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Variation in General Meaning Keywords in Press Releases from British and Spanish Companies: Gaining Deeper Insights into Corporate Discourse

Hanna Skorczynska^{a*}, María Luisa Carrió-Pastor^b

^{a,b} *Departamento de Lingüística Aplicada, Camino de Vera, 14. Valencia 46022, Spain*

Abstract

This study compares the use of general meaning keywords in press releases from energy companies in Britain and Spain. The analysis of general meaning keywords in specialist corpora of this type allows for a more refined corpus-based comparison of corporate discourse than is the case when comparing wordlists including similar technical issues and terms. The keywords were identified with WordSmith Tools (Smith, 2005), and were then further analysed with Sketch Engine's word sketch tool in order to determine their collocational patterns. The findings suggest that, even within the same industrial sector, corporate discourse can vary substantially, and that this is a reflection of different communicative strategies and the different social and cultural contexts in which they are employed across the world.

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1. Introduction

Corporate press releases provide information thought to be of interest to the general public, and they can nowadays be easily accessed on company websites. Corporate press releases also serve promotional purposes, as they seek to build a positive image of the company. Advertising strategies have been detected in texts of this type,

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +34963877530; fax: +34963877539.
E-mail address: hskorczy@idm.upv.es

but they have been found to be more subtle than other clearly promotional genres (Catenaccio 2008). Corporate press releases, therefore, combine two primary communicative goals: informative and promotional (Catenaccio 2008; McLaren 2005; McLaren-Hankin, 2008; Pander Maat, 2007; Vandenberghe, 2011; Wickman, 2014). Companies also use them to seek social approval for their activities (Sagiv & Schwartz 2007). The societal collectivity in which companies are nested provides them with their workforce, as well as other necessary resources such as money and materials. For this reason, companies need to operate in harmony with their societal collectivity and its cultural values, and, most importantly, they need to convey that this is the case to the general public. Corporate press releases provide a suitable communication channel with society which can be used to this end.

When English is used in a business context, hints can be found of the cultural influences on the writer: for example, using a commanding style, employing florid expressions (Carrió-Pastor and Muñiz, 2015) or using different rhetorical devices (Carrió-Pastor, 2014; Hyland & Tse, 2004). Research has thus established the existence of synchronic variation or discourse modification even in as specific a setting as doing business in English. We believe that if writers tend to use the linguistic processes from their culture, this may enrich the target language, as it incorporates novel cross-cultural characteristics.

It is also important to take into account that, in order for a text to transfer knowledge to readers of different cultural backgrounds, these readers must be able to obtain a full understanding of its discourse, as authors such as Hinds (1987), Hyland (2005, 2008, 2010, 2011) and Qi and Liu (2007) have shown. Therefore, writers need to be conscious of their potential readers and even more so when digital discourse is used. In business communications, it is very important that the readers of the discourse understand its content, and so the information should be conveyed carefully.

Variation may provide us with evidence of how genres change across disciplines, as Samraj (2004), Charles (2007) and Ozturk (2007) have argued. These researchers have shown that language communication exhibits considerable variation, indicating that language changes when it is being used by speakers with different linguistic or academic backgrounds. Variation should not be considered to be a negative if communication is not disrupted. Language changes due to the contact with other cultures and, in our view, linguists should place greater importance on this. In this sense, Buchstaller (2008: 16) points out “[...] the need to incorporate variationist findings within broader empirical issues, pointing in particular to the tension between global flows and their local consequences”.

Traditionally, most of the studies devoted to variation have focused on diachronic rather than synchronic variation because the language change that is taking place during the twentieth century was less noticeable due to the medium of exchanging information, i.e. printed documents. Now, in the Internet era, communication takes place very quickly and between people with different linguistic, cultural and social backgrounds and this is also changing the rhythm of language change (Carrió-Pastor, 2014). In this sense, the evolution of language may now be more easily observed by comparing texts written in the same language by people with different linguistic backgrounds. Recently, several researchers have paid attention to this issue (Abdollahzadeh, 2011; Crompton, 2012; Carrió-Pastor & Muñiz, 2012; Carrió-Pastor & Candel, 2013; Carrió-Pastor, 2013), and the results obtained may be an indication that the same language is expressed in different ways depending on the cultural background of the speaker. We believe that every writer uses language in a personalised way, as each use of language is to some extent unique. Nevertheless, language change can be analysed and the traces of themselves writers leave in the texts they write can be classified in order to investigate whether such traces might be associated with their cultural inheritance.

Previous research focusing on cultural differences has confirmed that the different national cultures of Europe vary significantly (e.g. Hofstede & Hofstede 2005; Hofstede et al. 2010; Kaasa et al. 2013; Kolman et al. 2003; Sagiv & Schwartz 2007). If responses to social expectations and reflections of the cultural context are present in the communicative strategies of the press releases under study, we might expect that companies from the same industry, but based in different European countries, would seek to reach out to the general public by addressing different issues. This study aims to investigate this unexplored area of research by looking into the use of general meaning keywords in press releases from British and Spanish energy companies. Variation in general meaning keywords in

the specialised type of discourse, which these corporate press releases represent, may provide clues to how non-technical information is conveyed and insights into the variation in the communicative strategies employed by companies from the same industry, but based in different countries. This study, therefore, adopts a cross-cultural view on variation in corporate discourse and takes a corpus-based approach to this discourse.

2. Corpora and method

Two corpora of press releases from British and Spanish energy companies were compiled for this study. They contained approximately 120,000 words each and included texts from British Petroleum and Centrica, on the one hand, and from Repsol and Iberdrola, on the other. The press releases were written in English, which means that in the case of the British companies, they had been written in English originally, and, in that of the Spanish companies, they were translations from Spanish.

In order to identify the corpora keywords, a 1 million-word reference corpus was used, which was made up of articles from business magazines (*The Economist*, *Business Week*, *Fortune*) and business research papers (*Journal of Economics & Management Strategy*, *Management Science*, *Strategic Management Journal*). Having a reference corpus made up of texts covering a similar but broader range of economic and business topics ensured that obvious business words, such as ‘company’ or ‘management’ were not identified as keywords, and a more fine-grained approach could then be taken with regard to identifying unusually frequent words in a specialist corpus.

The top fifty keywords were identified with WordSmith Tools (Scott, 2008) and were then filtered for the general meaning words. These were further analysed with Sketch Engine’s (<http://www.sketchengine.co.uk>) word sketch tool in order to identify the collocational patterns in which they were used.

3. Results

For the analysis of the general meaning keywords, we first set a cut-off point at 50 for the most significant keywords, including both general and more specific items, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Top 50 keywords in the British and Spanish corpora

British corpus	Spanish corpus
BP, energy, UK, our, Centrica, British, Direct, we, and, said, oil, project, north, cent, production, gulf, customers, US/us, exploration, smart, www, per, date, million, programme, announced, upstream, release, expected, Mexico, meters, electricity, support, homes, Deepwater, Dudley, agreement, approximately, sea, community, residential, carbon, olympic, continue, quarter, heating, editors, offshore, will	Repsol, Iberdrola, the, MW, euros, Spain, company, project, in, energy, wind, projects, gas, Brufau, agreement, Spanish, of, Antonio, million, production, YPF, sustainability, commitment, exploration, and, electric, which, LNG, Madrid, chairman, development, CET, capacity, Repsol’s, Ignacio, programme, awarded, de, training, renewable, Peru, strategic, Brazil, refining, release, field, area, award, initiative

The keywords in Table 1 were filtered for general meaning words. Words which were not considered by us to be general meaning words were; any business word related to company management; any technical word making reference to the technology involved in oil and energy production; any generic geographical word, such as ‘basin’ or ‘gulf’; any numerical word including dates and years; and any word related to the issuing and editing of press releases, such as ‘editor’ or ‘issue’. In sum, we regarded any word whose first basic meaning in the Macmillan English Dictionary (2012) was non-business and non-technical was a general meaning item. Table 2 summarises the findings.

Table 2. General meaning keywords in the British and Spanish corpus

British corpus	Keyness values	Spanish corpus	Keyness values
our	1,077.08	the	974.00
we	637.75	project	647.59
and	628.06	agreement	528.31
said	532.22	of	444.07
project [†]	391.96	sustainability	375.35
per	295.17	commitment	374.66
programme	260.41	and	340.90
announced	256.47	which	317.87
expected	249.51	development	297.03
support	218.20	capacity	273.95
homes	212.97	programme	256.26
agreement	203.65	awarded	246.39
approximately	203.10	training	235.61
community	202.49	field	203.77
residential	202.31	area	203.47
continue	188.30	award	203.06
will	167.64	initiative	201.65

The general meaning keywords were divided into open-class (lexical) and closed-class (functional) items. In the British corpus, there were 12 open-class words ('said', 'project', 'programme', 'announced', 'expected', 'support', 'homes', 'agreement', 'approximately', and 'community') and five closed-class words ('our', 'we', 'and', 'per', and 'will'). In the Spanish corpus, the figures were slightly different: there were 13 open-class words ('project', 'agreement', 'sustainability', 'commitment', 'development', 'capacity', 'programme', 'awarded', 'training', 'field', 'area', 'award', and 'initiative'), and four closed-class words ('the', 'of', 'and', and 'which')

With regard to the open-class items, which are of special interest in this study, just three overlapping items were identified: 'agreement', 'programme' and 'project'. The keyness values of these words varied notably in the two corpora except for 'programme' (see Table 2). 'Agreement' and 'project' were more key in the Spanish corpus than in the British.

In the analysis of the overlapping keywords and their co-text, we found that they were used in a variety of collocational patterns. Regarding 'agreement', this word combined with a broader range of verbs in the Spanish corpus than was the case in the British corpus (see Table 3). These verbs also expressed a greater variety of meanings, even though most of them focused on the administrative procedures and processes involved in managing agreements. Only four verbs preceding 'agreement' in the object position ('reach', 'sign', 'have', and 'include') and four verbs following 'agreement' in the subject position ('allow', 'be', 'include', and 'have') appeared in both corpora, with the rest being different lexical items. As with the verbs, a few overlapping modifiers of 'agreement' were identified: 'long-term', 'purchase', 'cooperation', 'joint' and 'collaboration'. The most frequent modifiers in the British corpus focused on marketing and sales, while, in the Spanish corpus, more emphasis was placed on

[†] The overlapping general meaning keywords have been highlighted in bold.

compensation[‡], partnership and supply. Finally, very few evaluative adjectives modified ‘agreement’: ‘strategic’ in the British corpus, and ‘first’ and ‘new’ in the Spanish.

Table 3. Collocates of ‘agreement’ in the British and Spanish corpora with the number of co-occurrences.

British corpus			Spanish corpus		
object of	subject of	modifier	object of	subject of	modifier
reach [§] 8	be 12	marketing 8	sign 58	be 23	compensation 8
sign 6	demonstrate 3	long-term 2	reach 13	have 4	supply 8
have 6	have 2	sales 2	enter 4	include 4	collaboration 5
be 4	allow 1	settlement 2	approve 3	stipulate 3	partnership 5
include 2	announce 1	share 2	back 2	entitle 2	gas 4
allow 1	include 1	strategic 2	follow 2	aim 1	LNG 3
conclude 1	lapse 1	swap 2	have 2	allow 1	sponsorship 3
expect 1	reach 1	aggregation 1	protect 2	approve 1	YPF 3
share 1	reaffirm 1	Burg 1	aim 1	do 1	extension 2
welcome 1	reflect 1	capacity 1	arrange 1	foresee 1	co-operation 1
		collaboration 1	complete 1	give 1	collective 1
		collaborative 1	declare 1	make 1	financial 1
		Concession 1	draw 1	provide 1	financing 1
		cooperation 1	embrace 1	reduce 1	first 1
		framework 1	guarantee 1	remain 1	joint 1
		January 1	include 1	renew 1	loan 1
		joint 1	incorporate 1	represent 1	long-term 1
		Offshore 1	ink 1	require 1	natural 1
		opt-out 1	maintain 1	seek 1	new 1
		purchase 1	meet 1	sign 1	one-year 1
		related 1	pioneer 1	strengthen 1	
		sale 1	ratify 1	underscore 1	
		shareholder 1	submit 1		
		technical 1	support 1		
		TNK-BP 1	aim 1		

Regarding the second overlapping general meaning keyword, ‘programme’, it registered similar keyness values in the two corpora (see Table 2), but, like ‘agreement’, it was used in a variety of collocational patterns. For this particular analysis, we focused on the use of ‘programme’ as a noun because nearly all of the occurrences corresponded to this part of speech (see Table 4). Just three overlapping verbs collocated with ‘programme’ in the object position (‘design’, ‘continue’, and ‘have’), and five in the subject position (‘focus’, ‘follow’, ‘be’, ‘have’, and ‘include’). Regarding the modifiers, ‘training’ and ‘ambitious’ appeared in both corpora, with the rest being different lexical items. On the other hand, the modifiers of ‘programme’ in the two corpora did tend to focus on corporate social responsibility (e.g. ‘scholarship’, ‘research’, ‘vocational’, ‘volunteer’, ‘conciliation’, ‘educational’, ‘dental’). As with ‘agreement’, few evaluative adjectives were found: ‘ambitious’ and ‘flagship’ in the British corpus, and ‘ambitious’ in the Spanish corpus.

Table 4. Collocates of ‘programme’ in the British and Spanish corpora with the relative number of co-occurrences

British corpus			Spanish corpus		
object of	subject of	modifier	object of	subject of	modifier
complete 4	be 12	divestment 8	have 2	be 3	restoration 5

[‡] In April 2012 the Argentinian energy company YPF, in which Repsol held a 51% stake, was renationalized. The Argentinian government’s decision led to a legal dispute with Repsol, which ended with the payment of compensation to the Spanish company.

[§] The overlapping items have been highlighted in bold.

deliver 3	have 3	scholarship 6	advertise 1	follow 2	ambitious 2
continue 2	achieve 1	research 5	call 1	include 2	compliance 2
create 2	continue 1	investment 4	continue 1	aim 1	dual 2
design 2	depend 1	change 3	design 1	combine 1	Flexible 2
undertake 2	focus 1	share 3	develop	earn 1	Iberdrola 2
exist 1	follow 1	buy-back 2	enroll 1	expect 1	Training 2
extend 1	impact 1	current 2	introduce 1	focus 1	Vocational 2
focus 1	include 1	exciting 2	link 1	have 1	Volunteer 2
fund 1	progress 1	IRF 2	maintain 1	specialise 1	conciliation 1
have 1	provide 1	long-term 2	manage 1		dental 1
implement 1	support 1	management 2	publicise 1		educational 1
launch 1		training 2	run 1		INNPACTO 1
mentor 1		ambitious 1	study 1		INNVIERTE 1
provide 1		buyback 1			Innvierte 1
roll 1		flagship 1			INSERTA 1
		hedging 1			intense 1
		internship 1			master 1
		multi-billion 1			Petroleum 1
		Nectar 1			Plus 1
		pre-drill 1			repurchase 1
		recertification 1			software 1
		scrip 1			Solidarity 1
		technical-change 1			teleworking 1
		two-year 1			wide-ranging 1

With regard to the third overlapping general meaning keyword, ‘project’, it registered a higher keyness value in the Spanish corpus (see Table 2). As with the previous two general meaning keywords, the collocational patterns of ‘project’ varied significantly in the two corpora. There was only one overlapping verb used in combination with ‘project’ in the object position (‘develop’), and two such verbs collocated with ‘project’ in the subject position (‘be’, ‘have’). As can be seen in Table 5, a notably broader range of different verbs was identified in the Spanish corpus. With regard to the modifiers of ‘project’, there were three overlapping items: ‘major’, ‘new’ and ‘important’. Eleven evaluative adjectives modifying ‘project’ were found in the Spanish corpus (‘key’, ‘major’, ‘expansion’, ‘strategic’, ‘innovative’, ‘turnkey’, ‘growth’, ‘new’, ‘first’, ‘large’, and ‘important’), whereas only seven were found in the British corpus: ‘major’, ‘new’, ‘modernization/modernisation’, ‘development’, ‘significant’, ‘important’, and ‘higher-margin’.

Table 5. Collocates of ‘project’ in the British and Spanish corpora with the relative number of co-occurrences

British corpus			Spanish corpus		
object of	subject of	modifier	object of	subject of	modifier
develop 7	be 28	new 23	develop 19	be 38	key 26
deliver 6	have 5	major 15	be 11	include 7	wind 13
expect 5	come 2	upstream 8	select 8	have 5	energy 12
be 3	include 2	restoration 7	present 7	allow 3	growth 12
include 3	start 2	Whiting 7	promote 7	involve 3	new 12
schedule 3		Cygnus 6	relate 6	represent 3	offshore 12
support 3		development 6	include 4	carry 2	expansion 11
bring 2		early 5	support 4	establish 2	major 11
fund 2		carbon 4	undertake 4	offer 2	strategic 11
headquarter 2		modernization 4	approve 3	spearhead 2	business 9
upgrade 2		Clair 3	award 3	strengthen 2	first 9
		future 3	launch 3		innovative 9
		important 3	outline 3		turnkey 8
		low 3	pioneer 3		research 7

modernisation 3	win 3	various 6
Ridge 3	boost 2	industrial 5
SCPX 3	focus 2	large 5
significant 3	have 2	LNG 5
solar 3	lead 2	Margarita-H 5
Auwahi 2	link 2	Peru 5
Chirag 2	locate 2	CENIT 4
higher-margin 2	receive 2	D 4
Refinery 2	sponsor 2	important 4
smart-grid 2		pilot 4
		Vida 4

Apart from the three overlapping general meaning lexical keywords ('agreement', 'programme', 'project'), which were used in a variety of collocational patterns in the two corpora, the remaining general meaning keywords shown in Table 2 also showed many differences. Particularly noteworthy was the fact that for the British corpus there are five verbs ('said', 'announced', 'expected', 'continue', and 'support'), and only one verb in the Spanish corpus ('awarded'). With regard to the verbs from the British corpus, some of these are very common in news reporting – 'said' and 'announced' – while the others – 'expected', 'continue', 'support' – were used to highlight positive expectations, the continuity of industrial and business activities, as well as the support for all types of economic, social, scientific and cultural activities. In addition, the functional item 'will' was used to make references to future plans, undertakings, results and strategies. Interestingly, three nouns in the group of general meaning keywords specific to the British corpus (Table 2), 'homes', 'community' and 'residential', demonstrated a concern for customer services and proximity to customers' local communities. The two keywords with the highest keyness values in the British corpus, 'our' and 'we', were used to refer to the company as a team or a community, but it is striking that they do not appear at all in the top 50 keywords in the Spanish corpus."

With regard to the general meaning lexical keywords specific to the Spanish corpus, only one verb, 'awarded' was identified, as was mentioned above, but, interestingly, there was another semantically related item, 'award', which was also found in the group of keywords specific to the Spanish corpus. Both words were used with regard to rewards for good results and achievements, but they were also used with reference to ceremonies and corporate rituals. The remaining items were nouns: 'sustainability', 'commitment', 'development', 'capacity', 'initiative', 'field', 'area', and 'training'. The number of nouns, nine in total, is notably higher than in the British corpus, where only three such items were found. The nouns mentioned express abstract meanings suggesting that the Spanish discourse in the sample studied was conceptually more abstract than the British, where concrete references to home, community and residential needs or services were found. It seems that by using these noun keywords the writers of the Spanish press releases aimed to enhance the image of the company as being competent and highly reliable.

4. Conclusions

The findings described suggest that despite operating in the same industrial sector, the press releases of the companies based in Britain and Spain vary substantially from each other, reflecting not only the different communicative strategies at work, but also the distinct social and cultural contexts from which they undertake their global operations. In this sense, the press releases studied seem to address issues which are important to their societal collectivities. As has been shown, the general meaning keywords varied notably in both corpora, while the overlapping items were used in differing collocational patterns. Obviously, this study was limited to the most prominent general meaning keywords and so further research involving a more qualitative perspective is needed to fully account for the variation in these samples of corporate discourse.

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