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Social actors "to go": An analytical toolkit to explore agency in business communication

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Social actors "to go": An analytical toolkit to explore agency in business discourse and communication

Abstract

This paper makes a case for raising critical language awareness in business communication education and proposes that the development of discourse analytical skills should be made part of management and business communication curricula. As one specific approach to train such awareness and skills, we propose a three-step analytical model to explore agency and action in business discourse and communication. The proposed model draws on organizational discourse scholarship, critical discourse studies and approaches from systemic-functional linguistics, and allows for gaining a better understanding of how agency is assigned in organizational texts. The method draws attention to linguistic and discourse practices and thus helps students to analyze texts more systematically, enables researchers to gain deeper insights into agency and action in organizational discourse, and assists practitioners to reflect on communication processes and consequently to improve their practice and produce texts with more impact. The study is thus part of a broader agenda that sets out out to fully realize the linguistic turn: it promotes an approach that views discourse as central to organizational processes, and by making the analytical framework accessible, it renders the approach easy to adopt by business and management curricula.

Keywords: social actor analysis, agency, critical language awareness, discourse analysis

Introduction

In April 2017, the terrifying images of a passenger being "forcibly removed" from a United Airlines plane spread across the globe and left many in deep shock. There was no shortage of accounts, justifications and explanations from the airline, but whatever the lead-up to the events, the recorded images of the bleeding customer being forcefully dragged off a plane for not giving up his already occupied seat "voluntarily" were hard to misinterpret. Yet, the picture that the company's CEO, Oscar Munoz, painted in his email to United Airlines employees is rather different. In his account Munoz wrote:

> United gate agents were approached by crew members that were told they needed to board the flight. We sought volunteers and then followed our involuntary denial of boarding process ... and when we approached one of the passengers to explain apologetically that he was denied boarding, he raised his voice and refused to comply with crew member instructions. He was approached a few more times after that in order to gain his compliance to come off the aircraft, and each time he refused and became more and more disruptive and belligerent.

Consequently, in a sentence that Dickey (2017) labels the epitome of bureaucratic style, Munoz said: "Our agents were left with no choice but to call the Chicago Aviation Security officers to assist in removing the customer from the flight. He repeatedly declined to leave."

The above communication reveals just how important linguistic choices are when describing an event. Note that in Munoz's statement "agents" (i.e. the airline workers) are depicted in two ways: if they are active, they act 'apologetically', but for the main part of the story they are passive: they 'were approached' and 'left with no choice'. Also note that in the part that supposedly contains the most information about the series of confrontations which left the customer with a bleeding face, the only active actor is the customer: he 'raised his voice', 'refused to comply' and 'declined to leave'. We do not have to look too deep to see who takes the blame for the events in Munoz's story.

The close look at Munoz's linguistic choices reveals how he manages to shift agency and hence responsibility from the company and its representatives to the customer. This is an interesting observation for business and professional communicators and an important process to understand. In this paper we demonstrate why such knowledge is crucial: firstly, we explore and make a case for (critical) language awareness in business communication education, before we zoom in on the importance and linguistic manifestations of agency and action. We offer an analytical model which enables students, researchers and practitioners to shed light on the importance of linguistic choices and the role these choices play in how reality is constructed in communication. To illustrate the model, we present a brief sample analysis of one company's text on corporate social responsibility.

Language awareness and discourse analytical skills in business communication
Business communicators are 'language workers': specialists for whom words are not only the means of completing their work, but the very focus and product of their work. For language workers, language is something to be crafted and designed in highly considered, institutionalized ways (Thurlow, 2017), as we have seen in the United Airlines example

above. Considering the importance of linguistic knowledge and awareness in such language work in organizational and business contexts, it is unsurprising than more and more scholars call for a greater acknowledgement of, and attention to, language in organizations in general and the communication that takes place within them in particular (e.g. Weninger & Kan, 2013; Cooren et al., 2014; Musson & Cohen 1999; Mautner, 2016).

In organization studies, the "implicate relationship" between language and organization has been a focus since the 1980s (Westwood and Linstead, 2001, p. 2). For the past thirty years, the view of language as a mere medium of communication, and the view of communication as simply another tool for management and organizational practices, processes and activities, has been widely contested (e.g. Putnam and Fairhurst, 2015; Grant et al., 2004). Instead, much greater attention is now paid to discourse, understood as language use as social practice. This view focuses on the constitutive role of language, for instance how it is used to project certain identities vis-à-vis others and relate to them in particular roles. Discourse is seen as being realized in texts and the way language is used in them, and as being embedded in a so-called discourse practice context referring to the production, distribution and reception of texts, as well as in larger social contexts, be they situational, institutional or societal. These contexts are dynamic within and across interactions, and shape language use just as they are shaped by them (cf. Fairclough, 2010, pp. 3-5, Boje et al. 2004)

In spite of this realization, the fundamental role that language - and consequently discourse - play in organizational realities is rarely mentioned, let alone addressed in business and management training (Cohen et al., 2005; Mautner, 2016; Tietze et al., 2003). How language works as a constitutive force in organizational contexts is crucial knowledge though: critical language awareness leads to the acknowledgement of the role of language in shaping individual lives and social realities, for example how it contributes to sustaining and reproducing unequal power relations. In the United Airlines example above, such critical awareness sheds light on how the CEO's strategic language use contributes to depicting the company and its processes as given and unmovable, and consequently makes the victim the only participant who knowingly and consciously acted, and who should be held responsible for bringing the the situation upon himself. Coupled with analytical skills, such awareness helps students and practitioners become applied discourse analysts and, consequently, empowered communicators. Apart from raising critical awareness of discourse, the language-centered exploration of texts and interactions also has a practical benefit in business communication teaching and training: it exposes effective and ineffective linguistic and discourse practices and thus equips students with concrete strategies to choose from when they intend to communicate across a range of organizational settings.

Yet, and in spite of extensive scholarly efforts that aim to reconcile the prescriptive ambitions of the US-centered business communication education with empirical, language focussed scholarship (see Alessi & Jacobs, 2016), business communication education is still dominated by a simplistic view of language. Weninger and Kan notice that such view fits well with the instrumentalism that characterizes mainstream management theory and practice (2013, p. 60): higher education curricula and communication training programmes are both predominantly

focused on decontextualized repertoires of formulae ('best practice examples') that aim at mastering a genre to reflect (often hypothesized) business needs. This approach has been under scrutiny, however, since Williams'(1988) seminal work, in which she compared the language used in meetings to the language taught for meetings. The study found only limited overlap between the two, leading her to call for an approach that breaks with the traditional "listing of repertoire of exponents" (p. 46) and instead focuses on the exploration of language in ongoing discourse.

Thirty years later, there are now increasing calls that advocate steering away from scripts, formulae and linguistic regulation in business communication education. Instead, the emphasis is on the development of strong (discourse) analytical skills. These skills are thought to help to address a range of practical concerns, for example, how to meet the needs of learners from a wide range of backgrounds, with diverse career trajectories and different workplace goals (Marra, 2013) and how to offer sustainable skill-development in a rapidly changing professional communicative environment (Mautner, 2016). Exposing unnoticed linguistic and discursive resources can empower students and practitioners to choose how to operationalize and achieve a range of business (e.g. Levin and Behrens, 2003) or management aims (e.g. Clifton, 2012). Equally, discourse analytical insights can lead to the crucial realization that the outcome of a communicative performance does not merely depend on the intentions of the communicators. Instead, language awareness and discourse analytical skills allow students and practitioners to understand that meaning is jointly constructed and is just as much the product of the speaker as of those who attend, interpret and respond to it (see Cornelissen et al., 2015).

We would add that a move towards nurturing analysts instead of communicators should not stop at the noticing and exposing stage: it is vital for students and practitioners alike to understand the linguistic principles behind case studies and best practice examples so that they can understand the complex effects of linguistic and discursive devices, and importantly, apply them strategically across different contexts themselves. Thus, we argue, directing attention to language-in-action will allow current and future professionals to observe, reflect on and internalize linguistic and discursive practices that enable them to identify how linguistic strategies function in given contexts and how they might be interpreted and perceived.

In this paper we propose a specific linguistic lens which enables students, researchers and practitioners alike to critically examine business and corporate texts: social actor analysis. As we saw in the United Airlines example above, this discourse analytical framework - which in discourse studies is often complemented with modality, evaluation and other analytic parameters (Koller, 2012) - draws attention to how language can be used to further strategic communication aims. In what follows, we briefly discuss the conceptual framework of agency before introducing an applicable analytical version, illustrating the framework with examples throughout. Finally, we argue how the results can benefit students, researchers and practitioners.

Agency and action in language

In order to understand agency, it is necessary to start with the definition of action. An action, as Cooren (2004) defines it, is "a transformation of state operated by an agent" (p. 376). Consequently, an agent is someone - or something - bringing about said transformation. The most obvious agents are humans, but other things, such as texts (Cooren, 2010) or rituals (Koschmann and McDonald, 2015) can also achieve a transformation of state or, in other words, have agentive power. The concept of agency has long been of interest for institutional theorists, in particular due to the interconnectedness of agency and structure. In what later became known as structuration theory, Giddens (1984) proposed that agents, or in other words active participants, play a key role in creating our social world. The idea of agency is important because it shows that although agents can be influenced or restricted by rules and resources (or in Giddens' terms, structures) they have the possibility to "act otherwise", thus changing the very structures of society and consequently their (our) social reality (Miller, 2015, p. 84).

As a result of the long-standing interest in agency (see e.g. Putnam and Cooren, 2004) there have been attempts to examine how agency is encoded linguistically in spoken or written communication. Cooren's study is a good example, as he focuses on the speech acts (Searle, 1969) that signal what "texts can or cannot do", expressed by verbs such as 'stating', 'suggesting' or 'rewarding' (2004). Similarly Koschmann and McDonald's study (2015) identifies how organizational rituals assume a degree of agency by examining the verbs the interviewees used to describe them. The ritual of "reading the mission statement in the context of the staff meeting" was recalled by participants as something that "reminded" them of the "overall purpose of their work" (2015, p. 244). When interviewees mentioned that a particular ritual "told" them something or "made" them take a particular action, the researchers were able to code these instances where entities other than human, such as rituals, were 'doing things' (2015, p. 240).

From a linguistic point of view, we would like to draw a distinction between agency and action, agents and actors (see also Cooren, 2008): while agency is a semantic category that refers to the meaning expressed through language use, action is a grammatical category that refers to who or what is represented as grammatically active or passive. Agency and action may or may not coincide, as illustrated in the following examples:

1. 'He took the helm of the department that supervises all local governments for only nine months': semantic agent and grammatical actor
2. 'The last time a South Korean leader was removed from office under popular pressure was in 1960': neither semantic agent nor grammatical actor
3. 'Yang himself became CEO only after former CEO Terry Semel left the company in 2007': grammatical actor, but semantically less agentive than the actor in (1)
4. 'She is widely respected as a leader who gets things done': not a grammatical actor, but a semantic agent

As the examples above show, grammatical action is a binary category: someone or something is either grammatically active or passive. By contrast, semantic agency is a graded category, in that agents can be more or less agentive. Clearly, it is more agentive to effect a material change in the world - even if metaphorically, as in example (1) - than to merely become or be something. (On these and other so-called process types, see Thompson, 2013, pp. 95-110.) This distinction is crucial; as van Leeuwen (2008, p. 24) notes, "[t]here is no neat fit between sociological [i.e. semantic] and linguistic categories, and if critical discourse analysis … ties itself too closely to specific linguistic operations or categories, many relevant instances of agency might be overlooked".

The agency-action distinction shows that there is still a lot of scope for looking beyond speech acts as manifested through specific verbs in communication and examining how agents and actors are - or are not - referred to in discourse. Previous work assuming such an angle has already shown that the way agency and action are encoded allows for inferring the ideologies that inform a text, as well as for recognizing the possible intentions of the communicators. In terms of inferring underlying ideologies, studies have shown that the linguistic manifestations of agency and action can serve the strategic goals of individual organizations (Pollach, 2005; The PAD Research Group, 2016) but, perhaps more worryingly, even influence societal values and public policy. For example, in their analysis of AOL TimeWarner's Internet policy document from the early 2000s, Amernic and Craig (2006) show how the document refers to human stakeholders outside of the corporation. Here is an extract from the document (quoted in Amernic and Craig, 2006, pp. 165-166):

> A new world is emerging - a more converged world, a more interactive world. At AOL Time Warner, we want to lead this new world, not only by providing our millions of readers, viewers, listeners, members and subscribers with instant access to a breathtaking array of choices in content and ways to connect, but also spurring the development of innovative products and services that benefit consumers.

Amernic and Craig (2006) identified that the expressions that were predominantly used to refer to non-AOL TimeWarner stakeholders were "consumer" and "subscriber". The authors draw attention to the importance of exposing the strategic use of these terms because only through such micro-analytic explorations can we throw light on how executive elites discursively construct stakeholders in ways that "render [them] disenfranchised, pliant consumers" (2006, p. 64). In the extract above, the company is not only represented as 'we' (see below for more on this pronoun), but also as grammatically active and having increasing degrees of semantic agency ('want[ing]', 'providing' and metaphorically 'spurring)'. Stakeholders on the other hand are represented as grammatically passive beneficiaries who are given access to products and services. To the extent that consumers are indispensable to the business, they have a degree of semantic agency, but grammatically, they are represented as passive, albeit as beneficiaries. The authors conclude that the corporation's policy document had a major influence on how society came to see the Internet and its users, precisely because it depicted the latter as "passive receptacles into which Internet content can be poured once they make the (correct) purchasing decision" (2006, p. 59).

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The above review shows that analyses exposing the linguistic encoding of agency and action can shed light on how these two categories are assigned by communicators. Beyond that, social actor analysis also illuminates what relationships between communicator, audience and third parties are constructed in a text. Thus far, however, as we have seen, attempts to capture the encoding of agency and action have been both limited and unsystematic. In this paper, we propose the adoption of an analytical model that enables students, researchers and practitioners to examine, in a more systematic manner, a wider range of linguistic choices that can encode agency and action.

Social actor analysis

While researchers in organizational scholarship typically focus on 'agents', critical discourse analysts usually operate with the concept of 'social actors', i.e. participants who are represented as doing something or having something done to them in texts. Two points are worth noting here to avoid confusion: firstly, the model we propose below adopts the well-established term 'social actors', but is intended to allow for the analysis of both semantic agents and grammatical actors. Secondly, we have seen above that agency and action can be allocated to people and processes, as well as concrete things and abstract objects, but social actor analysis limits itself to investigating how people are represented. In this paper, we will go along with this focus on human agents and actors.

Much of the critical scholarship in social actor representation (e.g. van Leeuwen, 1996; Koller, 2012) is concerned with the role of representation in backgrounding or foregrounding social actors, and indeed language enables speakers/writers to be either explicit about actors, for example when someone wants to emphasize their role in positive events, or obscure actors, e.g. when referring to a group collectively or not mentioning them at all serves the speaker's purpose better. Such foregrounding or backgrounding already points to the function of social actor analysis in helping to infer ideologies and intentions. It is probably because of this aspect of social actor analysis that it has received considerable attention in the analysis of media and political discourse, but much less in studies of business and professional communication. We see this as part of a wider reluctance to engage in critical analysis in this area, which has been noted by both Koester (2006) and Bargiela-Chiappini et al. (2013).

Yet critical analysis of language, including the way it is used to represent social actors and construct relationships between communicator, audience and third parties, is important in business discourse and communication, too: how we portray agency and action gives a different configuration to reality, portraying a parallel world and thereby helping to bring about that world. That is why we aim to equip students, researchers and practitioners of business discourse with a toolkit for analysing and representing social actors in texts. To that end, we propose a three-step model (based on van Leeuwen 1996; 2008, pp. 23-54) to identify who does what to whom in a given text. The first step is to investigate who is represented (or not) and by what linguistic means the present participants are referred to. Following that, identification also involves asking if participants are in a grammatically active or passive position, what degree of semantic agency they have and if they are referred

to in personal or impersonal ways. This identification of social actors bridges content and linguistic analysis at the text level, asking what groups and individuals are referred to and how. Another question for identification is the relationship between communicator, audience and third parties that is constructed in the text. The steps following identification are to explain the findings to infer what ideologies inform the text and recognize the possible intentions of the communicator. In the next section, we will provide some background to this analytical framework, outline its steps in more detail and then illustrate it throughout with the summary analysis of a corporate text.

Social actor analysis "to go"

The analysis of social actor representation - or social actor analysis - was first proposed and later revised by van Leeuwen (1996; 2008, pp. 23-54). Working with a simplified version of his elaborate - and not always intuitive - model, we will detail how social actors can be excluded or (implicitly or explicitly) included, activated or passivated, ascribed different degrees of agency, and referred to in personal or impersonal ways. We will reproduce parts of van Leeuwen's (2008, p. 53) diagram and illustrate the various forms of social actor representation with examples from a corporate text (Table 1) or our own examples. In addition, we will investigate the use of personal pronouns, especially 'we', to suggest a way of analyzing the relationship between the communicator, audience and third parties as it is constructed in a text.

In developing his "socio-semantic inventory of the ways in which social actors can be represented", van Leeuwen (2008, p. 23) was influenced by systemic-functional linguistics, an approach that views language as a system with meaning potential or a resource that allows text producers to decide which alternatives they choose (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004). In this view of language, every choice that a speaker or writer makes - be it about their intonation, words/lexis or grammatical structures - carries a particular meaning that cannot be expressed otherwise: for example, a passive construction without an actor (such as 'Everything needs to be agreed') foregrounds an action but backgrounds the actor. Likewise, a lexical choice can indicate that an utterance - and thereby the speaker and context - is more or less formal; note the differences between 'This is utterly incomprehensible', 'I don't understand' and 'No idea what you're on about'. Whatever the lexical or grammatical choices, analyzing them systematically enables us to discuss what beliefs and values are expressed in their text and what intentions communicators may have had when using language in a particular way.

Within systemic-functional linguistics, making choices to represent who does what to whom falls into the area known as transitivity, understood as the construction of one particular domain of our experience, divided into participants and the processes they are involved in (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014, p. 212). To illustrate, in the clause 'Employees have been informed that management will roll out the new scheme next month', employees are grammatically passive, while management are the grammatically active and semantically agentive participants, rolling out is the action they are engaged in and the new scheme is the

participant they do the action to. This example illustrates two points we made above, i.e. that not all participants in an action are human, and that social actors can be grammatically represented as being either actively engaged in an action ('roll out') or at the receiving end of it ('have been informed'). In addition, the example flags up another aspect that we need to consider when analyzing social actors, namely that social actors can be referred to in more or less personal or impersonal ways. As pointed out above, we will in the following disregard all non-social actors, i.e. instances in which something other than human individuals or groups are shown to act or to be acted upon. As for actions, in the discussion below we will inevitably refer to processes and actions, but due to space limitations these will not be discussed in detail. Instead, our focus will be on identifying social actors and, subsequently, discussing the ideologies that may have informed the text as well as the communicator's possible intentions with it.

To illustrate our framework, we have chosen a short text to guide us through, namely the introduction to cosmetics company Avon's corporate social responsibility (CSR) web page. This can be found at http://www.avoncompany.com/corporate-responsibility/about-cr/index.html and has been reproduced in a sentence-by-sentence format in Table 1.

[insert Table 1 here]

On occasion, we also rely on other examples from various sections of the 'About Avon' website or present our own realistic examples. (We will give URLs for the former, while the latter will be marked by 'e.g.'.)

The process we will be following is illustrated in Figure 1 and includes three main steps and guiding questions for each step.

[insert Figure 1 here]

STEP 1: Identifying Social Actors. In the first stage we analyze the text for
- who is implicitly or explicitly present, or absent altogether;
- how those present are referred to: as active or passive, more or less agentive, and in personal or impersonal ways;
- what relationship between communicator, audience and third parties is constructed.

STEP 1a: Who is absent, implicitly or explicitly present in the text? If social actors are absent from a text, we might ask if they have been strategically excluded (Figure 2).

[insert Figure 2 about here]

Communicators can delete those at the receiving end of someone's actions (e.g. 'Management had to apologize recently for circulating an internal memo to departments': who did they apologize to?). One way of excluding social actors is backgrounding them,

meaning that readers can still infer who they are, either because the actors are mentioned elsewhere in the text or can be reasonably assumed to be part of the text recipients' general knowledge. An example would be 'The suspect is remanded into custody', where the reader or listener can infer from their general knowledge that it is the police who do the remanding. In other cases, actors are suppressed altogether, i.e. they cannot be inferred or known, as in the United Airlines example we gave at the beginning of this paper: 'Crew members were told they needed to board the flight' - who told them? The latter is an example of a passive without any actors.

Along with infinite verb forms and actorless passives, impersonalizing social actors is another way of avoiding reference to them (Figure 3).

[insert Figure 3 here]

Impersonalization can be achieved through a grammatical twist by which social actors are turned into non-social actors by changing word classes. Perhaps the most common of such transformations is known as nominalization, a process by which verbs are turned into nouns (e.g. 'The level of support for the restructuring is at an all-time low': who is not supporting the restructuring?). However, adjectives can also be turned into nouns and vice versa. The sentence 'That new plant manager seems singularly incompetent', e.g., can be turned into 'Proceedings at the plant have suffered from managerial incompetence', an abstraction that backgrounds the social actor in question and also makes the whole utterance seem more formal and as such more likely to be found in written text rather than in talk.

Much has been made by critical discourse analysts of the ideological functions of abstraction, especially nominalization (for a debate, see Billig, 2008; Fairclough, 2008; Martin, 2008 and van Dijk, 2008). For present purposes, we can establish that social actors can be excluded for "innocent" reasons (e.g. to avoid repetition or unduly long texts or utterances; van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 28) or, alternatively, to eschew responsibility and blame for potentially controversial actions. This also holds true for another form of impersonalization, objectivation. Here, social actors are turned into objects, often by having an aspect of them stand for them (a device known as metonymy). For example, a company can stand for the people who work for it ('This is the company that puts mascara on lashes'), or a text for its producer (e.g. 'Our CSR report illustrates our commitment to the communities in which we are present').

The social actors included in the Avon CSR text are the company's founder, an unspecified 'we' and the company itself. Disregarding nominalizations and prepositional phrases ('our success at Avon'), but counting infinite verb phrases ('"to meet fully the obligations of corporate citizenship by contributing to the well-being of society"'), we can state that the founder is referred to once, 'we' three times and the company/Avon 14 times. The company is clearly predominant in quantitative terms but further analysis will have to show if it also dominates qualitatively. There are some absences, too: women are mentioned twice ('for women's financial independence', 'The company that ... has stood … for women') and society once ('contributing to the well-being of society'), but they are represented in

prepositional phrases and nominalizations rather than as actors. In addition, sentences 3-5 background the women affected by the company's actions, while sentence 6 is an example of excluding social actors by using the phrase 'domestic violence', which abstracts away from both perpetrators and victims/survivors.

Having already touched on passives without actors, we will now investigate in more detail how social actors can be represented as active or passive, awarded different degrees of semantic agency, and be referred to in personal or impersonal terms.

STEP 1b: How are social actors represented: as active or passive, as more or less agentive, in personal or impersonal ways? The next question we might want to ask is, how can actors be represented in a text? Are they included as active participants in, or passive recipients of, an action? In addition, what degrees of semantic agency are allocated to them?

[insert Figure 4 here]

When passivated, participants can be either the goal of someone else's action or, as we already saw above, the beneficiary of the action (Figure 4). For this difference in meaning compare 'McConnell committed his company' (company is the goal) with 'The company … supports six million independent Avon Sales Representatives' (Representatives are the beneficiaries). Some passive constructions include a (social or nonsocial) actor ('we are guided by our principles and values'), while others are actorless passives (as in the above 'crew members were told they needed to board the flight' - who told them?).

In the Avon CSR text, the one mention of the founder casts him in an active role ('David H. McConnell committed his company'), while the 'we' is grammatically active twice ('We're the company', 'We are Avon') and passive once, as a beneficiary ('we are guided by our principles'). The quantitatively dominant company/Avon is active for twelve of the 14 times it is referred to and is therefore the central social actor in qualitative terms as well. What is more, while the founder and 'we' are active in processes with a relatively low degree of semantic agency - committing and being -, the company features mostly in so-called material processes that effect a change in the outer world: putting, fighting, opening, contributing, meeting, bringing and supporting. (Even if these actions are metaphorical, as in '[the company t]hat fights wrinkles', the author has still chosen to represent Avon as actor in a material process rather than as a participant in a less agentive literal process.) These actions involve a high degree of semantic agency, and only in the minority of cases is the company allocated the more static actions of knowing, speaking, functioning and standing for something or someone.

Apart from being activated or passivated, and more or less agentive, social actors can also be referred to in personal or impersonal ways. Figure 5 gives an overview of various forms of personal reference.

[insert Figure 5 here]

An obvious way of referring to somebody in a personal way is to use their name. This can be done formally, when only the surname is used, with or without titles or honorifics ('Mayer served in managing director positions'), semi-formally, when both first and surname are given ('David H. McConnell committed his company'), or informally, when only first names are mentioned ('Debbie has spent the majority of her career at Avon Products, Inc.'). As for categorization, social actors can be referred to in terms of the functions or identities they share with others. Simply put, function refers to what people do (e.g. 'Managers are talking to workers about their concerns') while identity refers to what people "more or less permanently, or unavoidably, are" (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 42). As for the latter, social actors can be identified by some criterion of social classification, such as gender ('women') and/or age, in relation to another social actor (e.g. 'her direct reports'), or with recourse to their physical properties. Nomination and both forms of categorizing actors are often combined, as in 'Avon Founder David H. McConnell' (function and semi-formal nomination) or in '[He] hired Mrs. P. F. E. Albee as his first Representative' (formal nomination and relational identification). The focus on the company in the Avon CSR text means that there is no personalization other than the two examples already mentioned.

Half-way between personal and impersonal reference, we find social actors being specified (Figure 6).

[insert Figure 6 here]

When they are specified, social actors can be referred to as individuals or be assimilated into groups. It has been noted (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 36) that 'elite' persons tend to be represented as individuals, whereas 'ordinary people' tend to be assimilated; witness the difference between the social actors in '<u>Mr. Boyle</u> became IT Director of R&D Systems and led <u>his team</u> through [a] successful development'. When social actors are referred to as groups, this can be done through mentioning a collective, in the form of plural nouns, mass nouns or nouns denoting a group of people; e.g. 'consultants', 'staff" and 'the legal community', respectively. In aggregation, by contrast, groups of participants are quantified ('over 9,000 Abbott employees'). In the Avon text at hand, we find only one example of individualization, the aforementioned 'Avon Founder David H. McConnell', but frequent instances of collectivization in the form of 'we', 'the company; and 'Avon'.

Looking beyond the social actors who are represented in the text, we can turn to participants more broadly conceived and ask what relationships are constructed between communicator, audience and third parties.

STEP 1c: What is the relationship between communicator, audience and third parties?
Having examined the language used in the text and established how it is employed to include or exclude social actors, activate or passivate them, bestow different degrees of semantic agency on them, and refer to them in personal or impersonal ways, we might want to zoom in on the relationship between those social actors and the author and audience of the text: Who

is the creator of the text? Who is the text intended for? Is the audience explicitly mentioned in the text? What third parties are mentioned?

To identify what relationships are constructed between those parties, personal pronouns are of central importance: 'they', 'he/she', 'you' and, crucially, 'we'. In fact, 'we' is one of the most complex words to explore in social actor analysis. Pronouns, in general, are "indexical markers that anchor language in the real world" (Verschueren, 1999, p. 18), but their referents can be ambiguous and therefore their interpretation depends greatly on the context of the text. As attested by scholarship (Serrano & Oliva, 2013; Lammers, 2001 quoted in van de Mieroop 2009; de Cillia et al., 1999; Kuo, 1999), 'we' can refer to many aspects of reality, but it usually does so in a non-obvious way. The following list and Figure 7 give an overview of the various ways in which 'we' can be used:

1. COMMUNICATOR: This exclusive use of 'we' refers only to the communicator(s), usually when texts are written by groups of people or when writers want to reduce personal attributions by avoiding the first person singular pronoun 'I' (Kuo, 1999). A special case is the so-called 'royal we', famously used by former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, who in March 1989 declared that 'we have become a grandmother'.

2. Referring to the AUDIENCE as 'we' can be used as an implied command, as in e.g. 'We are clear about this, right?' or as a generally accepted opinion that is used as a basis for argument (Lammers, 2001 quoted in van de Mieroop, 2009). Use of the pronoun to refer only to the audience is sometimes also found in nurse-patient communication, where it is known as "secondary baby talk" (Caporael et al., 1983) (e.g. 'Have we finished our lunch?').

3. COMMUNICATOR+AUDIENCE is the interactional, inclusive use of 'we', where the communicator refers to everybody who is part of the interaction or a writer aims to establish an interpersonal identity by directly referring to the reader(s). An example would be e.g. 'We are all united in this endeavor to make the company profitable again'.

4. COMMUNICATOR+THIRD PARTIES: The institutional 'we' is used when the communicator indexes that they represent an organization, institution, field or shared view. For example, in 'We are guided by our principles', the communicator is both part of, and spokesperson for, the organization talked about, and therefore expresses a collective identity.

5. COMMUNICATOR+THIRD PARTIES+AUDIENCE are indexed when the communicator addresses an audience who come from the same organization, institution or field, or are represented as sharing the view that the communicator represents. An example of this expression of interpersonal and collective identity would be e.g. 'We're facing tough times in the banking sector' said by the representative of a bank to other bankers and referring to the wider industry both communicator and audience are part of.

6. GENERAL 'we' means 'people in general' and refers to general truths. The choice to use 'we' instead of, for example, the impersonal 'you' or 'one' enables the writer to

be explicitly included in the generalization (Breeze, 2015). An example is e.g. 'As a species, we are not getting any smarter.'

[insert Figure 7 here]

Identifying who 'we' refers to depends on who the audience is identified to be. In case of the Avon text, the instances of 'we' and 'our' refer to the communicator and audience if we see the text as internally oriented at staff, but to the communicator and the organization as third party if we see it as externally oriented to customers and the general public. Since the respective examples are all taken from the publicly available website of the company, the intended audience is supposedly the wide public, including current and prospective customers as well as current and prospective employees, so it is ambiguous who the author refers to by 'We are Avon' or 'At Avon, we are guided by our principles and values'.

This ambiguity is even more pronounced when we follow the link at the end of the CSR text, which takes us to an outline of Avon's 'principles and values'. One of the values listed is 'integrity', which is elaborated thus:

Integrity should be the hallmark of every Avon Associate. In setting and observing the highest ethical standards and doing the right thing, we fulfill a duty of care, not only to our Representatives and customers in the communities we serve, but to our colleagues and ourselves. (http://www.avoncompany.com/aboutavon/history/values.html)

The 'we' here shows a shrinking referential range, starting out with potentially referring back to 'every Avon Associate', but successively limiting the range by mentioning functionalized ('Representatives and customers'), collectivized ('communities') and relationally identified social actors ('colleagues') in the third person. The 'we' cannot refer to them and in the end is restricted to 'ourselves' only - and we may echo the title of Brewer and Gardner's (1996) paper to ask "Who is this 'We'?". Such ambiguity may be strategic of course, to purposefully create unclear messages with stakeholders (see Eisenburg, 1984). Indeed, it has been argued that ambiguity can be viewed as an inherent dimension in all complex organizations (Aggerholm et al., 2012) and to the extent that it communicates multiple, even conflicting, beliefs and values, it raises the question of how we can infer underlying ideologies.

STEP 2: Inferring underlying ideologies. Ideology can be defined as

a (metaphorical) network of beliefs that gives rise to expectations, norms and values about events, ideas and people … ideologies organize social life both by giving sense to encounters between people and, crucially, by being shared among people and thus constituting coherent, if not totally homogeneous, groups (Koller, 2014, p. 239-240).

This definition, which is based on work by van Dijk (1998) and Verschueren (2012), takes ideology beyond the social field of politics, with which it has traditionally been associated, and makes it relevant to social life and social identities more generally, including organizational contexts.

Taking the example of the Avon CSR text, ideology is reflected where the collective self of the company is foregrounded and overwhelmingly active, with its actions benefiting women. The text here instantiates the phenomenon of commodified feminism, i.e. the idea that consumption can aid political demands for women's rights. There is some metaphoric personification of the company ('opens its mouth and speaks out against domestic violence'), which is thereby represented as engaging in charitable activities. As a practice, corporate philanthropy can be seen as a reaction to the shrinking role of the welfare state in many Western economies, with companies partly filling that gap as they hope to improve their image and reputation.

The identification of social actors suggests a strong focus on the collective self: the only individual mentioned is the founder of Avon, and the most prominent social actor who carries the highest social value is clearly the foregrounded, active, personified company itself. This is a matter of frequency, position in the clause - the company is featured at the beginning of sentences 4-8 - as well as action and agency. The social actor 'we' is linked to the company/Avon in all three instances in which it is mentioned, thereby relating it to the ingroup of the writer and expressing a collective identity encompassing communicator, third party and possibly the audience.

Beliefs about Avon are presented as facts about what the company does: sentences 4-8 are organized as a list of commercial and philanthropic activities that the company engages in, with some of these pairings using the contrast between literal and metaphoric activities to represent the personified company's activities ('the company that not only brings beauty to doors, but also opens them'). Crucially, everything Avon is presented as doing has positive connotations: it helps customers beautify themselves and also takes action to improve the life circumstances of women. Yet women are backgrounded in most of the text and where they are included, are grammatically represented in prepositional phrases rather than as actors. Moreover, they are semantically constructed as the beneficiaries of the company's actions rather than having any influence over their own lives. Returning to the company, the hyperlink at the end of the text connects both the collective self of the company and its actions to its 'core principles and values', which further enhance the positive image that is being communicated. 'Principles' here seem to refer to the aims of the company, which either explicitly denote positive things provided by the company ('high-quality products', 'outstanding service', 'society's well-being', 'friendly spirit') or implicitly connote positivity ('provide opportunities to earn', 'give full recognition to employees', 'share with others the rewards of growth and success').

Norms and values are captured in what Avon calls just 'values', namely belief and trust in, as well as respect for and integrity of, representatives and employees, in addition to humility on part of the company. This clearly constructs an interpersonal identity of the company in relation to the people working for it, and possibly the wider community (in addition to constructing a professional identity and obligation for representatives and employees; see

Koller, 2011). However, this leaves us with the question of who 'we'/'the company' actually represents, if not the people working for and thus constituting it.

In sum then, the central social actor equals an ingroup with positive norms, values and aims, who benefits women - as customers and in general - through its actions. However, just who is included in the ingroup is questionable. In the final step of our illustrative analysis, we will argue that positive but ambiguous in-group construction may well be one of the communicator's intentions.

STEP 3: Recognizing the communicator's possible intentions To conclude the social actor analysis, we ask what the communicator's linguistic choices reveal about his/her possible intentions. To answer these questions we should re-examine the findings of the analysis conducted in Step 1:

- Who is explicitly present in the text, what actors are implicitly present and who is absent?
- Are the social actors depicted as active or passive, what degree of agency is allocated to them, are they referred to in a personal or an impersonal manner?
- What kind of relationship is created in the text between the communicator, the audience and third parties?

Excluding or only implying social actors by, for example, actorless passives, can serve as a strategy to limit blame or shift the responsibility of those involved in the action. By excluding or backgrounding social actors, text creators can also influence readers/listeners in a way that suits their interest. In his seminal work on the representation of social actors in a newspaper article on immigration, van Leeuwen (1996, p. 38) found that while

some of the exclusions may be 'innocent', details which readers are assumed to know already, or which are deemed irrelevant to them, others tie in close to the propaganda strategy of creating fear, and of setting up immigrants as enemies of 'our' interests.

Representing social actors as active 'doers' or passive recipients can serve this purpose of influencing how the audience interprets what is depicted as reality. Such interpretation is further aided by the extent to which semantic agency converges with grammatical action. What is more, the various linguistic realizations used to refer to actors in personal or impersonal ways, for example by functionalizing them, can also reveal the possible intentions related to the role that the creators of the text assign to those spoken about or addressed. We can recall Amernic and Craig's study (2006) on how external stakeholders are referred to in corporate policy documents: the authors showed that the strategic functionalization through the use of the labels 'consumers' and 'subscribers' in early Internet policy documents had a profound effect on how the relationship between Internet providers and the 'citizens' of the internet came to be defined.

Finally, the relationship between the speaker, audience and third parties can also help us discuss the speakers' possible intentions: labels can be used strategically to emphasize

similarities, create common ground, or conversely, to highlight differences and emphasize difference (e.g. 'us and them'). In the case of our Avon example, we have established a level of ambiguity about just who 'we' and its variants ('our business', 'our commitment') refer to. This ambiguity may well be intentional to bring about positive attitudes and emotions towards the company in the widest possible audience. For external stakeholders, current and potential consumers, it depicts the company as a coherent, unique entity which is able to act as such, and therefore able to achieve the aims set out in the text. If aimed at internal stakeholders on the other hand, i.e. current or prospective employees, references to 'we' are what Cheney calls a "subtle and powerful identification strategy [which] allows a corporation to present similarity or commonality among members as a taken-for-granted assumption" (1983, p. 154), and so influence employees to accept assumptions without questioning and identify with their corporate employer. In the example, what this duality/ambiguity achieves is best understood in light of how corporate texts such as CSR statements work, as we discuss in the final section of this paper.

Summary and concluding thoughts

Generally speaking, if we consider that companies are ultimately motivated by profit, all texts produced in a corporate context are to a greater or lesser extent meant to persuade external and internal audiences of the company's value, be that financial or social, so as to foster loyalty among customers, employees, investors and other stakeholders, and ensure sales, productivity and investment in the company. The discourse of CSR plays a role in this in that it purports to extend merely financial value to the so-called "triple-bottom-line … also known as the three Ps 'People, Planet and Profit'" (Jaworska & Nanda, 2016, p. 5), which addresses social, environmental and economic activities by a company. However, as the authors further note, "the extent to which the three Ps are covered varies considerably between companies" (Jaworska & Nanda, 2016, p. 5). In our specific example, the communicator clearly tries to construct the image of a company as an inherently good social actor with moral principles, norms and values. As we demonstrated in our analysis, the Avon CSR text achieves this aim by presenting Avon as both active and agentive, and by using metaphoric personification that allows the writer to combine actions related to the beauty industry with actions that are cooperative and socially oriented. The analysis enabled us to infer the wider belief system behind this example: one that sees companies as moral agents for the wider social good rather than simply for-profit organizations that produce goods and/or provide services.

Following the closer examination of the communicator's possible intentions with the text, we have found that the linguistic representation of social actors is ambiguous: if the language is interpreted to be aimed at internal stakeholders, employees and Avon Representatives, 'We are Avon' and other inclusive references are clearly intended to facilitate employee buy-in and foster identification with the company. However, any such inclusivity is temporarily abandoned when the text lists a range of activities about 'the company' (sentences 3-6 and 8) rather than 'our company'. While 'put[ting] mascara on lashes and food on tables' or 'fight[ing] wrinkles … and breast cancer' might be appealing aims for the wider public audience, these might prove problematic for internal stakeholders to identify with: Representatives, in particular, may only be involved in activities which are related to the distribution of beauty products but not so much in the philanthropic activities of the

company. While sentence 7 states 'We're the company that…' and sentence 9 explicitly equates 'we' with the company, it is unclear whether this is an attempt at making especially Representatives identify with Avon's philanthropic activities: after all, it is unclear just how inclusive 'we' is. Such a representation of the company as inclusive and exclusive at the same time may be a case of strategic ambiguity - or a case of unintentionally contradictory communication that could be avoided with increased language awareness and better analytical skills.

We hope to have shown that examining business communication through linguistic and discourse analytical lenses enables us to infer underlying ideologies that influence a text as well as recognize the obvious and less obvious intentions the text producer may have had. Indeed, most insights from the analysis could not have been gained without the framework that we introduce in this paper: while it is obvious from even a superficial reading of the Avon CSR text that the company is the central focus, only attention to the details of sentence structure, action and agency can demonstrate how this effect is achieved beyond mere frequency. In addition, social actor analysis can also reveal inconsistencies and contradictions within a text, such as the ambiguous and inconsistent use of 'we', which often point to broader ideological struggles within individuals, groups or organizations (Reisigl and Wodak, 2015, p. 25) or conflicted and unclear intentions on part of the text producer.

It was our aim with this paper to adapt an influential framework from critical discourse studies - van Leeuwen's (1996, 2008) model of social actor representation - that we believe has received limited attention in business communication scholarship and education. We have proposed a three-step model (Figure 1) that enables researchers, students and practitioners to gain a better understanding of agency in organizational texts. The first step in this model is descriptive, prompting us to analyse who is present and absent, who is activated or passivated as well as more or less agentive, and who is referred to in personal and impersonal ways in a text. It also shows what relationship the text producer constructs between themselves, their audience and any third parties. The next two stages are interpretative, enabling us to infer underlying ideologies, values and norms as well as the speakers'/writers' possible intentions. Although described in a linear order, the last two stages can occur in any sequence. At times, the interpretations also intertwine, since it is often hard to explain intentions without understanding deep underlying values, or the possible intentions shed light on norms and conventions encoded in a given text.

While we have simplified some of the perhaps excessive and sometimes counter-intuitive detail of the model, we have hopefully shown how adopting it can benefit teaching and learning about one of the most important aspects of business discourse. In the introduction we made a case for the importance of studying language in business and management courses, both as a lens through which students can gain insight into social and organizational processes, but also as an approach that can lead to practical outcomes. In the former sense, as Putnam and Fairhurst point out, language is a lens that can provide a unique way to focus on aspects of organizing which might not be easily noticeable and determines "what is figure and ground in the framing of organizational events" (2001, p. 79). As we saw in this paper,

this observation is particularly true in reference to agency, when language can be used to strategically represent social actors in a particular way, and thus frame realities differently.

Equally important is the practical aspect of this approach, because it enables business and management professionals to observe how language works. Such knowledge can lead to the realization of how linguistic and discourse practices function in a given context, and it consequently equips students and practitioners with concrete strategies to choose from when they want to communicate in a range of organizational settings. Raising (critical) language awareness will thus allow trainers and teachers to steer away from scripts, formulae and linguistic regulation, and empower students to choose how to best operationalize and achieve a range of management aims. In many areas of business communication - from managerial contexts to corporate communications - it is essential that students/trainees are a) aware of the power that is inherent in the representation of social actors, b) able to infer the communicator's ideology and possible intentions behind the linguistic choices of representing social actors, and c) equipped to strategically use this knowledge. Cohen et al. (2005, p. 286) argue that understanding how language works in the construction of organizational realities is fundamental to management practice. To deny students of management access to these theoretical ideas simply perpetuates the theory and/or practice divide so characteristic of management education. By contrast, language and discourse analysis enables us to make practices visible and thus helps students to analyse texts more systematically, researchers to gain a deeper insights into structure and agency in organizational discourse, and practitioners to reflect on communication processes, and consequently to improve their practice and produce texts with more impact.

United Airlines CEO Oscar Munoz was using language skillfully to shift blame for the 'passenger removal' incident away from the company and its representatives and onto the victim of their aggression. It is up to students, researchers and practitioners to understand exactly what he did and hold him and other text producers to account, in the hope that a more responsible and humane view of social actors may prevail.

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Social actors "to go": an analytical toolkit to explore agency

Tables and Figures.

1	About Corporate Social Responsibility at Avon
2	In 1886, Avon Founder David H. McConnell committed his company "to meet fully the obligations of corporate citizenship by contributing to the well-being of society and the environment in which it functions."
3	Today, these words are still central to our business and our success at Avon.
4	This is the company that puts mascara on lashes and food on tables.
5	That fights wrinkles with one hand and breast cancer with the other.
6	That knows the value of a perfect lip, but still opens its mouth and speaks out against domestic violence and for women's financial independence.
7	We're the company that not only brings beauty to doors, but also opens them.
8	The company that for 130 years has stood for beauty, innovation, optimism and, above all, for women.
9	We are Avon.
10	At Avon, we are guided by our principles and values, which are also reflected in our commitment to Corporate Responsibility.
11	Read more about our Core Values and Principles.

Table 1. Avon text on corporate social responsibility

Identifying social actors
- Who is absent, implicitly or explicitly present in the text?
- How are social actors represented: as active or passive, as more or less agentive, in personal or impersonal ways?
- What relationship between communicator, audience and third parties is constructed?

Inferring underlying ideologies
- What beliefs and values are expressed by this forms of social actor representation?

Recognizing the communicator's possible intentions
- What does the communicator try to achieve with this form of social actor representation?

Social actors "to go": an analytical toolkit to explore agency

Figure 1: A three-step model for social actor analysis
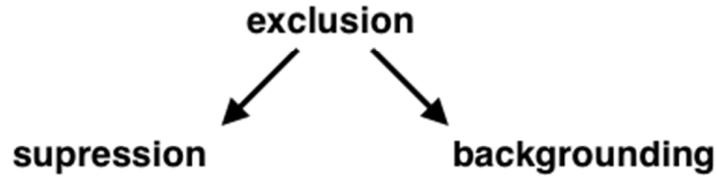
Figure 2: Excluding social actors
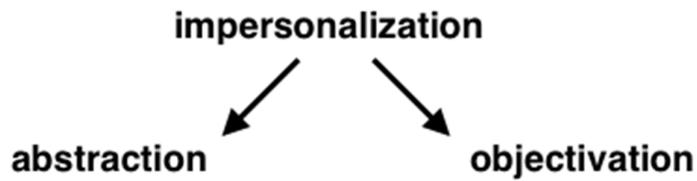


Figure 3: Referring to social actors in an impersonal way
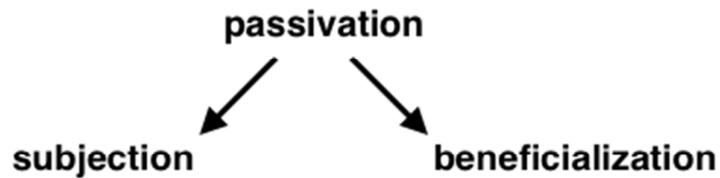

Figure 4: Passivating social actors

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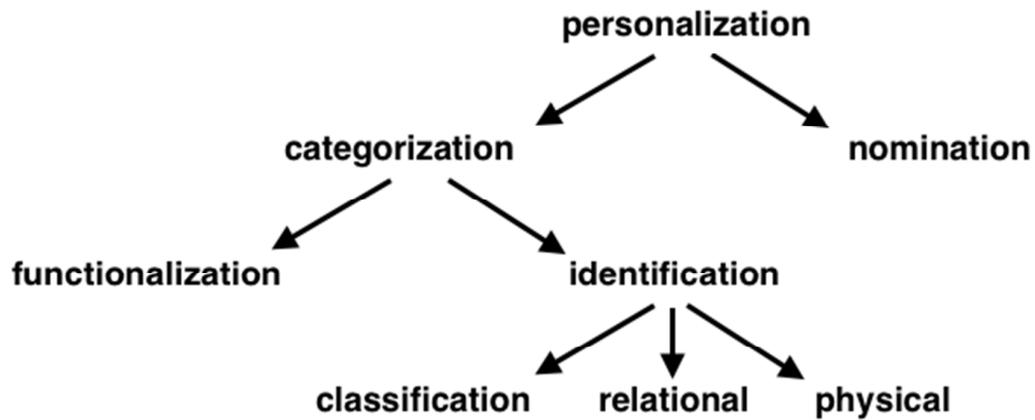
Figure 5: Referring to social actors in a personal way
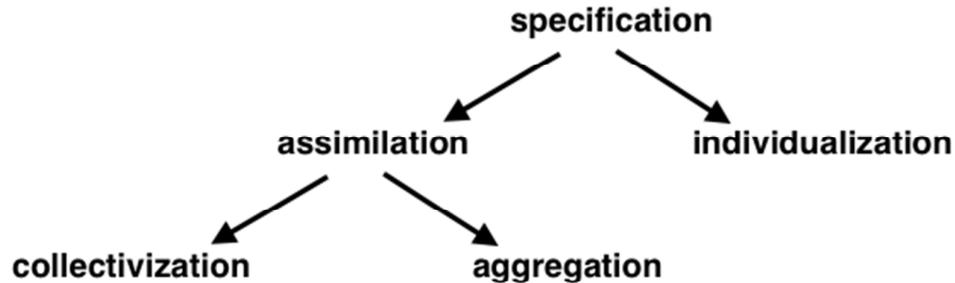
Figure 6: Specifying social actors

Social actors "to go": an analytical toolkit to explore agency
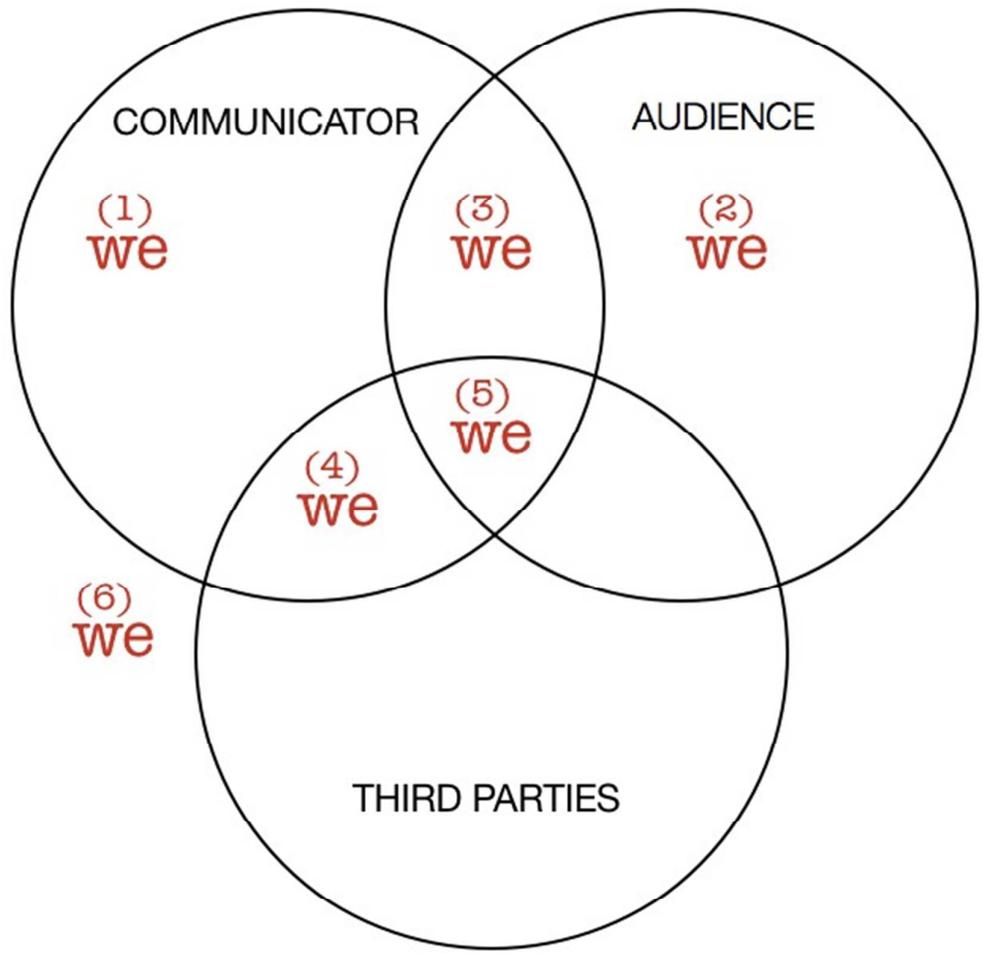

Figure 7: 'We' and the relationship between communicator, audience and third parties