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Corporate identity and its variation over time

A corpus-assisted study of self-presentation strategies in Vodafone's Sustainability Reports

Abstract: This study explores the discursive construction of corporate identity in disclosure statements about non-financial performance. The corpus for analysis consists of the Sustainability Reports published by Vodafone, the British telecommunications company, over twelve fiscal years, from 2000/2001 to 2011/2012. After retrieving instances of self-references in subject position and quantifying them, the collocational profile of the two most frequent forms, i.e. *Vodafone* and *we*, will be described paying attention to the textual meanings most often associated with them through the analysis of concordance lines and their classification in functional groups (Mahlberg 2007). Due to its relatively long and consistent tradition of social and environmental reporting, Vodafone is eligible for a case study of whether and how its corporate identity has changed over time. Therefore, self-presentation patterns will be examined not only in the corpus as a whole, but also in individual subcorpora to gather evidence of possible rhetorical shifts in the way Vodafone has shaped and reshaped its corporate identity.

1 Introduction

In today's socio-economic context, corporations have fully-fledged legal personalities: they can "undertake actions, own property and do business in [their] own name" (Breeze 2013: 4). Companies have become proper social agents, who have to respond for the consequences of their activities to the communities in which they operate. The globalisation of the market together with mounting competition have further increased the need for businesses to publicly account for their activities (Evangelisti Allori & Garzone 2010: 10). Therefore, it is crucial for corporations to maintain good relationships with different groups of primary and secondary stakeholders. Communication is key to the company's success. Much of it has now to do with the construction

of a credible public identity that is capable of generating social consensus on the corporation's activities.

According to Breeze (2013: 8–15), identity is the projection of the company's self-understanding (see Balmer & Greyser 2002 for the view that corporations have not one, but multiple identities that need to be aligned to work effectively). Identity is the result of top-down decisions taken at managerial level and is normally kept under strict control because it is a powerful tool for the company to differentiate itself from competitors. As indicated in *The 1st Strathclyde Statement on Corporate Identity* (International Corporate Identity Group, ICIG, 1995), identity can reinforce organisational culture and ultimately guarantee growth and success.

There is broad consensus among communications scholars and discourse analysts that corporate identity is constructed through discourse. As Breeze puts it (2013: 178),

all the company's relationships, with clients or customers, government or state, competitors, investors, stakeholders in general and, of course, the media, can and should be managed through discourse. Discourse is one of the corporation's most powerful tools in the current configuration of society.

As discourse is as a form of social practice performed through the use of language (Jones 2012), by analysing how corporations employ language, it is possible to gain insights into the way they construct their identity reflecting and reinforcing the system of beliefs and knowledge on which they rely. This paper deals with the way corporate identity is discursively constructed in non-financial disclosures, i.e. documents issued by companies embracing the values of sustainable development and reporting on their social and environmental performance. Previous studies (e.g. Aiezza 2015; Lischinsky 2010, 2011) have shown that one of the primary functions of non-financial disclosures is not so much to provide performance data, but to construct for the company the identity of a responsible business. Examining what language choices are made to achieve such a goal will provide insights into the way companies represent themselves in relation to the issue of sustainability and how they propagate certain values. This is, precisely, the overall aim of this study, which will be pursued through three more specific research goals – as explained in the remainder of this Introduction – analysing how the British telecommunications company Vodafone talks about itself and its actions in a corpus of Sustainability Reports (SRs) covering twelve fiscal years, from 2000/2001 to 2011/2012.

A first goal will be to understand what type of 'persona' the company projects when talking about its sustainable development policies and practices, specifically whether it considers it to be more rhetorically effective to appear as a formal and institutional entity or as a community with shared values and objectives. To this aim, I will investigate what forms of self-reference are preferred by Vodafone in its SRs, assuming that different types of person deixis imply different kinds of self-understanding. In line with existing corpus-assisted discourse studies of corporate identity (Aiezza 2015; Lischinsky 2010, 2011), I will concentrate on the 1st person plural pronoun *we* and 3rd person references (e.g. the company name and expressions such as *the company* and *the Group*), which will be retrieved and quantified by using Sketch Engine's concordance programme.

To further elucidate the discourse practices through which Vodafone constructs its identity of a sustainable business, I will look at the textual meanings related to particular types of self-reference in subject position, thus gaining insights into what the company predicates about its various corporate rhetors. To pursue this second goal, I will first analyse what verbs co-occur with the two prevailing forms of self-reference, namely *Vodafone* and *we*. Then, I will explore recurrent textual meanings associated with particular subject-verb combinations. Specifically, I will analyse the concordance lines in which collocations occur and group together instances with similar 'local textual functions' (Mahlberg 2007) (see Section 3.3 for more details). In so doing, it will be possible to identify the meanings that are relevant to the community that produces and consumes a certain text or group of texts (Mahlberg 2007: 196), in this case, Sustainability Reports. Therefore, the analysis of collocations and their textual meanings will show what activities contribute to the construction of Vodafone's identity as a sustainable business, and what rhetor-activity combinations are considered most effective to this aim, reflecting the type of organisational culture that the company wishes to reinforce through its discourse practices.

The two research goals stated above, i.e. the analysis of preferred forms of self-reference and of the textual meanings that tend to be associated with them, will provide information on the mechanisms of identity construction most frequently adopted by Vodafone. However, considering that corporate identity is "inherently subject to evolution and change" (Evangelisti Allori & Garzone 2010: 12) and that "reporting social and environmental activities has gathered momentum in the last 15 years" (Breeze 2013: 166), a third goal of this study will be to analyse whether Vodafone's corporate identity has changed in recent years responding to specific socio-cultural and organisational

demands, and whether any traces can be found of the trends noted in the existing literature (see Section 2 for an overview) about businesses' changing conceptualisation of their identity in relation to sustainability. More specifically, the analysis will concentrate on how self-presentation strategies and the meanings associated with prevailing forms of self-reference have varied since the early 2000s. The occurrences of self-references through the two most frequently used rhetors, i.e. *Vodafone* and *we*, will be investigated in terms of their ratio over time (from 2000 to 2012). Subsequently, a diachronic collocation analysis of the main corporate rhetor employed by the company throughout the years, i.e. the pronoun *we*, will be conducted to understand what textual meanings persist among the most salient ones and whether some meanings emerge or recede at specific points in time.

The discourse-analytical approach taken in this study is primarily text-oriented, although the context of communication will be taken into account for the interpretation of results. Indeed, the case study nature of the investigation will allow me to pay greater attention to non-linguistic factors that could influence the interpersonal choices made by the company. Corpus linguistics techniques will be used to notice recurrent patterns of self-presentation. The size of the corpus being modest (about 350,000 words), this study can be considered a "small-scale corpus analysis" (Bednarek 2009: 21), in which quantitative information is complemented with the manual annotation of meanings.

The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 introduces the notion of Corporate Social Responsibility, i.e. the framework within which companies articulate their commitment to sustainable development. The section moves on presenting the SR as a genre and reviewing existing discourse studies, including corpus-assisted ones, related to the construction of corporate identity in SRs. Finally, Section 2 outlines how the meanings conveyed by SRs have shifted in recent years as documented in previous analyses. Section 3 illustrates the methods adopted in this study, describing the features of the corpus (3.1) and the procedures followed to retrieve self-references (3.2); to derive collocations and group occurrences in functional groups (3.3); and to identify rhetorical shifts across the years (3.4). Sections 4, 5 and 6 present the results of the three research goals of the study respectively, namely what types of self-reference are favoured by Vodafone; what the major verbal collocates of preferred forms of self-reference are and what textual meanings they convey; and, finally, whether the overall picture obtained about Vodafone's strategies of identity construction applies to all the

SRs of the corpus or whether rhetorical shifts can be noticed. Section 7 concludes the paper.

2 Corporate social responsibility, Sustainability Reports and corporate identity

Bhatia and Lung observe that corporate identity results from the combination of various aspects among which are “the values, mission and philosophy” (2006: 273) of the corporation. Due to the pressure of growing public awareness (Bhatia 2011: 27) and the interest of investors in buying “clean investment products” (Selmi-Tolonen 2011: 45), businesses are increasingly articulating their identity in terms of commitment to the values of sustainable development. They do so through the notion of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). CSR has become a crucial legitimacy strategy for companies: “The development of CSR programmes can be seen as an attempt to narrow legitimacy gaps and cope with them in a systematic fashion” (Ihlen 2009: 245). The commitment to sustainability through CSR therefore enables corporations to enhance, maintain and repair their reputation.

Activities related to the policy of sustainable development are reported annually in disclosure documents called CSR Reports or Sustainability Reports (this is the label used in this paper in accordance with Vodafone’s recent reporting practices). These non-financial disclosures are issued on a voluntary basis. Whether they become integral part of business processes depends on a number of internal factors, including business size, industry sector and the type of relationship with customers, as well as external aspects, such as the role of investors, public pressure and political regulations.

The SR is a hybrid genre and reflects the “promotional turn” (Breeze 2013: 180) of corporate discourse, whereby informative and persuasive purposes intermingle. A trend has been noticed towards the increasing standardisation of the topics covered, such as information about stakeholder inclusiveness and the sustainability context. This tendency is connected to the adoption of criteria for sustainability reporting recommended in documents

such as the Sustainability Reporting Guidelines issued by Global Reporting Initiative.¹ However, companies do not have to adhere to specific standards, particularly in terms of *how* they communicate contents (Catenaccio 2011). It is this freedom in drafting disclosures and conceptualising what CSR and sustainable development mean for companies that makes SRs particularly interesting to study from a discourse analytical perspective.

CSR reporting strategies have been widely examined, mainly in disciplines such as business management and policy studies. Comparatively, there have been fewer discourse analyses of sustainability disclosures. However, a growing body of research is emerging that employs both text-oriented qualitative approaches and corpus-assisted methods. Among the text analyses is Fuoli's (2012) study of appraisal resources in BP's and IKEA's 2009 social reports. The two companies appear to have divergent approaches: while BP favours the image of an authoritative but detached interlocutor, IKEA appears more empathetic with the audience. Fuoli explains this difference using legitimacy theory and making reference to the different groups of stakeholders primarily addressed by the two corporations, namely investors and regulators for BP and customers for IKEA. Fuoli's study demonstrates that while trying to convey a desired image for themselves, companies also construct relationships with readers that elicit specific attitudinal responses.

Lischinsky (2011), on the other hand, uses both qualitative and quantitative corpus methods to explore self-references in 50 non-financial reports by large Swedish corporations. He observes that impersonal references to the company name are more frequent than 1st person plural references. However, he argues that both impersonal legitimacy and the affiliative voice associated with the use of the pronoun *we* are needed by corporations, who skilfully shift from one form to the other to reach their discourse goals. Lischinsky focuses, among other phenomena, on the corporate rhetor in subject position. He shows that different forms display different co-occurring patterns with verbs: the company name occurs with items that relate to business activities while *we* co-occurs with verbs connected with ethical issues.

Subject-verb associations are also investigated by Aiezza (2015). She carries out a corpus-assisted discourse analysis of the construction of

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¹ For the current *G4 Sustainability Reporting Guidelines* see the Global Reporting Initiative's website at <https://www.globalreporting.org/information/g4/Pages/default.aspx> (last accessed July 2017).

corporate identity in SRs published in English between 2008 and 2011 by energy companies operating in the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China) and in G8 countries. She focuses on forward-looking verbs in association with *we* and the company name, and analyses semantic prosodies and preferences. The results of her study indicate that projections tend to be optimistic and that their purpose rather seems “to stress a positive behaviour than to provide a full picture of future scenarios” (Aiezza 2015: 74). Hence Aiezza argues that positive forecasts mainly serve to enhance corporate image and to stress that the company is already a successful sustainable business.

This paper too is concerned with the meanings conveyed by subject-verb combinations. By focusing not only on lexical verbs but also on auxiliaries and modals, it will be possible to understand whether the actions described are presented as goals, accomplishments or work-in-progress activities. This issue is interesting to investigate in order to understand how Vodafone positions itself with regard to sustainable development. For instance, if the collocation corporate rhetor + *will* were found to be highly salient in Vodafone’s SRs, it would suggest that the company emphasises its commitments, expectations and good intents. Hence, the view of sustainability that would derive is one of a yet-to-be-achieved condition, a goal for the future, not a present state of affairs. Since the way companies talk about their actions reflects their ideas of what being sustainable means, corpus-assisted discourse studies that have analysed the notion of sustainable development as understood by companies are also relevant to the present investigation.

Alexander (2002) adopts a critical perspective to the use and content of the very term ‘sustainable development’ as it occurs in the 1999 and 2000 reports by Shell on the topics of people, planet and profits. Using a concordance programme and deriving the left collocates of the phrase, Alexander notices that *sustainable development* has a very positive semantic prosody serving to emphasise the good intentions of the company. However, he also notices that the adjective *sustainable*, when used with other head nouns, has no clear referential value: vagueness in meaning makes this adjective little more than a buzzword which is used strategically by the company to dissipate critical voices. Similarly, Lischinsky (2010) explores the notion of sustainable development looking for the node word *sustain** in a corpus of reports by 50 large Swedish companies. He notices that issues of profit are strictly connected to the concept of sustainability; he also observes that statements of intentions are more salient than references to concrete actions. Brown (2013) combines corpus analysis (keywords and collocations)

and framing theory to identify differences and similarities in the meanings conveyed by NGOs and British 'green' corporations in their websites about environmental protection. He finds that the two groups have distinct cognitive systems of concern for the natural environment; businesses, in particular, rely heavily on meanings related to the frames of good intentions and risk management. The former is absent from the NGOs' cognitive system, suggesting that it is specific to the way corporations articulate their commitment to environmental sustainability.

What these studies seem to agree on is that the notion of sustainable development is an elusive one and that companies frame their relationship with it mainly in terms of commitment to its values, showing willingness to listen to the concerns of stakeholders and to address them responsibly. However, there seems to be little (linguistic) evidence that companies' talk of sustainable development in their disclosures is actually "being walked" (Laine 2005: 409). The analysis reported in this paper will verify whether in the SRs published by Vodafone, the company articulates its adherence to the values of sustainability merely through continuous commitment or whether other strategies to obtain legitimacy can be noticed.

Finally, as this paper also takes a diachronic approach, studies that have investigated non-financial disclosures longitudinally are taken into account too. Despite being a relatively new genre, the SR seems to have undergone some developments in the past ten years or so. Probably the most evident one pertains to the name of the genre itself. While at the beginning the preferred way to refer to non-financial disclosures was 'Environmental Report', now the most widespread term seems to be 'Sustainability Report' (Catenaccio 2011). This change in terminology reflects the fact that corporations have progressively integrated sustainable development strategies in three directions, namely environmental, economic and social sustainability. These are the 'three pillars' that constitute the so-called Triple Bottom Line approach. Consequently, SRs nowadays include not only information about environmental policies, but also about social and economic issues.

Other changes have been noticed in rhetorical terms. Bowers (2010) observes that at the beginning of the 2000s companies committed to sustainability as a matter of compliance to norms and regulation, whereas in the late 2000s, they started stressing the economic value of sustainable activities. Breeze (2013: 166), too, reports a shift in recent SRs, which differently from the past also include issues related to accountability and transparency.

A diachronic study of how businesses' understanding of the notion of sustainable development has changed over time is carried out by Laine (2010). Using 'interpretative textual analysis', Laine focuses on the non-financial disclosures by three major Finnish companies during the period 1987-2005. He finds that over those two decades the corporations turned what initially appeared as a revolutionary concept into an idea to maintain the status quo. By 2005, the view that sustainability was irreconcilable with the principles of capitalism lost appeal and was replaced by the belief that sustainable development is an attainable goal compatible with prevailing business activities. In addition, while in the 1990s there was evidence of conflicts between corporations, environment and society, by the mid 2000s these contrasts had been mitigated and corporations simply seemed to accept sustainability as a common way of doing business. The focus now is no longer on problems but on the solutions provided by companies while undertaking their ordinary operations (Laine 2010). The diachronic analysis conducted in this paper will verify whether self-presentation patterns and their verbal collocations (especially auxiliary verbs) can uncover traces of similar, or other, discursive shifts in Vodafone's report archive.

3 Methodology

This section presents the corpus collected for this study, explains the procedures followed to investigate self-references, and describes the characteristics of the diachronic analysis and how rhetorical changes were identified.

3.1 The corpus

The corpus compiled for this study consists of twelve SRs and totals approximately 350,000 words (see Table 1). The PDF texts were downloaded from Vodafone's report archive, which at the time when this research was carried out listed the reports published from 2000/2001 to 2011/2012.² The Sketch Engine (Kilgariff et al. 2014) was used to create the corpus from the

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² The Vodafone report archive is available at <http://www.vodafone.com/content/sustainabilityreport/2015/index/vision-and-approach/about-our-reporting/report-archive.html> (last accessed June 2016).

PDF files.³ Once converted to plain texts, all the files were hand-checked for conversion errors, an indispensable step since this study deals with collocation analysis. Stretches of text occurring in tables, pictures and captions were retained because in the most recent SRs multimodal communication is extensively exploited and omitting the textual elements within such visual items would deprive the analysis of important data.

Tab. 1: Corpus for analysis consisting of twelve SRs by Vodafone (2000–2012)

Fiscal year	Words
2000/2001	7,968
2001/2002	12,155
2002/2003	15,794
2003/2004	17,610
2004/2005	26,195
2005/2006	32,493
2006/2007	37,552
2007/2008	107,164
2008/2009	33,167
2009/2010	36,188
2010/2011	12,597
2011/2012	9,717
TOTAL	348,600

The average text length of the SRs collected is about 29,000 words. However, some texts are well below or above this value. For instance, the 2011/2012 SR is shorter, because it is a Summary Report, which was published when the company started using the corporate website as the main tool for disseminating information about its sustainable performance.⁴ On the other

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³ The Sketch Engine Corpus Query System is available at <http://www.sketchengine.co.uk> (last accessed June 2016).

⁴ The following year, 2012/2013, Vodafone reintroduced the practice of issuing full SRs in PDF format while preserving the new habit of using the corporate website to provide the entire range of information on sustainability policies. The 2012/2013 SR was not available when this research was carried out.

hand, the 2007/2008 SR is longer. As compared to the previous report, it contains more pages and features less visual material. In addition, it presents a different macro-structural organisation with many more thematic blocks. It is difficult to understand why the 2007/2008 SR relies so much on text. What can be observed, however, is that in various passages the company declares to report information *for the first time* (the phrase occurs 10 times in the 2007/2008 SR and not even once in the previous SR). Because of differences in text length, when comparisons across sub-corpora are made, percentages will be employed focusing not so much on the over/underuse of items, but on (dis)similarities in the way features are distributed within individual texts (see Section 6.1).

3.2 Identifying and quantifying forms of self-reference

In order to achieve the first goal of this study, namely to understand what type of 'persona' Vodafone constructs in its SRs, self-references were retrieved using Sketch Engine's concordance programme. The node words *Vodafone*, *we*, *Group*, and *company* were focused on, as suggested by Vodafone itself, which in its SRs declares that "[a]ll references to Vodafone, Vodafone Group, the Group and 'we' [...] mean Vodafone Group Plc and its operating companies" (Vodafone Group Plc, *Corporate Responsibility Report 2004-2005*). Reading of concordance lines was required to distinguish between "averrals" (Tadros 1993) by the company and statements made by other voices. Only the former were analysed and quantified.

3.3 Deriving collocational patterns for *Vodafone* and *we* and identifying functional groups

The second goal of this study is to analyse what Vodafone predicates about its various corporate rhetors, thus gaining insights into what actions are presented by means of an institutional identity and what activities the company seeks legitimation for through a more affiliative 'persona'. In order to reach such goal, collocations were derived for the most frequent forms of self-reference, i.e. *Vodafone* and *we*. The log-likelihood (LL) test was chosen as a confidence-based measure to establish associations. Compared to other

tests,⁵ LL seemed to be better suited to the analysis of collocation and colligation, as it places emphasis on high frequency lexical verbs, auxiliaries and modals. Verbal collocations were calculated setting the window to the 3rd item on the right of the node word. This span was chosen after comparing the collocations thus obtained with those derived using different spans. With the +3 span, major verbal collocates in different constructions could be identified minimising the risk of excluding important verbs, as it happens with the +1 span (e.g. in *we would continue*) and with the +2 span (e.g. in *we will also support*). On the other hand, using a wider span the risk was that of counting redundant items, as is the case with the +4 span, e.g. *we believe we must continue*. The minimum frequency in the +3 span was set at three occurrences to exclude hapax and dis legomena.

As for the cut-off point at which collocates were considered worth analysing, the choice was unavoidably arbitrary. I opted for a ranking system (see Baker 2014: 137), meaning that only the items with the highest LL scores were focused on. This decision is mainly justified on practical grounds, since in some cases the list of collocates with a minimum frequency requirement of 3 was very long. A cut-off point of twenty verbal collocates was chosen as it was wide enough to allow for variation in meaning and sufficiently manageable for a detailed discussion. When the collocates derived with the set span and minimum frequency requirements did not exceed twenty items, no cut-off point was needed, but the attention was nevertheless focused on collocations with high LL values.

In order to explore recurrent textual meanings associated with specific subject-verb combinations, the collocations identified for *Vodafone* and *we* (e.g. *Vodafone supports* or *we want*) were analysed in their context of occurrence by reading all the concordance lines in which they appeared. Following the procedure outlined in Mahlberg (2007), concordance lines were grouped according to the 'local textual functions' that subject-verb combinations performed, that is, the meanings that they acquired in specific stretches of text. As Mahlberg observes, local textual functions represent "the textual components of meanings that are associated with lexical items" (2007: 195) and the labels assigned to functional groups are devised *ad hoc* to account for meanings that are "embedded in textual contexts" (2007: 199).

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⁵ The Mutual Information (MI) test was also applied to the data. MI is a strength of association test which identifies what is unique in the use of a given item in a corpus. It was discarded in this study for its almost exclusive focus on content words, including very low frequency items, which would have compromised the analysis of colligation patterns.

For instance, in her study of the use of cultural keyword *sustainable development* in newspaper articles, Mahlberg notices that it occurs in 11 main semantic contexts, which include the functional group of 'Conferences and the World Summit', where *sustainable development* is the topic for discussion (e.g. ... *at the world's biggest summit on sustainable development*), or the functional group 'Education in and for sustainable development', where the keyword occurs in contexts making clear references to the educational issues of sustainability (e.g. ... *and pupils are trying to bring sustainable development issues into the...*). By grouping together instances sharing similar textual functions, it is possible to gain insights into the socially-relevant meanings that items convey in the group of texts under study.

3.4 Characteristics of the diachronic analysis of self-references and their collocational patterns

The third goal of this paper is to analyse whether the overall identity constructed by Vodafone in the twelve SRs of the corpus characterises the way the company has always portrayed itself from 2000 to 2012 or whether differences can be noticed in individual texts, suggesting that the company has adjusted its discourse practices as a response to specific contextual demands changing its legitimacy strategies.

The diachronic analysis is based on a corpus that extends over a rather short period of time, which, to apply Mair's (1997 as cited in Gabrielatos et al. 2012: 158) label, could be considered a 'brachychrony'. In other words, the time-span is too short to fully deserve the label of 'diachrony', but sufficiently spread out to capture shifts. Two main reasons account for this time length: on the one hand, the amount of material available is limited, as the first SR ever published by Vodafone covers fiscal year 2000/2001; on the other hand, the case study nature of this investigation required the creation of a manageable corpus. Despite the limited amount of time covered, the diachronic approach was chosen assuming that the dramatic growth of sustainability disclosure in the recent years (Pilot 2011) and the increasing attention of the general public to ethical business management would have had an impact on Vodafone's self-presentation strategies within the CSR context.

According to Gabrielatos et al. (2012) time-span is not enough as a criterion to describe the features of a diachronic corpus study. Another important aspect is 'granularity', which is given by the number of sampling points divided by the time length of the corpus. Gabrielatos et al. (2012: 153)

argue that high granularity guarantees high levels of accuracy in the results obtained. The present study is characterised by a low level of granularity (=1), as there are 12 sampling points and the time-span covers 12 years. To increase the granularity, the sampling points would need to be augmented by reducing the interval between them. Unfortunately, this is not possible in the present study, as the number of sampling points is constrained by the specific genre under scrutiny, which is normally published once per fiscal year.

Shifts in the use of language were identified by first comparing the ratio (in percentage points) of the two most frequent forms of self-reference (i.e. *Vodafone* and *we*) across the twelve fiscal years. Subsequently, the collocates of *we*, i.e. the predominant corporate rhetor, were calculated for each SR and a cut-off point of twenty items was chosen. In order to distinguish possible changes in the collocational patterns of *we*, functional groups within each subcorpus were identified following the procedure outlined in Section 3.3. Adjacent years, proceeding chronologically, were compared to notice what functional groups were present in each subcorpus. I did not apply any statistical test to identify significant differences in quantitative terms, because the focus is on the relative salience of functional groups and not on phenomena of over/underuse of specific items.

4 Form of self-reference

Table 2 illustrates the frequency of the various forms of self-reference found in the corpus, distinguishing between all occurrences and those in subject position in averrals by the company. The most widely used construction in subject position is the 1st person plural pronoun *we* followed – with a considerable gap – by the company name *Vodafone*. This result indicates that overall the corporation seems to prefer a personal type of interaction as a way to gain legitimacy for its operations.

Tab. 2: Forms of self-references (raw frequencies)

Self-references	All	Corporate rhetor in subject position in averrals
<i>The company</i>	187	23
<i>(The) Vodafone Group (Plc)</i>	1,248	27

Self-references	All	Corporate rhetor in subject position in averrals
<i>The Group</i>	503	31
<i>Vodafone</i>	3,570	790
<i>We</i>	4,661	4,339
TOTAL	10,169	5,210

The way that companies communicate is likely to reflect their values and type of corporate culture. Eaton & Brown (2002) report that in order to sustain increased competition and to regain the lead in its market sector, Vodafone underwent a cultural change in the mid-late 1990s whereby the company started working to “replace ‘command and control’ with a ‘coaching and collaboration’ culture” (Eaton & Brown 2002: 284). Vodafone thus moved from a hierarchical organisational structure to a flat one, where team members are more engaged in decision-making processes. This change is likely to have left a mark on the communication strategies adopted in the company’s disclosure documents and the preponderance of *we* seems to confirm this presupposition.

Looking at other corpus-assisted discourse studies of corporate identity through self-references, additional interpretations for Vodafone’s interpersonal choice can be proposed. Bernard (2015) found that as compared to Integrated Annual Reports (a hybrid genre disclosing both sustainable and financial performance), SRs issued by the same companies tended to rely more on *we*-references. Although broad generalisations should be avoided, a hypothesis that arises from Bernard’s study is that a correlation might exist between the SR as genre and the preference for a more personal interactional style. Hence, one reason for the predominance of *we* in the corpus could be that when ethical business behaviour is the main issue at stake, companies find it rhetorically more effective to use 1st person plural pronouns. *We* enables writers to identify with their arguments, to underscore their contribution to sustainable development and to gain credit for their actions.

Another factor playing a role may be the specific cultural and socio-economic context in which companies operate. Aiezza (2015) found that in SRs by companies in G8 countries, *we* was the most frequent corporate rhetor. Conversely, businesses in the BRIC countries adopted a more “bureaucratic style” (Aiezza 2015: 71) favouring the use of the company name and of the label *the company*. It could therefore be hypothesised that “more mature sustainable practices” (Aiezza 2015: 71) allow businesses to appeal to

readers through the voice of an “affiliated speaker” (Cheney & McMillan 1990: 97) representing a community that shares values, interests and goals. This interpretation may hold true for Vodafone: despite operating in both developing and developed countries, its engagement with sustainability issues can be considered mature, as it has been committed to sustainable development for more than 15 years and has been regarded as being capable of setting new standards in sustainability reporting practices (Allison-Hope 2014).

Cultural and socio-economic differences might also explain why the results obtained in this investigation are in conflict with Lischinsky (2011: 268). He found that in a corpus of 50 SRs by some of Sweden’s largest companies, 3rd person self-reference by means of the company’s name was the most frequent choice with a ratio of 2.05:1 to 1st person plural pronouns. The divergence between Lischinsky’s results and the data obtained here is evident, and even more so if only the frequencies for *Vodafone* and *we* in subject position in averrals are considered. In this case, the ratio is 5.5:1, with the 1st person plural pronoun occurring more than five times as frequently as the company name. It is possible, therefore, that different areas and audiences have dissimilar expectations about what counts as convincing interpersonal practices in SRs.

5 Major verbal collocates of *Vodafone* and *we* and their textual meanings

In the previous section different forms of self-reference were extracted from the corpus. It was noted that *Vodafone* shows a marked preference for *we* and that it relies predominantly on the company name when an impersonal subject is needed. In this section, the verbal collocates of these two forms will be analysed to understand what representation *Vodafone* makes of itself through such corporate rhetors. I will start discussing collocations with lexical verbs, distinguishing between verbs that co-occur uniquely with one node word and those that are shared (even though the grammatical form may be different). I will then proceed considering those verbs, such as *has* or *are*, that can either be used as auxiliaries or in other constructions. Finally, I will focus on modal verbs.

Table 3 compares the main verbal collocates of *Vodafone* and *we*. Both the co-occurrence counts and the LL values are rather high, especially for the

1st person plural pronoun, so the list of likely collocates is long. Only the first twenty items (ranked by LL scores) are shown in Table 3. The verbs in bold type are unique to the top ranking items of each node, while those in Roman are shared, meaning that they appear, albeit in different word forms, within the first twenty collocates of both items. For instance, the item *acting* (and the lemma ACT) only appear among the twenty top ranking collocations of *Vodafone*, while the lemma HAVE is a shared collocation, which appears in the highest ranking position in both lists, in the form of *has* and *have* for *Vodafone* and *we* respectively.

Vodafone co-occurs with items that can be divided into two main functional groups. The first includes verbs related to corporate policies and governance practices; the second comprises verbs referring to public/stakeholder perception of the company and to the recognition of its merits. These groups were identified based on recurrent meanings associated with the top 20 verbal collocates of *Vodafone* within all the concordance lines in which they appeared, following Mahlberg (2007) (see Section 3.3).

Tab. 3: First twenty highest-ranking verbs collocating with *Vodafone*⁶ and *we*.

Vodafone				We			
Verb	Co-occurrence count	Candidate count	LL	Verb	Co-occurrence count	Candidate count	LL
has	247	993	1,123.255	have	779	1,708	4,815.422
is	355	2,976	1,080.939	are	576	2,537	2,581.650
continues	26	47	168.444	would	284	371	2,173.009
will	77	1,111	153.486	will	305	1,111	1,478.079
acting	23	39	153.299	believe	120	183	849.592
does	30	121	134.942	operate	101	129	777.475
was	47	426	133.476	said	100	150	712.924
seeks	15	21	109.160	aim	88	144	602.995
supports	17	36	102.684	continue	89	163	580.305
should	29	223	91.515	do	102	307	534.999
recognises	12	26	71.745	commissioned	59	82	435.312
engages	9	12	67.052	recognise	56	71	432.143
worked	14	52	65.497	working	93	401	411.827
participating	13	45	62.889	want	52	87	352.421
believes	9	17	57.155	engage	55	131	319.452
acquired	12	43	57.106	provide	73	364	300.147
introduced	16	108	54.600	launched	52	187	250.807
teamed	6	6	53.649	plan	45	119	249.526
joined	8	14	52.552	introduced	43	108	243.901
won	9	21	52.073	developed	57	271	239.970

□□
⁶ Choosing the +3 span, the collocates listed here regard the node word *Vodafone* as well as country-specific references such as *Vodafone UK* and *Vodafone Spain*.

The first functional group, i.e. that of verbs referring to corporate policies and governance practices, will be analysed considering each individual semantic aspect in turn. The items that describe corporate policies are *seeks*, *supports*, *participating*, *teamed (up)* and *joined*. Each verb has distinct shades of meaning. For instance, *seeks* indicates the efforts in achieving sustainability goals that are related to the telecommunications sector or that require collaboration with other institutional parties (example 1) [bold type and italics mine]. *Joined*, *teamed (up)* and *participating* refer the corporation's involvement in initiatives by charities and other sustainability bodies (example 2). *Supports* underscores Vodafone's help and encouragement to governments and non-profit organisations for their policies (example 3).

- (1) **Vodafone** also **seeks** to help governments meet their objectives on a number of issues of broader public interest. [2006/2007]
- (2) **Vodafone is participating** in the Global eSustainability Initiative assessment questionnaire and risk assessment tool (GeSI) [...] [2005/2006]
- (3) **Vodafone supports** the European Commission's efforts to strengthen security and privacy, and increase industry's obligation to notify consumers of security breaches. [2007/2008].

The item that describes governance practices is *acquired*. Its use is illustrated in example 4. The firm's expansion in China is mentioned as investment made to develop worldwide, a choice that is justified, in sustainability terms, as an attempt to address the 'digital divide' issue. Personal references are scattered throughout the passage, but the use of *we* with *acquire* would appear too personal, informal and possibly celebratory in this context.

- (4) Our rapid growth has meant that we have inherited a wealth of local business, employment and environmental practices. We have made structural changes to respond to this diversity while, at the same time, establishing the consistency that is proper for a global business. In November 2000, for example, **Vodafone acquired** an equity stake of approximately 2.18% in China Mobile (Hong Kong) Ltd [...]. [2000/2001]

The need to maintain a high level of formality is also observable in example 5, which illustrates the second main functional group: public perception and recognition. While the idea of community and teamwork is underlined by the possessive pronoun *our*, which appears in the heading of the passage from

where example 5 is taken (i.e. *Been recognised for our transparent communication on tax*), the use of *Vodafone* with *won* conveys a more detached and official tone to the statement. In so doing, the company manages to construct a convincing ethos, promoting itself without offending readers for “indulg[ing] in large amounts of self-praise” (Breeze 2013: 103).

(5) Been recognised for our transparent communication on tax.

Vodafone won the ACCA award for best CR report in 2006 and for tax and public policy reporting in 2007. [2007/2008]

The functional group of public perception and recognition also includes the verb *acting*. Although semantically it does not refer to the fact of being perceived or assessed, it was included in this group because it occurs in passages referring to the opinion that stakeholders have of the company. The 23 concordance lines of *acting*, distributed across most fiscal years since 2003/2004, all feature a sequence that recurs with minor changes: [...] *stakeholder opinion on how responsibly Vodafone is acting regarding mobile phones, masts and health*. The verbs preceding such a long object vary and include *survey*, *improve* and *report on*. On the one hand, this collocation unveils the formulaic nature of SRs, which was already noted by Alexander (2002: 242) through his analysis of the type-token-ratio of two reports by Shell; on the other hand, it illustrates that the company name can work as an impersonalising device. As Breeze (2013: 160) points out, impersonalisation occurs when there is the risk of negative outcomes. In the sequence above, the 3rd person reference reduces the potential threat posed to the “human face” (Breeze 2013: 159) of the organisation by stakeholder opinion on the most material issues for Vodafone.

With regard to the collocates of *we*, three functional groups were identified that do not seem to be salient with *Vodafone* as subject. The first presents forward-looking statements, and includes the verbs *plan*, *aim* and some uses of *want* (examples 6–8). The second deals with the company’s CSR activities and comprises the following items: *commissioned*, *launched*, *developed* and some uses of *provide* (examples 9 and 10). Differently from the institutional and impersonal tone conveyed by the company name, *we*-references enable the firm to construct itself as a responsible corporate citizen who embraces the values of sustainable development with honest intentions. The use of *we* also allows the corporation to underscore its proactive attitude and to take the merits for the positive sustainable outcomes of its CSR initiatives.

- (6) **We plan** to review our new commitments to take into account new issues that may arise in the future and ensure we meet our stakeholders' expectations. [2003/2004]
- (7) **We aim** to recycle 95% of network waste across the Group [...]. [2009/2010]
- (8) **We want** to support adaptations of technology to meet the needs of those with physical and mental disabilities. [2001/2002]
- (9) [...] **we launched** a dedicated intranet site on climate change in 2007 [...]. [2007/2008]
- (10) During 2004, **we commissioned** four research studies into the socio-economic impacts of mobile phones in Africa. [2004/2005]

The third functional group in which *we* occurs deals with metadiscourse meanings, and includes some uses of *provide*, *want* and *said*. In examples 11 and 12, *we* makes it explicit that the reporter's voice coincides with that of the corporate citizen, who is therefore responsible not only for sustainable performance but also for its proper disclosure. In example 12, *we* also contributes to the construction of reliability: through a personal tone, the company expresses empathy for customers' worries about identity theft, stressing that it can be trusted upon to take care of their personal information.

- (11) In the following pages **we provide** a brief overview of the steps taken over the last year to establish our approach to sustainability in Ghana and Qatar (see pages 12–13) [2009/2010]
- (12) Identity theft is a growing problem. **We want** to reassure our customers that their security is protected. [2007/2008]

Vodafone's SRs are sequential texts published constantly since fiscal year 2000/2001. As will be discussed below, Vodafone establishes intertextual references between SRs through the pattern *we said we would*+infinitive and *we have*+past participle. The function of this structure is to show readers that the sustainability claims made in previous SRs are followed by concrete actions. The collocation *we said* can therefore be viewed as conveying metadiscourse meanings that go beyond the ongoing discourse and refer to previous events in the chronological sequence (Mauranen 2012 and Ädel 2006 provide a similar interpretation for intertextual references in sequences of university speech-events and in writing respectively). In showing that past forward-looking statements and commitments are followed by actions, Vodafone seeks to gain credibility and accountability. Often these sequences

are used to narrate what Dryzek calls “success stories” (2013: 159), where achievements are highlighted (example 13).

- (13) **We said we would increase** the number of phones collected for reuse and recycling by 50% by March 2007 (from the 2004/05 baseline) [...]. **We have achieved** our target of increasing by 50% the number of phones collected for reuse and recycling from the 2004/05 baseline. [2006/2007]

Certain high-ranking collocates of *Vodafone* and *we* are shared. These can be divided into the following functional groups: commitments (CONTINUE), corporate stance (BELIEVE, RECOGNISE) and CSR activities (ENGAGE, WORK, INTRODUCE). Let us look at some of these verbs to understand why one subject is preferred to the other in specific contexts. The need to usefully step into and out of the discourse, as noted above, is clearly one reason why personal or impersonal forms are employed. This purpose is particularly evident with the cognitive verb BELIEVE (examples 14 and 15).

- (14) **Vodafone believes** research is best conducted by independent experts and has established a funding framework for national, regional and international research programmes. [2001/2002]
- (15) By making effective use of our resources **we believe we can add** value, **develop** new opportunities and, ultimately, **make** a positive difference to the World Around Us. [2001/2002]

When comparing examples 14 and 15, it appears that the personal pronoun is preferred when the corporation makes more emphatic statements about corporate values, almost sounding like slogans (“World Around Us” was indeed the title and the catchphrase of the 2001/2002 SR). However, in some cases there is no apparent discursive reason why one form is used instead of the other. This is the case, for instance, of RECOGNISE. This verb tends to appear in Problem-Solution textual patterns: first the company acknowledges the existence of a Problem related to its business sector or its operations; then it presents its practices and policies as the Solution, thus comforting readers (example 16). This behaviour was also noted in Aiezza (2015: 74) and may be seen as linguistic evidence of what Dryzek (2013) calls the reassuring rhetoric of sustainability discourse.

- (16) [...] **Vodafone recognises** that there is public concern about the safety of RF fields from mobile phones and base stations. We are

committed to showing leadership by making objective information widely available and engaging openly in dialogue with our stakeholders. [2006/2007]

(17) **We recognise** that the net carbon benefits of some of these options remain controversial and we continued to engage with stakeholders in 2010/11 to assess the most credible options. [2010/2011]

Impersonalisation does not seem to be the main reason why *Vodafone* is used in those contexts. Indeed, the company name is not the most recurrent choice with the verb RECOGNISE (see Table 3), although the discussion revolves around sensitive legitimacy issues. The company seems to prefer the adoption of *we* as an overall strategy, because in this way they can show greater commitment and create a more personal dialogue with readers (example 17). Therefore, the choice of the company name as subject is difficult to explain interpersonally and may be due to textual or stylistic reasons.

I will now turn to those verbs that may work as both lexical items and function words. I will focus particularly on their uses as auxiliaries. The main goal of this part of the analysis is to illustrate the type of grammatical meanings (i.e. tense and aspect) associated with *Vodafone* and *we*. I will also include modals in the discussion. For both the company name and the plural pronoun, the verbs HAVE and BE are the highest-ranking collocates. Although LL values regard the full range of structures encompassed by these forms (e.g. possessive *have* and copular uses of *to be*), in both cases, most occurrences feature the verb in its role as auxiliary, respectively in the present perfect and the present continuous forms. For instance, 81% of the concordance lines obtained for *we have* feature present perfect constructions and 75% of the occurrences of *we are* are in the present continuous form. Therefore, the colligational profile of *Vodafone* and *we* suggests that the company places considerable emphasis on undertaken actions and achievements (e.g. *we have already taken practical steps* [2001/2002]; *We have fully achieved 16 of our 21 commitments* [2004/2005]). Equally, the firm stresses the ongoing efforts to be a sustainable business (e.g. *In our own operations, we are using smart metering to help us improve energy management across our network as part of our efforts to manage our carbon footprint* [2011/2012]). This is not to say that forward-looking meanings, promises or estimates are not present. The collocation with the modal *will* is among the highest-ranking ones and verbs such as *aim*, *plan* and *want* are indeed very salient. However, considering the frequent use of auxiliaries and the form of various high-ranking lexical verbs (e.g. *participating*, *working*,

commissioned, launched), it can be argued that Vodafone's legitimization endeavours are expressed not only in terms of commitment to the values of sustainable development but also, and possibly more, in terms of work-in-progress activities and accomplishments.

6 Self-references across years

This section presents the results of the diachronic investigation, first illustrating the data obtained for the distribution of self-references across the years and then turning to the collocates of *we* to explore whether and how the meanings associated with this pronoun have changed.

6.1 Frequencies of *Vodafone* and *we* across years

Considering the marked imbalance between the frequency of 1st person plural references and other forms of self-reference (see Table 2 above), one would expect the use of *we* to be a constant trait of Vodafone's communication strategy. In other words, *we* is likely to be the predominant choice throughout the whole corpus. However, it is possible that the earliest SRs display distinct features, maybe reminiscent of the traditional managerial culture. In order to explore this issue, the distribution of self-references across the twelve SRs of the corpus was analysed.

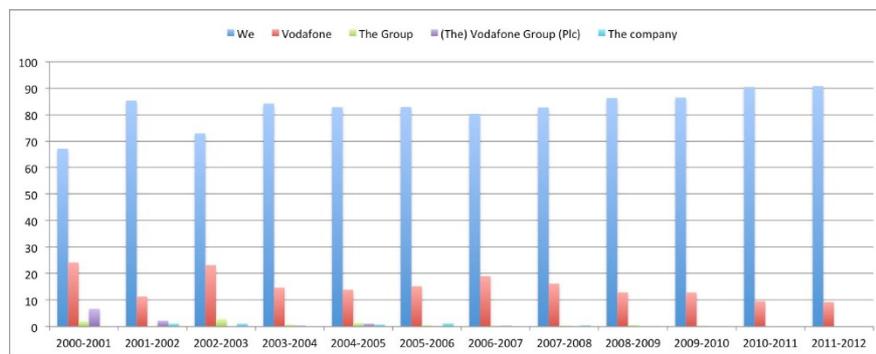


Fig. 1: Self-references across years (percentages).

Figure 1 shows a bar chart reporting the results in percentage points. Percentages indicate what portion of the total number of self-references is related to the specific forms. With the exception of the earliest SRs, where indeed a slightly higher proportion of impersonal forms is present, Vodafone's overall construction of corporate identity relies almost exclusively on the 1st person plural pronoun *we* and, to a much lesser extent, on 3rd person references to the company's name. The difference in percentage points between *Vodafone* and *we* increases with the passing of time: the narrowest gap is found in the earliest SR (42,95 percentage points), while the widest one (81,50 percentage points) is observable in the latest document, the 2011/2012 SR. The texts in the middle show a rather constant discrepancy between *we* and *Vodafone* which ranges from 60 to 70 percentage points. By moving towards a more marked preference for an affiliative corporate persona, at least as revealed by the ratio between *Vodafone* and *we*, the company seems to have progressively adjusted its language choices to the changes in policy identified by Eaton & Brown (2002), according to which in the second half of the 1990s Vodafone started working towards a flat organisational structure emphasising teamwork and a sense of belonging to the company. The increasing reliance on *we* as the main corporate rhetor also suggest that this interpersonal choice has proved an effective legitimacy strategy for the company. Whether this feature is typical of the business sector of telecommunications is not possible to establish here, but it would be interesting to understand to what extent this type of 'persona' allows Vodafone to meet the expectations of stakeholders in its sector and to what degree this choice makes the company stand out from its direct competitors. In the following section, I will concentrate on *we* and investigate whether any changes are noticeable in the distribution of the meanings associated with this subject throughout the corpus.

6.2 *We* and its collocates across years

Despite the constant inclination for the use of *we*, a closer look at the collocational profile of this pronoun across years may shed some light on possible changes in the way Vodafone's identity has been represented within the context of corporate sustainability discourse. To recapitulate, the functional groups identified in association with *we* in the corpus as a whole include forward-looking statements (e.g. PLAN); commitments (e.g. CONTINUE); corporate stance (e.g. BELIEVE); CSR activities (e.g. ENGAGE) and

metadiscourse (e.g. SAY). Table 4 shows the collocations of *we* across the first six SRs and Table 5 presents the data for the latest six.

Tab. 4: Collocations of we (2000/2001–2005/2006).

2000-2001		2001-2002		2002-2003		2003-2004		2004-2005		2005-2006	
Verb	LL	Verb	LL	Verb	LL	Verb	LL	Verb	LL	Verb	LL
will	127.488	will	185.482	have	168.345	have	405.449	have	404.833	have	463.107
operate	96.815	committed	167.492	are	161.483	are	138.337	would	193.615	would	375.520
are	89.342	have	145.829	committed	78.301	would	115.846	are	166.581	are	233.747
have	87.789	are	139.739	will	68.074	said	95.207	said	116.904	believe	125.643
believe	37.524	believe	90.967	estimate	48.741	also	74.255	will	100.183	said	96.085
intend	31.337	want	84.452	made	46.731	will	72.271	commissioned	61.771	will	95.108
recognise	25.099	operate	46.286	accept	29.167	carried	61.946	aim	61.251	do	61.157
ensure	21.777	determined	30.411	do	29.157	plan	50.973	do	54.975	continue	52.026
continue	20.084	can	30.379	expect	26.859	working	40.974	believe	40.662	operate	48.108
be	13.426	introduce	24.404	recognise	23.177	repeat	35.005	operate	37.189	engage	47.858
can	10.601	made	21.292	encourage	19.763	recognise	28.728	recognise	35.191	provide	44.009
		support	21.100	operate	19.575	need	28.230	met	30.637	developed	42.925
		make	20.783	believe	17.492	track	26.804	engage	28.994	held	42.191
		promote	19.858	set	14.412	complete	26.539	learned	28.707	recognise	39.852
		encourage	19.092	provide	13.462	developed	24.786	set	26.827	aim	38.647
		value	16.481	been	11.204	set	23.507	continue	26.821	conducted	37.075
		developed	14.519	doing	22.567	review	25.310	buy	25.310	buy	31.935
		do	13.794	run	20.909	accept	23.938	manage	23.938	manage	30.243
		were	12.608	collect	20.706	addressing	23.488	need	23.488	need	27.929
		be	10.249	develop	17.853	explain	22.871	're	22.871	're	27.524

Tab. 5: Collocations of we (2006/2007–2011/2012).

2006-2007		2007-2008		2008-2009		2009-2010		2010-2011		2011-2012	
Verb	LL	Verb	LL	Verb	LL	Verb	LL	Verb	LL	Verb	LL
have	459.479	have	1,046.766	would	517.182	have	507.270	are	260.314	are	311.620
would	372.673	are	584.499	have	430.067	will	184.199	have	187.844	have	158.083
are	235.554	will	399.425	operate	119.023	would	154.494	commissioned	77.978	working	91.823
will	123.344	would	311.999	are	94.223	aim	143.720	aim	67.460	exploring	75.942
continue	113.804	believe	215.312	do	90.472	are	134.425	continue	55.991	continue	57.748
operate	74.912	want	159.896	said	86.893	believe	98.419	can	55.097	need	55.180
commissioned	65.982	operate	140.684	continue	76.162	said	86.740	expand	46.677	manage	49.135
intend	65.052	said	133.578	will	71.718	working	67.794	face	46.677	work	48.226
said	63.034	provide	126.130	aim	70.626	launched	64.649	believe	37.070	aim	41.267
introduced	60.827	commissioned	125.017	launch	64.741	do	60.739	operate	32.549	will	38.841
believe	59.004	offer	106.459	developed	56.606	commissioned	55.264	recognise	29.051	believe	38.375
held	51.520	aim	103.170	work	44.952	introduced	50.721	continued	28.391	face	36.290
plan	50.530	working	101.837	ensure	41.430	operate	47.827	working	27.793	do	32.210
offer	48.844	continue	98.531	plan	41.168	held	41.946	conducted	27.217	can	26.253
do	48.700	do	94.609	engage	39.813	plan	41.087	targeting	26.484	operate	25.101
provide	45.366	introduced	89.260	provide	37.550	recognise	39.641	exploring	26.235	using	25.000
introduce	44.581	engage	83.199	conducted	36.934	established	38.020	held	25.366	know	24.191
decided	44.005	launched	79.206	did	36.406	asked	37.379	expanding	25.125	achieve	18.437
launched	43.244	consult	77.513	worked	34.419	continue	36.673	made	24.759	must	15.821
engage	40.943	recognise	76.407	revised	32.195	extend	32.217	set	23.902	opportunities	14.811

The functional group of forward-looking statements is almost always present across the years. This indicates that stating intentions and making estimates about future performance are core discourse practices in Vodafone's SRs. The centrality of these meanings is related to the conceptual system that characterises corporations' understanding of sustainability (cf. Brown 2013). As Aiezza observes, "the function of 'anticipation' is considered a necessary competence to be developed in a CSR report in order to provide a rounded picture of the company's health" (2015: 69).

Verbs expressing (or negotiating) corporate stance are also a constant trait. The two most typical collocations of *we* to express intersubjective positioning are *believe* (in the pattern *we believe that*) and *recognise*. These items, however, are not equally salient in all the SRs analysed. In the 2008/2009 document, for instance, *believe* does not appear at all within the twenty highest-ranking items, while it is a collocate of *we* in the 2001/2002, 2005/2006 and 2007/2008 SRs. Such fluctuations suggest that meanings in SRs may be backgrounded or foregrounded to suit to the persuasive needs of the company at specific points in time.

A particularly evident example of the flexibility of the SR as a genre can be found comparing the 2002/2003 and the 2003/2004 SRs. The fiscal year 2003/2004 is a watershed in Vodafone's reporting practices. The company started using the pattern *we said, we have, we will* to underscore its progress against targets (example 18). This tripartite structure shows that claims are followed by actions, thus contributing to the construction of accountability and trustworthiness. Intertextual metadiscourse through the collocation *we said* becomes one of the most prominent meanings conveyed by the 1st person plural pronoun, and it remains so for seven years, between 2003/2004 and 2009/2010.

- (18) Last year **we said we would** increase the number of handsets returned for recycling by 10% by 2005 from the 2002/03 level. [...] This year **we have** collected 1.5 million phones. This is an increase of 29% compared to last year's levels, meeting our commitment one year early. [...] Next year **we will** pilot a programme to support reuse and recycling of mobile phones in one developing country.
[2003/2004]

Regarding the functional group of CSR activities and policies, it becomes salient for the first time in the 2001/2002 SR. It is expressed through verbs such as *support, promote* and *encourage* and refers to the company's assistance to stakeholders in implementing CSR policies or to its

endorsement to third-party initiatives. However, it is interesting to notice that it is in the 2003/2004 SR that Vodafone started emphasising its own proactive behaviour (e.g. *we carried out a major survey of attitudes towards Vodafone* [2003/2004]). This feature will characterise all the subsequent SRs particularly through the verb *commissioned* (see fiscal years 2004/2005, 2006/2007, 2007/2008, 2009/2010 and 2010/2011). Among the company's CSR policies is stakeholder engagement, which seems a particularly noticeable concern between 2003/2004 and 2008/2009.

Finally, the functional group of commitments emerges as salient through the verb *continue*, especially in the mid-2000s. An explanation is that *continue* presupposes previous goals and commitments. Hence, it is a verb that is likely to be found when companies have already made attempts to implement CSR policies. According to Catenaccio (2012: 129–130), current CSR discourse is characterised by an emphasis on ongoing practices. This view is supported by Aiezza (2015), who found that *continue* was the most frequent co-occurring item of *we* in her corpus of SRs published between 2007 and 2011. Considering the timeframe of Aiezza's study and the data obtained here, it can be hypothesised that the 'work-in-progress' rhetoric of SRs is particularly typical of the second half of the years 2000s, when companies have overcome the scepticism of the 1990s (Schlichting 2013) and fully embraced the values of sustainable development.

If auxiliaries and modals are taken into account, a similar picture can be drawn. Indeed, a progressive move away from the almost exclusive reference to forward-looking statements and commitments to an emphasis on accomplishments and ongoing activities is noticeable. Evidence for this shift can be found in the ranking of the colligations *we will* and *we are*⁷ in 2000/2001 and 2001/2002. It appears that at the beginning of the years 2000s Vodafone's rhetorical strategy was to declare its adherence to the values of sustainable development, which remained, however, largely vague (e.g. *consistent standards*; *to make a real difference*; *to send out a clear environmental message across the world*). The impression is that Vodafone was just starting to experiment with possible ways to make sustainability policies an integral part of its business operations. Evidence for the introduction of new communicative strategies can be found in the ranking of the collocation *we have* starting from 2002/2003 and in the progressive emphasis on ongoing activities that can be noticed in the patterns involving

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⁷ In these reports, *are* is most often used as a copular verb with the adjectives *committed* and *determined*.

we are. In the 2002/2003 SR, 37% (11 raw hits) of the instances of *we are* occur in present progressive forms, while in the 2011/2012 document, the instances of present progressive constitute 81% (44 raw hits) of all occurrences.⁸ In the 2003/2004 SR the modal *would* also appears among the highest-ranking items. It signals the company's attempt to gain legitimacy through a rhetoric based on intertextual 'dialogue' between subsequent SRs. On many occasions, progress against a target is documented with recourse to numbers. As Breeze observes, "[...]oci of quantity' are a classic means by which a rhetor can intensify his arguments" (2013: 184).

7 Discussion and conclusion

This study has focused on the discursive construction of corporate identity in a corpus consisting of twelve SRs published by Vodafone from 2000/2001 to 2011/2012. The first goal was to identify the overall type of corporate identity that the company constructed for itself over the twelve years under scrutiny. Of the various forms of self-reference searched in the corpus, the most frequent ones in subject position are the 1st person plural pronoun *we* and the company name *Vodafone*, with a ratio of 5.5:1. The preponderance of *we*, which is a constant feature across the years, was found to be a distinguishing trait of this company, which seems to set Vodafone's rhetorical practices apart from the more common use of the firm name noted in Lischinsky (2011) and corroborated in other studies, such as Swales and Rogers (1995). Vodafone aims to create the image of a dependable corporate citizen willing to engage directly with its stakeholders, taking the responsibility for its actions and emphasizing the cooperative ethical effort of the Group rather than seeking impersonal legitimacy. Explanations for this result may be found in the socio-economic context in which the company operates, but probably the specificity of the telecommunications sector, too, plays a role, as it involves a close relationship with customers who are among the company's major stakeholders. In order to ascertain the influence of business sector, a carefully designed and balanced corpus containing data from firms operating in

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⁸ The difference is statistically significant according to the Log-likelihood ratio statistics ($G^2 = 40.44$, $p < 0.0001$; critical value = 15.13), at <http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/llwizard.html> (last accessed June 2016).

different areas of activity would be needed. Therefore, this issue remains to be verified in future investigations.

This study has also explored how Vodafone's identity is constructed in relation to what is stated about the two main corporate rhetors employed, which seem to be used for rather different textual functions. The meanings that revolve around *Vodafone* and its unique lexical collocations refer to corporate policies and government practices, on the one hand, and to the public perception of the company and the formal recognition of its merits, on the other. The impersonal subject in these functional groups serves the purpose of achieving a high level of formality when talking about official relationships with institutional partners, such as governments and non-profit organisations, also enabling the company to maintain a neutral and institutional tone when it comes to acquisitions and awards. The mitigating effect of impersonality can be noticed when Vodafone deals with stakeholder perception about the firm, which in some cases poses a threat to the human face of the corporation.

The textual meanings associated with *we* and its exclusive lexical collocations emphasise the good intentions of the company (i.e. the functional group of forward-looking statements), helping project the identity of a responsible corporate citizen who proactively undertakes actions towards the goal of sustainable development (i.e. the group of CSR activities). A third functional group was identified for *we* and its collocates *provide*, *want* and *said*, that is, the group of metadiscourse meanings. This group is particularly interesting, as it allows Vodafone to align the identity of a responsible corporate citizen with that of a dependable reporter, a choice whereby the company openly takes responsibility for the disclosure of its sustainability performance, thus building accountability and creating a direct relationship with the readers of its SRs. Finally, some collocations of *Vodafone* and *we* were found to be shared and these convey meanings related to commitments, CSR activities and corporate stance. In some cases, it seems that alternation of the two forms enables the company to skilfully manage the level of personality required, but in other cases the choice of one form rather than the other seems to respond to textual or stylistic needs rather than interpersonal ones.

Vodafone and *we* were also analysed in terms of their colligational profiles. Both subjects are used extensively in present perfect constructions (with *HAVE*) and with present continuous ones (with *BE*). This result suggests that Vodafone places emphasis not only on goals for the future, although this practice is very salient too, but also on accomplishments and ongoing

activities. It was suggested that this strategy is symptomatic of a corporation that has gained experience in devising and implementing policies in favour of sustainable development. The analysis of individual SRs seems to corroborate this hypothesis.

While no evident change was noted in Vodafone's preferred voice over time, some shifts occurred in terms of the collocational and colligational profiles of pronominal references. It is possible to trace a progressive transition of the company's public discourse on sustainability from a marked focus on goals and commitments to rather vaguely defined sustainability goals in 2000/2001, to increased emphasis on the company's achievements and ongoing practices. In addition, starting from 2003/2004 the company strives to project the image of an accountable firm through the *we said, we have, we will* rhetorical pattern. This way of organising the company's sustainability discourse proves an effective strategy that performs simultaneously a variety of functions: it constructs credibility via intertextual references, it gives the idea that sustainability is not a far away and vague target, but a set of very specific short- and medium-term objectives, and it allows the company to restate its commitment to sustainable development portraying it as an ongoing process which also includes not only the future but also the past and the present.

Vodafone's portrayal of its relationship to sustainability has evolved in a way that partly corroborates Dryzek's (2013) description of sustainability as a *discourse* needing continuous commitment, but which also partly diverges from it, in that it contains features that go beyond promises and that pertain to accomplishments. Whether these achievements have a significant impact in terms of environmental, social and economic sustainability, however, is something that cannot be verified using corpus-based discourse analytical techniques.

This study can be expanded in various ways. It would be interesting to see how self-references are used in specific sections of SRs, thus carrying out more fine-grained analyses of CSR discourse in relation to the environmental, social and economic sustainability. It would also be interesting to extend the study to other phenomena, such as longer phraseological patterns, to see whether and what type of additional evidence can be provided to support the hypothesis of rhetorical shifts. Finally, it would be advisable to go beyond the case study approach and replicate this investigation on larger corpora to identify more general patterns of the way corporations shape and reshape their identity in relation to the notion of sustainable development.

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