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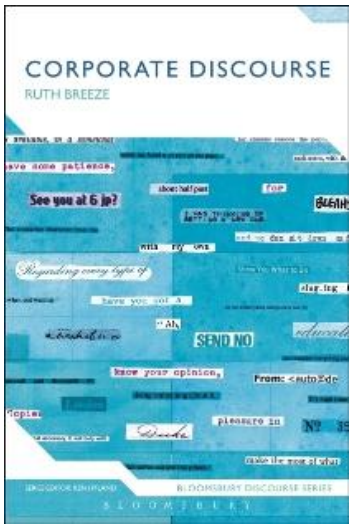
BOOK REVIEW



CONSTRUCTING CORPORATION THROUGH DISCOURSE

Ruth Breeze. CORPORATE DISCOURSE (2013), Series: Bloomsbury Discourse, London/New York: Bloomsbury Academic. 209 pp., ISBN 978-1-4411-2718-1 (HB), 978-1-4411-4267-2 (ePub), 978-1-4411-7753-7 (ePDF).

Companies have considerably changed the way they conduct business. This shift has its roots in a number of factors: globalisation, advances in information technology, heightened social responsibility of companies and their profound impact on people's lives. The accelerated changes in business landscape accompanied with a constant urge to make hefty profits, to position well on the market, and to gain new customers and/or retain the old ones have made companies realise the importance of language they use not only to construct their self-perception, but also to construct and communicate their relationships with other discourse participants. Hence, with its emphasis on naturally occurring language data, discourse analysis has recently become enriched with a field which combines interactions of companies on the one hand, and linguistics on the other. A plethora of intra- and intercommunicative practices of today's companies makes corporate discourse a goal-oriented discourse where companies use a synergy of communication skills, registers, genres, and communicative purposes in corporate settings.

Ruth Breeze's book *Corporate Discourse* embraces all these synergetic approaches to provide a comprehensive account of distinctive lexical, textual, pragmatic, visual, generic and other features of how companies communicate with different audiences – employees, customers, investors, the local community, and the society at large. Such a book is a compulsory reading material for anyone who studies this topic because it aims "to identify discursive strategies, to document trends and developments and to shed light on the ongoing relationships that

corporations construct with a multitude of different stakeholders in today's increasingly complex business scenario" (p. 1).

Corporate Discourse comprises seven chapters, in which the author provides a broad perspective on not only various discursive practices as social actions in which the company engages, but also on different modes of effecting these practices, thus disclosing in a straightforward manner how companies construct their professional and social roles through discourse. Breeze achieves this by combining the work of other researchers with her own quantitative and qualitative findings, as stressed out in Introduction to the book (pp. 1-2).

In Chapter 1 (pp. 3-27), entitled "The Corporation and its Stakeholders: Identity, Action, Interaction", Breeze introduces the main topic of the book – corporate discourse, by outlining the basic concepts and categories concerning any company, such as corporate identity, culture, image, shareholders, and how these concepts are communicated via discourse. The author stresses that the construction of the company through discourse is a two-way, interrelated process. It comprises both corporate identity viewed as the discursive representation of the company's self-perception, upheld by corporate culture and values and embodied in employer-employee communication, and corporate image that relates to various discursive means and practices to which the company resorts in its interaction with other social actors – investors, customers, and the wider public, so as to build a positive image and accomplish legitimation of its activities. Thus, broadly defining corporate discourse as "the overall communicative activity of the company on a variety of levels" (p. 23), Breeze points out that corporate discourse needs to be understood as a discourse system comprising several discourses which can be classified according to: (1) speaker or 'origin' (the discourse generated by corporations); (2) presumed 'addressee' (e.g. employees, customers, investors and the general public; (3) predominant textual manifestation or 'genre' (e.g. employee handbook, advertorial, Annual Report), and (4) 'discourse types' or categories (e.g. promotional, informative and legitimatory). Each of these discourses positions the company both inside and outside the corporate world, which should attest to the importance of corporate discourse in the constant shaping of society.

Chapter 2, titled "Approaches to Corporate Discourse" (pp. 29-51), is not only an overview of a panoply of diverse approaches to examining discourses of corporations, but also the unveiling of the author's understanding and interpreting of corporate discourse in analytical terms. By adopting a critical stance on different theoretical backgrounds, methodologies, and practical solutions pursued in exploring corporate discourse, Breeze focuses her attention on both discourse studies that start from the text and those that go beyond the text level. Text-oriented approaches to corporate discourse belong to the realm of applied linguistics, which groups together genre analysis, corpus linguistics, multimodal approaches and critical discourse analysis, each differently 'positioned' in discourse construction of the company. Context-based approaches to corporate discourse revolve around ethnographic and intercultural approaches respectively,

where the former lays a major stress on the social roles of texts, while the latter draws on the wider social anthropological studies and on spotting relevant cultural elements in different genres of corporate discourse. Breeze emphasises that in order to fully grasp corporate discourse, both text-oriented and context-oriented approaches need to be integrated "into a coherent vision" (p. 50).

In recent years, recognition of the importance of employees to companies has grown dramatically, evidenced by shifting away from authoritarian to a more participative framework with the aim of binding employees tighter to their companies, thus actively contributing to the company's 'health'. The linguistic means used by the companies to achieve these utilitarian ends are meticulously dealt with in Chapter 3, entitled "Communicating with Employees" (pp. 53-81). Basing her analysis on the discourse of large European and US companies, Breeze covers a whole genre series of employer-employee communication, starting from job advertisements and job interviews, then moving to induction seminars and guides for new recruits, before concluding the Chapter with newsletters and other ways of informal communication. By incorporating the results of other scholars and her own, Breeze manages to show that each of these genres has clearly defined discursive features and roles. She also enumerates the lexical means by which the loyalty of new employees can be built, such as power nouns, verbs, adjectives and terms, as well as 'we' and 'you' pronouns which should foster the 'we' to 'you' relationship. The author underlines that "multiple persuasive and coercive functions" (p. 74) of the company in-house discourses strongly resemble those identified in political discourse, and are increasingly viewed as a way of changing employees inner perceptions and values to accommodate to those promoted by companies, in both public and private sectors.

In Chapter 4, titled "Communicating with Investors" (pp. 83-113), Breeze explores the complex and subtle company-investor relationship, that is, how the company strives to build its positive identity and image and strengthen the relationship with its investors and other stakeholders through the Annual Report as a genre together with its sub-genre, the CEO letters. The author identifies dual, hybrid discursive functions of the company's Annual Report – to inform and to persuade, which stems from the dual objectives of the Annual Report – to provide shareholders and potential investors with factual information about the company's financial performance on the one hand, and to engage financial experts, the media and other audiences by conveying a positive corporate image on the other. To communicate 'the public relations' purpose in the first part of the Report, as Breeze's in-depth analysis shows, the company relies on an array of multimodal strategies, such as multimodal metaphors, iconicity, colour and other visual information. Yet, to represent the corporate self and maintain its credibility in the second part of the Report, the company falls heavily back on figures, the first-person plural, and positively-charged adjectives such as 'good', all evidenced by corpus tools. In sections referring to the letters to shareholders, the author focuses attention on legitimation strategies and the narratives the CEO uses to present

how the company copes with difficult situations and wrongdoing. As Breeze suggests, the strategy of backgrounding the troubled past and foregrounding the company's present and future activities in positively-evaluated terms calls for turning a critical eye on this sub-genre.

In Chapter 5 (pp. 115-146), titled "Communicating with the World: Advertising Discourses", Breeze raises a number of important issues. Questioning the ambivalent nature of advertising as a parasite or creative genre, Breeze first considers the extremely rich multimodal advertising discourse pertaining to car and perfume advertisements. She particularly hinges on metaphoricity as the most important aspect that binds words, images or sounds with the positive features of the product, with a clear rhetorical function of producing the immediate impact on the audience. However, the author emphasises that many advertisements from one cultural setting fail to communicate the same associations in another, which prompts the need for customisation to local culture, particularly in the realm of global advertising. Also, Breeze turns her attention to a new genre of advertising – hybrid genres, exemplified by advertorials which, though they appear as advertisements, "invade the space and usurp the features" (p. 136) characteristic of informative genres. Assessing the role of advertising as a social phenomenon at the end of this chapter, the author stresses that despite the fact that advertising may have a 'distorting effect' in the sense that it can be a vehicle for promoting ideologically-loaded values and exercising control, the promotional aspect as the most vital ingredient of advertising will increasingly pervade other aspects of corporate discourse, such as the informative aspect, which will lead to an increase in discursive hybridity as a result.

Similarly to Chapter 5, in Chapter 6 entitled "Communicating with the World: Websites, Reviews, Sponsorship" (pp. 147-175), Breeze also focuses on the company's outward communication, more specifically on corporate websites as the modes of how the company interacts, not only with the customers, but with a global audience as well. Before embarking on exploring corporate websites from a discourse analysis perspective, Breeze describes interactivity of webpages, which rests on both 'vertical' and 'horizontal' planes, that is, on "the interplay between design and information" (p. 152) or, the multimodal display of verbal means, icons, sound and hyperlinks. She then plausibly shows how companies use websites to communicate information in 'about us' sections, corporate mission statements, social responsibility reports, annual reviews, and in sponsoring various activities, describing each in terms of the verbal, multimodal and rhetorical choices bound by common pragmatic goals – warding off potential criticism, achieving interactivity, and promoting the company's positive image.

In the closing Chapter 7 (pp. 177-190), entitled "Interpreting Corporate Discourse", Breeze summarises the previous chapters, makes a distinction between corporate discourse and academic discourse, and critically reconsiders corporate discourse. She posits that many different genres which are interwoven in corporate discourse are all linked with the idea of 'impression management' and

the public relations aspect, which is, in addition to collective identity and a different social role, what sharply contrasts corporate discourse with academic discourse. Striving to forge the legitimisation of activities via discourse, the company resorts to epideictic rhetoric, which enables communicative collaboration with different audiences, builds the corporate 'ethos', and prompts action. In the end, Breeze accentuates that both aspects of corporate discourse – epideictic and persuasive – may rely on ideological mechanisms of the current socio-economic system, which calls for taking a critical stance on corporate promotional pursuits, and, if need be, rejecting the propagated values.

Ruth Breeze's *Corporate Discourse* is a useful text in many aspects. Firstly, it covers the issue of corporate discourse from a range of theoretical backgrounds and their respective methodologies, plausibly showing how corporate 'discourses' both merge and differ from one another. Secondly, all the genres dealt with in the book are exemplified with authentic data, which lends validity to the author's findings. Thirdly, although Breeze never loses sight of the two staple ideas of the company's communicative intent – promoting a good image and legitimising corporate activities – she underscores the need for a critical evaluation of both company's internal and external communicative and discursive practices.

Ruth Breeze's book on exploration of discourse in business contexts, both internally and externally, evidences not only how the companies, their identity, image, and their relationships with global audiences are configured through discourse, but also how pedagogy may be enriched with researching the company's communicative practices from a discourse perspective. Therefore, the target audience of *Corporate Discourse* is varied – the book will be of significant interest to applied linguists, ESP scholars, critical discourse analysts, and students in communication studies, as well as to company's professionals, and practitioners in the fields of public relations, corporate communications and the business media.

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