

THE ROLE OF COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS IN CORPORATE STORYTELLING – A METHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: Corporate storytelling has been usually investigated from the perspective of both marketing studies (Brown 2006: 734) and corporate communication (Ford et al. 1995; Boje 2001; Clifton et al. 2020), which have emphasized the role played by narratives in corporate identity claims. This work is a pilot study aimed at providing a different methodological perspective applied to corporate narratives. In particular, theories from cognitive linguistics (Rosch 1978; Lakoff, 1987), previously applied to corporate mission statements (Ran et al. 1997), will be explored here in corporate narratives. More specifically, cognitive categories including, among others, positive, negative and neutral positioning along with interaction processes (Glaser et al 1968) will be taken into consideration. Positioning, for instance, implies a value structure, as an organization can be positioned at either the positive or negative end of the continuum or at some neutral midpoint. From a general perspective, an identity claim that represents an organization too positively or too negatively may lack credibility to target audiences. Conversely, an identity claim that defines an organization neutrally may construct an identity that audiences consider more reliable. In brief, examples of storytelling employed by centenarian Italian companies (<https://www.assocentenari.it/en/index.php>) will be explored in order to analyse the ways these companies represent themselves from a cognitive perspective.

Keywords: corporate storytelling, cognitive linguistics, corporate identity, centenarian companies.

1. Introduction

The purpose of the study is to propose an investigation of corporate storytelling from an integrated cognitive-linguistic perspective. In particular, in this pilot research study, some cognitive categorizations, previously explored in corporate mission statements, will be applied to corporate narratives. The corpus under investigation includes the storytelling sections published on the home pages of the companies belonging to the 'I Centenari' Association, founded in Naples in 2001 by Pina Amarelli and Martino Cilento. They decided to create a project for the enhancement of long-standing family firms, following the experience already consolidated by Les Hénokiens, an association from across the Alps, which succeeded in bringing together family businesses with more than two hundred years of history from all over the world. They are long-lived family firms, which managed to survive over time thanks to their roots and set of traditional values. In this study, the website home pages of long-lived Italian family companies producing artisan and hand made products will be investigated, as illustrated in the following table:

Table 1. Description of the companies under scrutiny

Company	Industry
A. D'Andrea	Home textile
Besana	Dried fruit
Cianciullo Marmi	Natural stone for building
Cilento M. & F.llo	Textile/men's tailored clothing
Coelmo	Generating sets
Casa D'Ambra Vini D'Ischia	Wine
De Luca Industria Grafica e Cartaria	Packaging
Don Alfonso 1980	Restaurant/catering
E. Marinella	Fashion
Fabbriche Riunite Torrone di Benevento	Confectionary/merchant wholesaler
Gruppo Petrone	Pharmaceutics
Giovanni Ascione & Figlio	Coral craftsmanship/jewellery
Giuseppe Bottiglieri Shipping Company	Shipping
Hotel Jaccarino/Hotel Imperial Tramontano	Hospitality

Agenzia Marittima Michele Autuori	Shipping
Ottica Cav. Raffaele Sacco	Optics
Pastificio F.lli Setaro	Food/ pasta
Serpone srl	Sacred art
Antonio Sada e F.lli	Corrugated paper/packaging
Ceramica Pinto	Artisan pottery
Ventrella	Jewellery
De Nigris	Food /Vinegar
Voghera	Clothes
Umberto	Restaurant
Gruppo Tavassi	Logistics
Castaldo	Agriculture
Amarelli Liquirizia	Food / Liquorice
Grand Hotel Excelsior Vittoria	Hospitality
Savinelli	Pipes
Officine grafiche Francesco Giannini & Figli	Typography
Guida Editori	Publishing

More recently, much attention has been paid to the immaterial values that characterize Italian long-lived family companies. Their historical values and traditions, for instance, have been analysed as strategic resources employed to build empathy in their relationships with customers (Montemaggi et al 2007). In this scenario, narratives have acquired more and more importance as, through narration, long-lived family companies can communicate their past traditions, values and identity more efficiently, thereby encouraging the involvement of customers and improving the knowledge of the companies on the part of all their stakeholders (Salmon 2008; Qualizza 2009). The first section of this work will be devoted to a literature review of previous studies on narratives in corporate discourse from both linguistic and marketing perspectives. The methodology section will outline the cognitive approach applied to the corpus under scrutiny. The findings section will show some examples published on the 'I Centenari' website, where cognitive categorization can easily be identified in published

corporate storytelling. Finally, some final observations will be provided in the concluding remarks section.

2. Literature review

The analytical focus on storytelling is increasingly common across different disciplines with different aims, as, for instance, in social science and corporate studies. In particular, in corporate discourse, storytelling has been considered as 'responsible' for corporate collective identity. The latter "resides' in the collective identity stories that, for example, people tell to each other in their conversations, write into corporate histories, and encode on websites" (Brown 2006: 734). More specifically, from a narrative perspective, "organizations' identities are discursive (linguistic) constructs constituted by the multiple identity-relevant narratives that their participants author about them, and which feature, for example, in documents, conversations and electronic media" (ibid.: 733). Thus, narratives can be performative, as they are "speech acts bringing into existence a social reality that did not exist before their utterance (Ford et al 1995)". This concept derives from social constructionist and critical studies, which have suggested that narratives are the products of particular contexts (Gabriel 1995), that fragments of narrative intertextually dialogue with, quote from and anticipate other narratives (Fairclough 1992), and that organizations are literally narratives (Cooren 1999) or ante-narrative networks of dynamic and unfinished stories (Boje 2001). A clear instance of this is provided by an investigation from marketing studies, where storytelling was explored in order to provide a better understanding of the nature and role of the strategic orientation of family firms (Riviezzo et al. 2015). An interesting approach derives from the fields of cognitive linguistics and social psychology (Glaser et al. 1968; Ran et al. 2007). Thanks to these studies, it is possible to investigate a fundamental three-way relationship between identity, language, and cognitive processes of categorization. In particular, the interaction processes of cognitive categories including, among others, positive, negative and neutral positioning along with movement (positive, negative, stable), can help to represent corporate identity through narratives. Specifically, organizational identities are defined through the organizations' classification according to social and conceptual categories, as well as corporate identity claims. As Ran et al. (2007: 157) asserts, "[a]n identity claim establishes an idiosyncratic system of value-laden categories; positions the organization positively or negatively within these categories; projects images of identity movement and transformation; constructs past, present, and future identities; and defines the organization in terms of categories reflecting its actions and interactions with other individuals or organizations whose identities are also constructed through the identity claim".

Understanding the cognitive processes involved in organizational identity claims is fundamental as corporate identity is strongly entangled with organizational performance. Thus, its exploration may help professionals who investigate corporate strategies to represent their company in a more efficient way and explore critically the strategies of others. According to the traditional

concept of categorization, all objects belonging to a category share essential features and thus a category is characterized by definite boundaries (Lakoff 1987). Nevertheless, Wittgenstein (1958) underlined that the referents of words do not necessarily share a set of common attributes as they may bear only “family resemblance” to one another, forming amorphous categories with fuzzy boundaries. Thus, to identify the right categories where words are included and understand the actual speakers’ intentions, it is necessary to explore the linguistic and social contexts where those words and expressions are found. According to Ran et al. (1997), when a communicator uses words to label an object, the audience’s knowledge of the category influences how the object is likely to be interpreted; that is, category labels tend to invoke mental images for audiences based on their understanding of category prototypes. In this study, the cognitive mental processes involved in the construction of an organization’s identity were investigated.

3. Methodology

The methodology will be based on the cognitive categorization applied to corporate narratives (Lakoff 1987; Ran et al. 1997; Taylor 1995). In particular, the classification typically applied to mission statements will be adopted to investigate the ways storytelling is developed by centenarian companies. The main assumption is that storytelling is strongly entangled with performativity. In particular, branded communications are performative (Lowrie 2007: 992; Mautner 2008), as they do not simply express a pre-existing brand identity, but are the means through which brand identity is created, transforming a functional commodity into a socially meaningful entity and generating “economic capital through the exploitation and creation of symbolic capital” (Thurlow et al. 2007: 310). According to Browning (1991), people do not just tell stories, but they tell stories to “enact” an account of themselves and their community. Stories also shape the course and meaning of human organization.

Thus, an attempt to outline the performative power of corporate storytelling will be made through exploration of cognitive categories.

As mental images, organizational identities are conceptual representations of organizations built up through Identity claims. Identity claims include statements made on behalf of an organization by official spokespersons (e.g., letters to shareholders in corporate annual reports, advertisements, public relations announcements, corporate mission statements) and a wide variety of other formal or informal statements authored by various stakeholders, such as employees, customers, industry competitors, market analysts, media commentators, etc. (Ran et al. 2007). Identity claims that articulate different conceptions of an organization can socially construct its identity for specific stakeholder audiences in specific contexts (Berger et al 1966). As mentioned earlier, categorization has been adopted in previous studies to explore mission statements on some company websites. As reported by Ran et al. (1997: 169), “[m]ission statements often emphasize the comprehensiveness of an organization’s activities, products, or services. Because an organization must

satisfy the demands and expectations of stakeholders in diverse domains, it needs to be perceived as capable of providing complete and comprehensive coverage of these domains". Mission statements convey a company's identity through the use of 'comprehensive words' aimed at defining them, while Storytelling, on the other hand, strongly identifies a company as 'responsible' for corporate collective identity. Thus, cognitive categories traditionally used to analyse corporate mission statements will be used here to analyse the companies' storytelling outputs, in order to explore the identities shaped by the 'I Centenari' organizational members. According to Ran et al. (1997: 171), "[l]anguage is used to define the organization's position within the cognitive space, to convey dynamic images of organizational movement through the space, and to establish logical or functional interactions between specific identity categories". Cognitive categories include, among others, positive, negative and neutral positioning along with movement (positive, negative, stable), interaction processes. Positioning implies a value structure in which an organization can be positioned at either the positive or negative end of the continuum or at some neutral midpoint between positive and negative positions. Positive positioning includes, among others, positive nouns or noun phrases, positive superlatives.

Conversely, negative positioning is conveyed by processes that are analogous to those used in positive positioning: they consist in using negative nouns/superlatives and/or noun phrases. Finally, identity claims may contain neutral language that positions the organization in a neutrally defined category.

Thus, neutral positioning does not convey clear positive or negative connotations and therefore positions the organization in a 'neutral' or 'emotion-free' context. From a general perspective, an identity claim that represents an organization too positively or too negatively may lack credibility to target audiences while an identity claim that defines an organization neutrally may construct an identity that audiences consider more reliable. A further category is represented by movement, "which conveys dynamics through what we call movement processes — language that projects an image of the organization moving along figurative trajectories through the cognitive space established by the identity claim toward positions representing future identity states or goals" (ibid.: 174). Positive, negative or neutral movement can be found in identity claims.

Positive movements suggest that the organization is moving along a trajectory toward a desired position or objective. In particular, positive movements suggest that although the organization may not have yet reached the desired identity position or goal, it is moving along a trajectory toward it. Identity claims can also imply the movement of the organization from a positive to a negative identity category or toward the more negative end of a category continuum, which is often metaphorically expressed as downward or backward movement. Negative movement is related, instead, to either the movement of a company from a positive to a negative category or the tendency towards the more negative end of a category continuum. Finally, stable movement could be compared to the ideas of "constant velocity or acceleration in physics, whereby an organization's identity is represented as being in a kind of dynamic equilibrium (e.g., constant positive movement) rather than a static position"

(ibid.: 176). Further possible classifications include category interactions which mainly deal with construction of the organization's identity in terms of interactions with other categories of social actors or conceptual objects (ibid.: 176). For instance, some examples imply inputs received by other actors or providing outputs to others. Finally, interaction processes are also found in identity claims. They denote idealized functional relationships between various subject, object, or action categories. The processes include, among others, causal, transitive, and associative relationships, as well as various other logical forms.

4. Findings

In this section, some examples of corporate storytelling will be drawn from the 'I Centenari' website to show how cognitive categorization can be applied to the narratives delivered by the companies under scrutiny. In the following example, both positive positioning and positive movement are found in the narratives delivered by Cilento M. & F.llo-Ugo Cilento - a centenarian Neapolitan tailor's shop belonging to the 'I Centenari' Association:

1) La nostra è una missione di eccellenza e stile, di estrema cura della qualità, tutto ciò che è prodotto su misura porta con sé anche un servizio superiore fatto di coccole al cliente, questo è il nostro mondo. (Cilento M. & F.llo-Ugo Cilento) (<https://www.assocentenari.it/associato-cilento.php>)

1) Ours is a mission of excellence and style, for attention to quality, all that is custom made also brings with it a superior service of pampering the client, this is our world. (Official English version available at <https://www.assocentenari.it/en/associato-cilento.php>)

In example 1), movement is clearly represented by 'mission', a noun defined as "an important task that people are given to do". The tasks to be performed by the company are to both ensure that the customers receive excellent, stylish products and to establish good relationships with them. Positiveness as an essential identity feature is emphasized by the cataphoric reference of the possessive pronoun (ours). Positive positioning is clear in this example along with movement.

Moreover, the company's commitment to guarantee future quality aims to satisfy its customers. Thus, interaction processes are involved in identifying the company's identity along with the two categories mentioned above, as the final aim is to satisfy the customers. Interaction processes are defined as processes which "construct causal, transitive, and associative relationships, as well as various other logical forms" (Ran and Duimering 1997:177).

Movement is also found in some other instances of storytelling by the owners of Serpone - a tailor's shop where holy garments are embroidered:

2) La valorizzazione di un patrimonio di saperi unici e irripetibili avviene anche con le tante innovazioni di prodotto e con l'apertura di un piccolo laboratorio dove si sperimentano ancora oggi nuove tecniche di lavorazione, l'utilizzo di filati pregiati come l'oro e dove ancora si tramanda l'arte del

ricamo a mano, da una generazione all'altra di abili operaie (Serpone-Francesco Serpone). <https://www.assocentenari.it/associato-serpone.php>

2) The regard of a legacy of knowledge unique and unrepeatable also happens with the many product innovations introduced over the years, always with respect for tradition and history. And with the opening of a small workshop where they are still experimenting new processing techniques today, the use of quality yarns like gold, and where, still, the art of hand embroidery is handed down from one generation of skilled workers to another (Official English version available at <https://www.assocentenari.it/en/associato-serpone.php>)

In 2), movement across time is clearly expressed by time adverbials such as “over the years”, “always” referred to innovations encouraged by the company along with traditional values over a long period of time. Thus, the company’s identity is constructed by stable movement referred to constant positive value over time - a constant velocity. A stable movement from the past towards the future, with a focus on the company’s glorious past, is found, instead, in the following examples. Storytelling in 3) is delivered by a company producing electrical generators. Example 4) reports the story told by the owner of a Neapolitan company which makes jewellery:

3) La sicurezza di chi opera sul mercato da tempo, sopravvivendo ai cambiamenti, disegnando i confini dell'impresa per un futuro sempre più vicino, nel rispetto delle persone che condividono un credo irrinunciabile nel modo di fare business, e la gestione della sicurezza sul lavoro, consentono alla Coelmo di essere riconosciuta e apprezzata in tutto il mondo (Stefania Brancaccio, Domenico e Marco Monsurrò- Coelmo, Gruppi Elettrogeni Industriali) (<https://www.assocentenari.it/associato-coelmo.php>)

3) The security, the certainty of those operating on the market for some time, that survives the changes rather than the ephemeral of the new, thus drawing the boundaries of the company for a an ever closer future, with respect for people who share with them an ethical manifesto (Official English version available at <https://www.assocentenari.it/en/associato-coelmo.php>)

In 3) stable movement is represented both by the adverbial for some time referred to the length of time during which the company has been operating on the market, while guaranteeing reliability and loyalty to the organizational members, and the verbal phrase “survives the changes”, which refers to duration of the company over time. In example 4, stable movement is combined with positive positioning:

4) Argento, oro e bronzo si fondono per creare opere sempre differenti dalle precedenti, ma al passo con i tempi anche nelle creazioni meno impegnative, bilanciando sapientemente l'orientamento al mercato con la voglia di miglioramento e con la ricerca di nuove opportunità, anticipando le richieste dei più esigenti. (Ventrella, Paolo Ventrella) (<https://www.assocentenari.it/associato-ventrella.php>)

4) Silver, gold and bronze combine, intertwine and merge to create works that are always different from the previous ones, but in step with the times even in less demanding creations, expertly balancing market orientation with the desire for continuous improvement. (Official English version available at <https://www.assocentenari.it/en/associato-ventrella.php>)

In the example above, stable movement is conveyed by the noun phrase continuous improvement, where the adjectival premodifier implies commitment by the company to provide positive achievements over time. Positive positioning is implicit in the same noun phrase along with the adverbial phrase “expertly balancing” market orientation, where the adverb “expertly” communicates the capability of the company to keep up its expertise over time.

Positive positioning is the most prominent category in the following example, as positive qualities are employed to refer to the traditional values of the famous company that produces hand-made ties:

5) La fedeltà di Marinella a Napoli è consapevolezza e gratitudine per ciò che oggi rappresenta nel mondo. Un gene imprenditoriale unico che ha interiorizzato e reinterpretato lo stile inglese in un mood personale, forgiato dalla forte e ingombrante identità della città. Marinella resta a Napoli. Sempre più corteggiata, adulata e ricercata, sempre più global. Ma a Napoli. Nonostante tutto. (Maurizio Marinella- Marinella) (<https://www.assocentenari.it/associato-marinella.php>)

5) Marinella's loyalty to Naples is also awareness and appreciation for what it represents today in the world. A unique entrepreneurial gene, of the founder and his descendants, who has been able to interiorize the English style and reinterpret it in a personal mood but forged by the strong and cumbersome identity of the city. (Official English version available at <https://www.assocentenari.it/en/associato-marinella.php>)

In 5), positiveness is construed in terms of pride of the relationship of the company with the city of Naples, but also as regards respect and devotion to its founder. Only a few instances of interaction processes have been found in storytelling by companies producing paper (example 6), packaging (example 8), or in narratives by Don Alfonso, a centenarian Neapolitan restaurant (example 7):

6) L'impresa nel senso nobile della parola deve confrontarsi con il proprio territorio, deve produrre ricchezza prima per il prossimo poi per i proprietari. (De Luca Industria Grafica e Cartaria -Andrea de Luca) (<https://www.assocentenari.it/associato-deluca.php>)

6) An enterprise is not for its own sake. An enterprise in the noble sense of the word has to deal with its own territory, it must produce wealth for the neighbor first then for the owners. (Official English version available at <https://www.assocentenari.it/en/associato-deluca.php>)

7) Ancora oggi Alfonso e Livia, insieme ai figli Ernesto e Mario, diffondono la conoscenza, il rispetto e la valorizzazione del territorio, offrendo la possibilità di conoscere le sue bellezze, gli odori, i colori attraverso i loro piatti e la qualità delle materie prime. Una dinastia che fa del forte legame

per la terra una linfa vitale inesauribile per raccogliere le grandi sfide offerte dal mercato, in un connubio di passato e modernità, di innovazione e tradizione. (Don Alfonso-Alfonso Iaccarino) (<https://www.assocentenari.it/associato-donalfonso.php>)

7) Numerous are the recognitions that remain in the heart of Livia and Alfonso by celebrities who attended the restaurant, from Carlo Azeglio Ciampi to the Queen of Holland, as well as many ordinary people who live a dream, an experience of light, unique and unrepeatable, in a charming setting. (This version does not correspond to the Italian one although it is the official English version available at <https://www.assocentenari.it/en/associato-donalfonso.php>)

8) Profonda la considerazione per l'ambiente e la salute delle persone, che trova riscontro nell'orientamento verso package biodegradabili, riciclabili o riutilizzabili. Prodotti che sotto forma di imballaggi, scatole, raccoglitori variopinti e atossici provano a ricreare il ciclo chiuso della natura (Sada& F.lli- Antonio Sada) (<https://www.assocentenari.it/associato-sada.php>)

8) Profound, finally, was and is the consideration for the environment and people's health, which has been reflected in the orientation towards biodegradable, recyclable or reusable packaging. The territory being a constituent element of the company, that is where we get the raw material, then becomes a privileged recipient of a great part of the production. (Official English version available at <https://www.assocentenari.it/en/associato-sada.php>)

In 6), and 8) interactions are represented by relationships of the company with the local area in terms of its contribution to the area (e.g., must produce wealth for the neighbour) or attention to environmental issues (e.g., orientation towards biodegradable, recyclable or reusable packaging). Conversely, in 7), emphasis is placed on the relationships with people who used to go to the restaurant in the past and people who still go there to appreciate its charming atmosphere.

5. Concluding remarks

In previous studies, corporate storytelling has been mainly explored from the perspective of both marketing studies and corporate communication. In particular, the role played by narratives in corporate identity has been investigated and analysed in detail. Taking our trajectory from these antecedents, this study sought to propose an additional perspective, by addressing the issues related to the mental categorization involved in corporate identity narratives. In particular, this work aimed to show how cognitive linguistics could help explain how corporate identity claims are developed through storytelling strategies. Thus, from a methodological perspective, some cognitive categories, previously applied to corporate mission statements, have been here identified and explored in corporate storytelling in order to discover which strategies are typically employed by Italian family companies to define themselves and build-up their own identity. The study has shown the

predominance of positive positioning and movement as the most relevant cognitive categories found throughout the whole corpus. The companies define themselves through dynamics which represent a movement from the past to the future while they tell the story of their efforts that are firmly rooted in the past while reaching into the future.

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