007). In Repsol's texts, however, fewer first-person references seem to have been exploited differently with other resources used instead. Regarding the variations reported, there may be a number of reasons for them: distinct communicative and promotional strategies, as well as organizational and cultural factors. The cultural reasons beyond the variations identified should be considered with much caution, especially in the case of global organizations where the influence of local (national or regional) culture may turn out to be difficult to determine. Moreover, an ethnographic approach should be adopted in such research, including also larger corpora representing a broad range of companies. These are the main reasons why the present study did not enquire into the cultural motivations of the existing variations between BP and Repsol.

As has been seen, the dialogic nature of press releases as noted through first-person references can be exploited to a higher or lower degree, independent of the undeniable need and efforts that oil companies encounter to deliver a positive public image. Further research in this field clearly points to the need to verify the insights gained here with the actual writers of press releases in order to determine how the distinct strategies in the use of first-person references and a clearer advertising tone tune in with their professional practice and the organizations' communicative strategies.

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ⁱ The application of corpus linguistics methods and the inclusion of quantitative data have certainly enriched pragmatics research, and actually, this new field has recently been denominated as 'corpus pragmatics' (see Rühlemann, 2019 for an overview).