



**Centro di Ricerca sui Linguaggi Specialistici
Research Centre on Languages for Specific Purposes**

**Stefania M. Maci
& Michele Sala (eds.)**

**REPRESENTING AND
REDEFINING SPECIALISED
KNOWLEDGE: VARIETY IN LSP**

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Stefania M. Maci & Michele Sala (eds.)

Representing and Redefining Specialised
Knowledge: Variety in LSP

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CERLIS

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REPRESENTING AND REDEFINING SPECIALISED KNOWLEDGE:

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WALTER GIORDANO

Communication Strategies and Crisis Management in 2015-2016 Volkswagen CEO Letters to Shareholders¹

1. Introduction

In 2015, Volkswagen (VW), the German carmaker, had to admit that the emission tests had been cheated in the USA, as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) discovered many VW vehicles sold in America equipped with a “defeat device” - or software - in diesel engines. This equipment was able to detect when the car was being tested, changing the outcome accordingly to deliver acceptable results under the regulation of emissions (Hotten 2015). The scandal reached Europe, too, and VW had to make up for the inconvenience recalling millions of cars worldwide to fix the device. The words spread on the markets too, causing a fall in sales, and a consequent quarterly loss reported in October 2015 (Cremer 2015), and a collapse in stock market price as well. Surprisingly, or maybe not, the following year, VW became the first world carmaker, in terms of sales (Topham, 2017). This unpredictable result was relevant in terms of communication as the company had initially to apologize and make up for the misconduct; but after the 2016 sales performance, Matthias

¹ This study contributes to the national research programme “Knowledge Dissemination across media in English: continuity and change in discourse strategies, ideologies, and epistemologies”, financed by the Italian Ministry for the University (nr.2015TJ8ZAS).

Müller, VW's CEO, was able to address communicative strategies, supported by the positive response of the market.

This study explores the strategies used by the company to restore trust and manage the crisis. To this aim, the letters to shareholders, included in the 2015 and 2016 VW Annual Reports written by the Mathias Müller, were analyzed. The documents have been investigated both at a discursive level and at a cultural level. On the one hand, in fact, the linguistic devices, the communicative strategies and the tools adopted, have been identified. On the other hand, the analysis of the linguistic elements is intimately linked to the cultural background in which the events take place. Thus, the possible application of Hall's, Hofstede's and Lewis' theories, help explain the moves and the results of the strategies.

2. The corpus and the theoretical pillars

This study investigates the Letters to Shareholders, in the 2015 and 2016 Annual Reports of VW, written and signed by the CEO, Mathias Müller, with the purpose of demonstrating that the communication strategies employed by VW, in the person of its CEO, with the goal of restoring trust in the brand image of VW, are based upon two possible pillars; the image/trust repair models, and the cultural model theories.

The letters to Shareholders are included in a financial document called Annual Report. It is usually composed by a narrative part and a financial data section, where little text is contained. The narrative part includes: the Financial Summary, the Letter to the Shareholders and information on Company Operations. Annual Reports are considered as a hybrid genre (Yuthas et al. 2002; Garzone 2004; Zanola 2009; Bhatia 2010, 2011; Giordano et al. 2018) as the traditional financial information purposes coexist with the need to popularize the contents to a much wider readership, making them more appealing and readable to a "de-specialized" audience (Giordano et al. 2018; Ruiz-Garrido et al. 2005). In particular, many scholars have focused on the importance of the letters to Shareholders, as they are considered to be

the first contact of the company with the readership, setting a first impression (Hyland, 1998; Crombie/Samuji, 1999; Smith/Taffler 2000; Garzone 2004; Breeze 2013; Palmer-Silveira/Ruiz Garrido, 2014). They convey a positive message: the language is simple and straight (Palmer-Silveira/Ruiz Garrido, 2014: 411). Garzone (2004: 322) defines the Letters as a “particularly interesting subgenre” as it has substantially adapted over time to the changing audience: from selected finance experts and investors to a number of non-specialised readers. She also identifies some functions of the Letters: mainly, they serve as a report on the company activities and performance and also have a promotional function, transmitting a positive image, explaining circumstances that led to the best possible policies undertaken, and conveying the idea of management reliability to investors. These letters may give an optimistic view about every aspect of the company life. This part of the Annual Reports, then, takes on a public relations function. Conversely, the more technical and adherent to reality description of the company performance, along with the general financial information, is contained in the auditors report, being their peculiar function (Breeze 2013: 87). The function of being an informational-promotional tool, useful to build trust, reputation and image, too, is commonly recognized in literature (Hyland, 1998; Garzone 2004; Rutherford 2005; Beattie et al. 2008; Breeze 2013; Dragsted 2014;). Rutherford (2005: 375) recognizes there are more positive words in the Letters to Shareholders than in other narrative sections of the Annual Reports, leaving room to the possible utilization of strategies like “impression management”. Moreover, he noted that in more favorable and promising years, the company refers to itself neutrally, in the third person as a *company* (Rutherford 2005: 371). Conversely, addressing the discourse in the first person, adds a “personal touch”, showing the human face of the company. Thus, the first person enhances the corporate image and makes the collective ethos stronger (Breeze 2013: 184). When the company has to deal with communicating negative issues, disasters, scandals, etc. corporate representatives try to justify themselves and safeguard their reputation. In doing so, the Letter to Shareholders plays an important role, because it represents a more “personal” and less aseptic way to communicate. The CEO is seen as the scapegoat and he/she tends to take on the responsibility of the wrongdoing (Breeze 2013: 109).

3. Method

The specific aim of this work is to analyze the communicative strategies utilized when the existence of the problem is admitted, and the intention is to repair, along with the cultural bias that affect the content and the way of communication. To do so, three models have been studied: Benoit's (1995) image restoration strategies, the trust-repair discourse by Fuoli/Paradis (2014), and the model of impression management, first conceptualized by Goffman (1959) and then further developed by several scholars, in particular Hooigemstra (2000). These three models were specifically designed to illustrate the different communication strategies. The first identifies the recurring categories of communicative behaviors activated in presence of perceived wrongdoing. The second model points out the actual strategies undertaken when the wrongdoing is acknowledged. Finally, the third model presents in detail the strategies to convey a less negative/more positive perception of the wrongdoing. Even though these three models seem to overlap, my aim is giving an insight at multiple level of analysis, thus giving a higher grade of focus at each stage. In the next sections, the three models will be illustrated, so that it is made apparent that they allow for the analysis of the communicative strategy at different levels of generalization, and therefore, they are complementary rather than overlapping. The analysis will be then integrated, in the following paragraph, with the cultural theories, to demonstrate that cultural bias contributes remarkably to make the communicative strategy effective and complete.

3.1 Benoit's model of image restoration strategy

This is the first level of analysis, which deals with the fact of admitting the problem or not. Benoit (1995, 1997) draws a model with the typologies of image restoration, to explain what types of communication strategies are used to disclose companies' weaknesses and wrongdoings (Erickson et al. 2011: 211). Such typologies are outlined in Table 1, and they cover the possible misconducts, accidents or scandals that may happen in the business life of a company.

Categories	Strategy	Description/example
Denial	1. Simple denial	Refuting outright that the organization had any part in the event
	2. Shifting the blame	Asserting that someone else is responsible
Evasion of responsibility	3. Scapegoating	Blaming the event on the provocation of another
	4. Defeasibility	Not knowing what to do; lacking knowledge to act properly
	5. Accident	Claiming the event was "accidental"
	6. Good intentions	Claiming the company had good intentions
Reducing the offensive act	7. Image bolstering	Using puffery to build image
	8. Minimization	Stating the crisis is not bad
	9. Differentiation	Indicating that this crisis is different from more offensive crises
	10. Transcendence	Asserting good acts far outweigh the damage of this one crisis
	11. Reducing the credibility	Maintaining the accuser lacks credibility
Taking corrective action	12. Compensation	Paying the victim; making restitution to set things to where they were before the event
	13. Corrective action	Taking measures to prevent event from reoccurring
Mortification	14. Mortification	Admitting guilt and apologizing

Table 1. Benoit's (1995) image restoration strategies.

As we can see in the Table, Benoit identifies five categories that include 1) the dismissal of the misconduct (denial), 2) the facing of the crisis (evasion of responsibility, 3) reducing the offensive act, 4) the reparation (taking corrective acts) and 5) the admission of the wrongdoing (mortification). For the purpose of this work, the first category, will not be considered, because in denying the misconduct, there will not be any repair strategy.

3.2 Fuoli/Paradis model of trust-repair discourse

The following level of analysis, that is the actions and the strategies to be enforced once the wrongdoing is acknowledged, is the model to restore trust designed by Fuoli/Paradis (2014). In this model the actions are mainly meant to neutralize the negative and emphasize the positive. “The neutralize-the-negative strategy is realized through the linguistic resources for dialogic engagement [...], the range of resources included in this category is broad, comprising epistemic modals (e.g. believe, think, be certain that), markers of evidentiality (e.g. see, hear. show that), expressions of attribution (e.g. say, claim, argue)” (Fuoli/Paradis 2014: 12). On the other hand,

The emphasize-the-positive strategy is directly connected to the linguistic resources that speakers use to express evaluation [which] refers to the linguistic expression of positive or negative subjective assessments of people, objects or events. Although adjectives and adverbs are primarily associated with this language function, evaluation is not tied to any specific set of language forms, but it can be conveyed through an open-ended range of expression. (Fuoli/Paradis 2014: 14)

3.3 Impression management

The third level of analysis, that is the practical communication of the wrongdoing, refers to impression management strategies. Impression management is “how individuals present themselves to be perceived positively by others” (Hooghiemstra 2000: 60). The concept is applied in corporate reporting (Godfrey et al. 2003) in order to affect audience

in their perception of a company's financial position, reputation on the market and reliability (Brennan/Merkel-Davies 2013: 110). The impression management strategies become evident in the corporate narratives where the message conveyed may correspond to an ostensible reality, amplifying positive aspects of the narration and at the same time, veiling less appealing aspects of the subject dealt with. In doing so, the readership perception might be altered (Brennan/Merkel-Davies 2013: 110). The concept of positive image refers to the reliability of the company in the industry it operates in, in the eyes of both the consumers and the investors. These impression management strategies may have good correspondence with the "neutralize-the-negative" and "emphasize-the-positive" actions in the Fuoli/Paradis model discussed above: as a matter of fact, they do not overlap, but the former is a further extent of the latter. Such strategies can play a pivotal role in restoring reputation, dented image in times of scandals, crisis or negative financial conjunctures. They are then used effectively to communicate not only the exceptional nature of the disaster, event or misconduct, but also that the corrective actions undertaken are effective and necessary (Brennan/Merkel-Davies, 2013: 112).

4. Analysis

4.1. Restore image models

One of the aims of corporate communication via Annual Reports, and particularly via CEO's letters is maintaining a positive image of the company. In the event of damaged reputation, the company representatives have to tackle the problem of restoring the positive image in the perception of the stakeholders. In the VW scandal, the main problem for Müller was to apologize for the misconduct. Apologizing, the "speaker's goal is to remedy an offense – and restore relational rights and privileges – by accepting responsibility" (Bisel/Messesmith 2012: 427).

The VW CEO Letter in the 2015 Annual Report, then, was focused on the strategy to admit, first, and apologize, afterwards, for the wrongdoing.

- (1) *we find* ourselves in the midst of what is probably the greatest challenge in the history of our Company (2015)
- (2) *we must* above all learn from past mistakes and draw the right consequences so that something like this can never happen at VW again (2015)

In the 2015 Letter, Müller speaks both in the first person singular and the first person plural. When he speaks in the first person singular, his aim is taking on personally the responsibility of the scandal.

- (3) although *I* would have preferred to be addressing you in more auspicious circumstances (2015)
- (4) *I* have great respect for the achievements and dedication of our employees. We are – *I* am – very grateful for that (2015)
- (5) this year, *I* am asking above all for your continued loyalty to VW in spite of the present pressures (2015)

Conversely, he speaks in the first plural to address the commitment of the company to make up for the inconvenience, to work hard to regain trust, and to show a collective, united and sound stance of the company (my italics here and there)

- (6) *Our Group* has qualities that did not vanish overnight, qualities on which *we* can also build for the future: strong brands and great vehicles (2015)
- (7) *We are all aware that* the Volkswagen Group still has a long way to go (2016)
- (8) *We also know* we asked a lot of you, our shareholders (2016)

In the 2015 Letter, Müller calls the problem “crisis”. In six out of eight paragraphs of the Letter, the focus is on the “crisis”, and on the efforts the company is doing\is going to do to solve the crisis. The words communicate undercover apologies. It is possible to fit Müller’s strategy to the 12th (Compensation), 13th (Corrective action) and 14th (Mortification) typologies in the Benoit’s model:

- (9) *Everyone at Volkswagen is working most diligently and with great commitment to rebuild the high esteem this Group rightly enjoyed for so long* (2015) (Compensation)
- (10) *We are doing everything we can to overcome this crisis: with effective technical solutions for our customers and trustful cooperation with all the responsible authorities in order to completely and transparently clarify what happened* (2015) (Corrective action)
- (11) *On behalf of the Volkswagen Group I would like to apologize to you, our shareholders, that the trust you placed in Volkswagen has been broken.* (2015) (Mortification)

The speaker has then admitted the wrongdoing. The next level of investigation makes it possible to apply the Fuoli/Paradis model to the Letters, as they contain plenty of the markers that the two scholars identify as relevant in the model (see 3.2), as well as the strategies they outline (“neutralize-the-negative” and “emphasize-the-positive”). Instances of the use of markers can be observed below:

- (12) *I realize that this course sometimes puts a great strain on patience – both yours and ours* (2015) (markers)
- (13) *For me it is important that you know there is much more to Volkswagen than this crisis* (2015) (markers)
- (14) *From the outset, I have believed it is important we use this crisis as an opportunity* (2015) (markers)

Examples of the other strategy are the following:

- (15) *But these figures also contain another important message: our operating business continues to be in excellent shape, our portfolio of twelve strong brands, unique in our industry* (2015) (emphasize-the-positive)
- (16) *A Group that boldly seizes the future, attains sustainable growth and opens up long-term perspectives* (2015) (emphasize-the-positive)
- (17) *I am firmly convinced that, with time, we will be able to say: no matter how grave the crisis was, it also opened doors for us* (2015) (neutralize-the-negative)

The scenario surprisingly changed in 2016, as VW became the first automaker in the world, selling some 10.3m vehicles. An unexpected result after the diesel scandal in 2015. This gave Müller the opportunity to manage the communication wisely in his favor. In the 2016 Letter there is little reference to the “crisis” (2 paragraphs):

- (18) Life sometimes has its ironic side. For years, Volkswagen seemed to be pursuing one overriding goal: to become the world’s biggest carmaker. Then the diesel scandal broke in September 2015, marking a profound turning point. And now – in spring 2017, when we are still coping with the consequences of the *crisis* and have long since defined new priorities for the future – the headlines read: “Volkswagen becomes the world’s best-selling automaker” (2016) (neutralize-the-negative)
- (19) At €7.1 billion, the operating profit, which had slipped into the red in the previous year due to the diesel *crisis*, was back in strongly positive territory (2016) (emphasize-the-positive)

In 2016, the intention of apologizing is still detectable (behind the thanks Müller gives in two different paragraphs). This message allows to file such a Letter as a document written to recognize the wrongdoing, even celebrating positive results that the market awarded them with.

- (20) I would like to thank all colleagues in the Group for their personal commitment and hard work during last year (2016)
- (21) On behalf of our employees and in my own name I would like to thank you for your loyalty and support during a difficult time for your company (2016)

Not surprisingly, these are the only two sentences in the 2016 Letter spoken in the first person singular. As a matter of fact, the communicative strategy of pronouns is in line with 2015: the CEO speaks in the first person singular any time he has to apologize or take responsibility. When it comes to share the merit, the positive aspects, the history and the image of the company, he speaks in the first person plural, involving staff, customers, investors, etc.

At a deeper level of analysis, it is possible to detect Müller’s attempt to impress readership with the identification of the crisis as an opportunity. It leaves room to the utilization of some impression

management techniques; the strategic use of promotional discourse aimed at offsetting the effects of the crisis, as can be seen in the following excerpts:

- (22) Volkswagen Group has the firm resolve and the *strength* to master the difficult situation we find ourselves in with *its own resources*. From the outset, I have believed it is important we use this crisis as an opportunity: an opportunity to *realign the Group* in an automotive world that is facing *epoch-making change* (2015)
- (23) The diesel issue has clearly overshadowed much in recent weeks. For me it is important that you know there is much more to Volkswagen than this crisis. Our Group has *qualities that did not vanish overnight*, qualities on which we can also *build for the future: strong brands and great vehicles, outstanding technological expertise and innovative strength, our global presence, millions of loyal customers* all over the world, and a *skilled team that is totally committed* to these customers. I have great respect for the *achievements and dedication of our employee* (2015)

In the 2016 Letter the background for using impression management techniques was even more favorable. The company came out of the scandal with excellent sales figures, becoming the first carmaker in the world. In the 2016 Letter, Müller did not miss the opportunity to consolidate the result and take advantage from it. It seems he conveyed the message that they really turned the *crisis* into an *opportunity* (excerpt 22).

The discourse is highly connoted by impression management:

- a) There are many adjectives whose aim is enhancing the representation of the reality. This feature is in common with the Fuoli/Paradis model, notably in the strategy of *Emphasize-the-positive*:
 - (24) Volkswagen seemed to be pursuing one *overriding* goal (2016)
 - (25) we delivered a *record-breaking* 10.3 million vehicles last year (2016)
 - (26) *very successful* year for Volkswagen (2016)
 - (27) back in *strongly positive* territory (2016)
 - (28) we are making Volkswagen *faster, more focused and efficient* (2016)

- b) Müller sets ambitious objectives, addressing and sharing them with staff, consumers and investors. Discourse is mainly on the acquisition of new technology and investment in the human resources (Painter/Martins 2017). The aim seems to be to make all of them feel a part of this innovation, of this step into the future, forgetting what happened in the previous year, and trying to regain business confidence and consumer trust:
- (29) We are leading this great company whose brands and products have always stood for innovative strength, security, enduring value and emotional design into tomorrow's world. There is no question that we have set ourselves a challenging goal. But it is most definitely worth it (2016)
- (30) Our future program, TOGETHER – Strategy 2025, maps out this change and underpins it with a *convincing* plan. We are working to transform Volkswagen into a *globally leading provider of sustainable mobility*. To that end, *we have forged new partnerships* and entered into new participations in recent months. With MOIA, we have established our own company for new mobility solutions. *We have set clear signs* regarding our ambitious plans for e-mobility. By decentralizing responsibility within the Group we are making *Volkswagen faster, more focused and efficient*. We are doing more in terms of *integrity and sustainability*, too, because a company's long-term success depends on *its authenticity in assuming responsibility* for the environment and society (2016)

The impression management technique reveals in the voluntary shift of the focus from the crisis to the new opportunities. The word crisis is found only twice, in two different paragraphs, and the reference to the difficulties is made only incidentally in excerpt (31). Moreover, the architecture of the Letter is clearly designed to make little reference to past negative events and to enlighten the future, convincing the readership (all the possible stakeholders) to join the company in the “journey”. The strategy of speaking collectively, as a member of a group, is effective as Müller considers investors and customers as a part of the group and part of the success achieved.

- (31) We also know we asked a lot of you, our shareholders, recently. On behalf of our employees and in my own name I would like to thank you for your loyalty and support during a difficult time for *your* company (2016)

Müller launches the metaphor of the “journey”, present in the 2015 Letter as well, to head into the future, to light the way to new opportunities in the journey, which is now safe and wise.

- (32) The Volkswagen Group is *on the move*. We are leading this great company whose brands and products have always stood for innovative strength, security, enduring value and emotional design into tomorrow’s world. There is no question that we have set ourselves a challenging goal. But it is most definitely worth it. And we very much hope *you will remain at our side on this journey* (2016)

4.2 Cultural models theories

Culture is the fundamental basis of communication. It is “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others” (Hofstede 2010: 5). As a consequence, culture has a deep impact on mind, changing the way people see things, act and speak in a given context.

The strategies investigated so far, beyond the communicative architecture built to get the result, seem to show some cultural bias. The theoretical background to be considered for the purpose of this work may refer to the studies of Hall (1976), Hofstede (2010) and Lewis (1996). They all have deeply investigated the relationships existing among culture, language and behavior.

The first model that can be applied to the study of the Letters, is Hall’s model (1976). On the basis of the analysis of the modalities of speaking among different nationalities, Hall (1976: 91) divides cultures in two groups:

- *Low context cultures*, characterized by verbal and explicit communication, with an emphasis on facts, direct information, and coherence. All the conversation goes straight to the point;
- *High context cultures*, characterized by non-verbal and implicit communication. The emphasis is on context, feelings, or the way the others understand what is said according to context. The conversation hardly/rarely goes straight to the point.

German culture is an example of a low context one (Djursaa 1994: 139; Hall 1990: 6; Lewis 1996: 107). Müller seems to confirm the parameters of such a model, as in his communication, he is direct,

explicit, and concise, using the first person singular and getting straight to the point: the crisis, the consequences and future plans.

The second model that can be applied to my corpus is the *Six Dimensions of National Cultures* model theorized by Hofstede (2010). In his pioneering work the classification of cultures is pursuant to six dimensions, that are:

1. *Power distance index*: This index shows “the degree to which the less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. The fundamental issue here is how a society handles inequalities among people” (2010: 29-31). For that reason, cultures can have large power distance, that means there is no equality between members (strong hierarchical order), and small power distance, in which people strive to have equality in the name of democracy.
2. *Individualism vs. collectivism*: People of individualist cultures are self-oriented, independent and goal-oriented. They take care of themselves and are judged for their qualities; collectivist cultures, on the contrary, rely on the group and they are oriented to the result of the collectivity (2010: 53-86).
3. *Masculinity vs. femininity*: Masculine cultures are competitive, heroic, and successful; conversely, feminine cultures, tend to be cooperative and modest (2010: 89-133).
4. *Uncertainty avoidance index*: This dimension refers to the relationship of cultures with the future. Cultures with a high index have rigid codes and behavior, meant to control future actions and events; on the contrary, a lower index relates to those cultures which have a more realistic and fatalistic approach to the future (2010: 135-184).
5. *Long term orientation vs. short term normative orientation*: If this index is low, societies view social changes with mistrust; instead, a higher index is instead typical of more pragmatic societies, where the efforts made in the present to prepare for the future are encouraged (2010: 187-194).
6. *Indulgence vs. restraint*: Indulgence societies have less regulation; restraint societies have strict social rules regulating their lives (2010: 235-259).

From the investigation of the Letters, these dimensions can be detected in some traits: the choice of taking on the responsibility for

the wrongdoing, can be seen as an expression of leadership and hierarchy, strong individualism and heroic masculinity (dimensions 1, 2, 3). Furthermore, the choice of naming the problem ‘crisis’ and the focus on the future, considering the crisis as an opportunity (excerpt 22), seem to fit with the dimensions concerning uncertainty avoidance and long-term orientation (dimensions 4, 5). The commitment to re-establish the dented image, the trust among shareholders, and in general, to the ethical and the market rules, recalls the notion of restraint in (in dimension 6). The correspondence is not surprising, as Mathias Müller is German, and German culture suits most of the first parameters for each pair (i.e. high-power distance, individualism, masculinity, high uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation) in Hofstede’s dimensions (Endrass 2014: 35-38).

The third and last model is the one proposed by Lewis (1996) who, based on behavior, divides cultures into three groups (Lewis 1996: 33-34):

- linear-active, that are “cool, factual, decisive planners cultures, focused on rational thought”;
- multi-active, that are “warm, emotional, loquacious and impulsive”;
- reactive, that are “courteous, amiable, accommodating, compromiser and good listener”.

Germany represents the extreme pole of the linear-active cultures (Lewis 1996:32-33). The 2015 and the 2016 Letters can be accredited in this theory, as the focus on the future, the VW CEO’s plans and the absolute rationality by which he faces the crisis seem to fit in such a partition. Lewis’ cultural markers do appear especially in the 2016 Letter, because Müller underlines the way himself, being the leader of the organization, was able to regain trust from the stakeholders, becoming the first carmaker in 2016. The implication is that VW is back again because of *their* (he claims the hard work of all the staff and patience of stakeholders) being rational, pragmatic, resolute, capable to solve problems successfully. That explains why the focus is more on the first person pronoun *we* instead of *I*, as if the CEO (all alone) was responsible for the guilty act and the ‘group’ lexicalized through the inclusive first person plural were those working hard to make up.

5. Other implications in the car industry

The crisis affected sales at VW, but also in the whole German car making industry. The marketing strategy changed both at VW and at some German competitors, indeed. Once the scandal burst off, the main VW competitors as well lost ground on the markets: BMW lost 5% and Daimler 5 % (Ruddick 2015).

It can be reasonably inferred that the scandal affected not only the brand image of the company, but also the image of the German paradigm of reliability, strictness and control; in other words, the so-called 'country of origin' effect (COE), that is:

the recognition, by consumers, of a country or geographical area to which the product belongs. Together with such recognition, a whole series of attributes connected to that geographical area and their population are consequently connected to the brand; this process creates associations in consumers. (Di Ferrante et al. 2016)

Thus, it was the whole reputation of the German leading quality in the car industry to be at stake: its perception, might be affected by this scandal (Chambers 2015). Consequently, one of the first moves by VW Marketing Department management, was to change the logo. The payoff DAS AUTO disappeared soon after. The new logo, then, reported no payoff, just the company name: VOLKSWAGEN. Other carmakers, maybe worried about a possible domino effect on the markets, decided to undertake other moves that could possibly safeguard their own brand image, and changed their slogans, campaigns and strategic communication.²

² One of them, OPEL, changed the message in its commercials as it seemed they didn't want to be confused with the dented image of German cars in those months. In the Opel Karl commercial, broadcasted in Italy before the scandal, the message was: "Opel Karl, il meglio della ingegneria tedesca (translated: Opel Karl, the best of GERMAN engineering)" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cowlSpKkOQ> retrieved on February 20th 2018); in the post-scandal commercial, the sentence was changed with

6. Final remarks

This study has tried to demonstrate that the architecture of the communication released after the 2015 VW diesel scandal – namely, the Letters to Shareholders addressed by the VW CEO Mathias Müller, included in the 2015 and 2016 VW Annual Reports – can be framed into models and strategies aimed at image restoration after a crisis, a negative event or a disaster, with the consideration of apparent cultural bias.

The commonly recognized promotional nature of the narrative parts in the Annual Reports helped Müller design his strategy to regain trust, credibility and positive image after the scandal. The methods proposed in this study seem to clarify, explain and help interpret Müller's communication.

On the one hand, the image/trust restoration models constituted a fundamental lens for the analysis of the communicative strategies chosen to address the mistakes and rebuild trust. The first model, Benoit's typology of image restoration after a crisis, was used to identify and examine the stance chosen by Müller. The second model, Fuoli/Paradis's (2014), was applied to identify the communicative strategy conveyed by the Letters, as it indicates the possible communicative actions to be taken: *neutralize-the-negative* and *emphasize-the-positive*. At a deeper level of investigation, the third

“Opel Karl, il meglio della ingegneria OPEL (translated: Opel Karl, the best of OPEL engineering)” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UASnm4PYiBE> retrieved on February 20th 2018). Another sentence, present in the OPEL pre-scandal commercial, referred to the value for money price of the car, was “*I tedeschi non scherzano mai* (translated: Germans never play games)”. The sentence was replaced in the post-scandal commercial with the sentence “*Non è possibile, ma è vero*” (translated: It is not possible, but it is true). Even though it cannot be proved that it is an established strategy (replacing the adjective “German” with a more general one), the coincidence with the scandal is quite striking and it is worth a note.

model, namely the *impression management strategy*, helps explain how the CEO decided to mainly enhance the positive aspects, in the steam of the positive business results in 2016, in order to “turn the crisis into an opportunity” (excerpt 22).

On the other hand, the analysis is completed by the synergic and complementary cultural theories of Hall (1976), Lewis (1996) and Hofstede (2010). The cultural markers help understand the choice of the strategy architecture. The cultural traits drive Müller’s words and moves, through a “journey” that surprisingly (or not) led VW out of the crisis, becoming in 2016 the first carmaker in the world.

The results can be summarized as follows:

- The strategy to admit, apologize and express future commitment in the 2015 Letter turns out to be successful, as it prepares the ground for the unexpected positive business result in 2016. The deeper the level of investigation, through the models of image/trust repair, the clearer the intention to enhance the representation of reality and impress the reader;
- The communicative strategy adopted is culturally biased, as the national cultural markers affect the communicative way, the content and the result obtained;
- The use of two complementary and synergic sets of models and theories is effective in the investigation of the Letters: it can be considered as a proposal of a possible analytical methodology, since limiting the analysis to the trust-repair models only would not allow to explain and highlight the communicative actions that are “national culture driven”.

These results are not only relevant to understanding the mechanisms of repair strategies in crisis management contexts, but they may also be relevant to actually build communication campaigns aimed at affecting customers’ attitudes toward brands and companies. Finally, the application of the three models complemented with the cultural approach to actual case studies, might be a powerful teaching tool in any Business English or English for Specific Purposes class, as they would empower students abilities to handle crisis-related communication issues as well as their awareness of the multitude of variables that contribute to (re)establish the reputation of a company.

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