*Belinda Crawford Camiciottoli**

Challenges and Opportunities in Accessing Discourse Data in Business Settings: Some Reflections on Research Experiences[1]

Abstract
This article offers some reflections on research experiences in relation to both challenges and opportunities involved in gaining access to authentic corporate data, also in situations where direct personal contacts within companies are lacking. Business organizations are highly intent on protecting their confidentiality and sensitive information, and are thus notoriously reluctant to open their doors to 'outsiders'. Clearly, this sceptical attitude represents a challenge for discourse analysts who focus on business genres that are produced within companies. The discussion will also include insights gleaned from contacts with a professional who operates externally to companies, but was nonetheless able to shed interpretive light on the results of an analysis and possible motives behind access challenges, while suggesting strategies for going forward. With reference to opportunities, I reflect on an interdisciplinary research experience with colleagues from the field of marketing that provides a fresh perspective on acquiring data in a non-intrusive way. This research highlights the fruitful combination of marketing research processes and in-depth language study in order to collect and analyse data of interest to companies, while exploring new ways to connect business discourse research with professional practice.

1. Introduction
Discourse analysts who are interested in studying genres used in business communication may encounter both challenges and opportunities during the research process. On the one hand, they often face considerable challenges when attempting to analyse authentic texts produced by companies, which can be traced essentially to two interrelated aspects: access to data and interpretation of the findings. First of all, are the data publicly available or not? Are they in written, spoken or digital form? This is an important distinction which can be a determining factor in how available textual data may or may not be. Then, once the data have been procured and analysed, is it possible to clearly interpret the findings simply on the basis of textual evidence, or is it necessary to go beyond the text in order to find out more about the context, the participants and the production process? If the latter is the case, how feasible is it to do so? On the other hand, the very nature of business communication opens up interesting opportunities for collaboration with scholars working in other related fields (e.g., management, marketing), thus inviting a mutually beneficial "dialogue across disciplines" (Bargiela-Chiappini 2009: 11). For example, is it possible to identify research questions that encompass diverse interests? What can be learned from experiencing different research approaches and methods?

This article will attempt to respond to the questions outlined above and is articulated as follows. Section 2 focuses on challenges linked to accessing company-produced data and interpreting the findings of an analysis. With reference to data access, I first provide an overview of how this issue has been dealt with in the literature and then offer a reflection based on a personal re-

1 A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the Association for Business Communication International Symposium on *The Ins and Outs of Professional Discourse Research*, March 6-7, 2014, Modena, Italy.

* *Belinda Crawford Camiciottoli*
Department of Philology, Literature and Linguistics
University of Pisa
belinda.crawford@unipi.it

search experience. In relation to the interpretation of findings, I review three different approaches that have been successfully implemented in business discourse research. Section 3 reflects on opportunities offered by interdisciplinary research, beginning with a review of data collection methods used in the field of marketing, and continuing with an account of an interdisciplinary study undertaken with marketing colleagues. Section 4 concludes by highlighting the importance of strong links between business discourse research and professional practice.

2. Challenges

2.1. Access to data

When business discourse analysts need to gain access to company-produced data, there are three main factors that create challenges: information sensitivity,[2] lack of understanding of the underlying rationale for business discourse research and the need to establish contacts with professionals. With reference to information sensitivity, today's business organizations are very concerned about protecting confidential data, and are thus often reluctant to open their doors to 'outsiders'. These are obviously legitimate concerns that are driven by the highly competitive global marketplace in which companies operate, but also by the increasingly stringent norms and regulations that businesses must comply with in order to avoid legal problems. Actually, the issue of access to business discourse is not a new one; it has been ongoing over the course of the last two decades. In a relatively early volume of research dedicated to the discourse of business negotiation, Ehlich/Wagner (1995: 2) were among the first to recognize the difficulties of gaining access to this type of data, citing concerns about "professional privacy" on the part of practitioners. They mentioned the problems involved in obtaining consent to audio-record business negotiations, and suggest that researchers who also aim to investigate non-verbal aspects of negotiation that would require video-recordings are likely to encounter even more resistance. Focusing specifically on management communications, Fox (1999: 265) commented "As a rule, companies are unwilling to allow recording of boardroom negotiations, shareholders' meetings and company policy discussions." Indeed, this sceptical attitude is a particular challenge for business discourse analysts who work with spoken language and therefore need to collect recorded data from corporate events, which may be perceived by companies as especially intrusive. Moving closer to the present day, Kankaanranta's (2005) study of internal email correspondence between Swedish and Finnish employees in a multinational company that uses English as a lingua franca found that access challenges are not limited to spoken discourse, but can also occur when dealing with written business communication. In fact, she characterized her data collection procedure as "voluntary" rather than "systematic", observing that "access to authentic data from day-to-day corporate operations continues to be difficult" (Kankaanranta 2005: 133). Bargiela-Chiappini et al. (2013: 8) aptly summarized this situation as it has evolved from the 1990s, while also leaving some room for optimism moving forward:

> Issues of access, data sensitivity and transcription detail often complicate the job of the discourse analyst. Now, almost two decades later, business discourse researchers are still grappling with the same problems, but have however acquired much more experience in ethnographic research in corporate and institutional environments.

The second factor that contributes to the challenges of gaining access to in-house communications is a general lack of understanding among business professionals of the reasons for language-oriented research. When describing issues involved in data collection for the Language in the Workplace Project (Victoria University, Wellington, New Zealand), Stubbe/Ingle (1999: 3) pointed out the need for "face validity", i.e., making sure that participants understand why the research is being conducted. In addition, professionals may not perceive the advantages of collaborating with

2 This is actually an issue with very broad implications that extend far beyond the business world. The need to protect sensitive data and safeguard privacy is a major concern in many facets of modern society, as can be seen in recent wiretapping, phone-hacking and information leakage scandals that have reached global proportions.

business discourse analysts. In fact, they may be chiefly (and understandably) concerned about "what's in it for us" (Bargiela-Chiappini 2009: 11). Thus, it is important for language researchers to be aware of this position when proposing projects that require access to corporate data, both written and spoken.

The third factor relates to access issues that come into play when establishing contacts with business professionals. Much of the research that has provided key insights into business discourse practices which are normally not accessible to outsiders have taken a case-study or small-scale approach based on one or a limited number of companies and/or participants. Bargiela-Chiappini/Harris (1997) carried out one of the first studies on the discourse of business meetings that centres around a contrastive case study of management meetings in a British company vs an Italian company. Thus, the focus was on spoken business discourse from the cross-linguistic and cross-cultural perspectives. In this study, the authors attributed their success in gaining access to the companies to personal contacts, though they did not provide any further details. Researchers involved in the New Zealand Language in the Workplace Project who succeeded in collecting data to investigate the discourse processes of corporate project meetings in three organizations also made use of personal contacts to initiate the relationship, which is described as a "friend of a friend strategy" (Stubbe 2001: 8). In a study based on a series of boardroom interactions among top managers of a UK manufacturing company, Samra-Fredericks (2000: 251) noted that access was the fruit of an "on-off" negotiation effort that went on for a number of years. Recent work carried out by Evans (2013) describes the findings from four 'week-in-the-life' case studies of Hong Kong business professionals. This ethnographically-inspired study investigated both spoken and written discourse, with special attention to the phenomenon of code-switching involving written English and Chinese, as well as spoken English, Cantonese and Putonghua in BELF, i.e., Business English as a Lingua Franca, a term coined by Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005), to characterize workplace communication of this type. In this case, Evans (2013: 234) provided some useful information about the process of establishing collaboration of the participants who

> […] were identified through contacts established over a number of years by the host university's Research Centre for Professional Communication in English, one of whose aims is to "facilitate joint research and related activities between academics and practitioners in professional communities" (original quotes)

Evidently, all the researchers who carried out the studies reviewed above were able to convince the companies involved to grant them access to the data they needed. This may be the result of some form of previous contact with the company, e.g., fieldwork experience, consultancy positions or personal relations with company employees. However, establishing contacts with companies remains a challenge, as Bargiela-Chiappini (2009: 11) pointed out: "Those of us who have done fieldwork in companies, or perhaps have not always had the benefit of personal contacts, will know how hard it is to obtain that first meeting with a gatekeeper".

The cultivation of personal contacts is an important and valid strategy, but it is not always a feasible option. For example, if research aims to shift onto a larger scale beyond the case study or small-scale approach in order to perform more systematic types of analysis (e.g., using methods inspired by corpus linguistics), then data are needed from a wider sample of companies. Clearly, in this case, the issue of access becomes even more problematic. More specifically, the higher the number of companies involved, the greater the difficulty in creating personal contacts to access data. Indeed, it is highly unlikely that an unknown language researcher would be able to establish direct relations in multiple professional settings.

The final part of this section is dedicated to the challenges I encountered in the context of the type of larger-scale research mentioned above. More specifically, I recount the lead-up to my corpus-based research in the area of financial discourse (see Crawford Camiciottoli 2013), which I would characterize as a combination of **luck**, an **open door** and **dead end streets**, i.e., three 'conditions' in the access process which I describe in detail in the paragraphs below.

Several years ago, I started to perceive a disconnect between the genres that are introduced in business communication textbooks and those that are used in the corporate world, especially with regard to financial genres and technology-mediated communications. I had the opportunity to have some informal discussions with a relative who is a finance professional (**luck**). He emphasized the importance of earnings conference calls as a key form of communication between management and the global investment community. These have become routine events periodically organized by companies during which teams of executive management give presentations of economic performance to financial analysts who are connected via telephone in a teleconference format. After the presentations, the analysts interact directly with the executives in a Q&A session. The finance professional also suggested a possible source of data that he often relied on, i.e., the transcripts of earnings conference calls that are produced and made available through an Internet service specializing in financial information. At the time, these transcripts were available only to professionals and at high costs. However, I contacted the Internet service and explained my research objectives, and they gave me complimentary access to earnings calls transcripts for one month (**open door**). During this period, I was able to collect transcripts from 30 multinational companies that I compiled into a corpus for subsequent analyses that integrated both quantitative and qualitative methods. I maintained contact with the professional who became my informant. He was a financial analyst and a frequent participant in earnings conference calls, though not specifically in those that were comprised in my corpus.

Over the next few years, I analysed the transcripts from a variety of discursive and linguistic perspectives, but began to perceive the need for additional input in order to extend the research. Unfortunately, this led to **dead end streets**. For example, I was unable to obtain the corresponding audio files of the transcripts, which could have provided important interpretive insights. The original contact person from the Internet service who had granted me access to the transcripts did not respond to my inquiries. The service had in the meantime been taken over by another company. In the fast-paced corporate world, companies are constantly being bought out and employees frequently move on to positions in other organizations that may have more restrictive communication policies. As a result, business discourse analysts may find that important contacts that had been previously established, and perhaps with considerable effort, can unexpectedly become no longer viable.

In research on earnings conference calls, it would also be important to know more about the presentation component, particularly the production process leading up to the presentations, beyond what my informant on the receiving end of the communication during the Q&A sessions could provide. However, this raised other issues, e.g., how feasible is it to try to directly contact executives of major multinationals? When I posed this question to my informant, he replied as follows:

> I would guess that most wouldn't have the time or see any of the upside from talking to somebody from the outside. Their concern is that they're going to say the wrong thing or they have nothing to gain by doing it. I would say you'd have better luck to try to talk to somebody who is retired, who used to do it and doesn't have to worry about it anymore and may be interested in helping in an academic study.

Essentially, this response confirmed my initial doubts about the feasibility of direct contacts with executives of large multinationals, even if the suggestion to target retirees instead of active managers could be promising.

Since establishing contacts with large multinationals did not seem practicable for the reasons explained above, I decided to scale down my approach and explore possibilities with smaller companies that operate on a local level, but still hold earnings conference calls. Towards this aim, I contacted a representative of an Internet portal dedicated to investor relations that serves my geographical area.[3] I asked advice on how to go about identifying companies in the local area that

3 http://www.investor-relations.it/I_R/contatti_ing.htm

might respond to these criteria, and perhaps be willing to engage with business discourse analysts. The response was quick and courteous, but the representative was unable to offer any advice and did not seem to be interested in pursuing any form of collaboration, and thus another **dead end street**.

I would like to conclude this discussion of access challenges on a positive note, suggesting an 'indirect' strategy for establishing contacts with companies, i.e., building relations with media professionals who can act as a bridge between scholarly research and business practice. I will illustrate this possibility through a personal experience with a journalist who writes for an online magazine dedicated to investor relations.[4] The journalist contacted me to request a phone interview after reading about my research on earnings conference calls that had been published in a scholarly journal. A summary of our discussion was subsequently published in the magazine's section dedicated to academic research with implications for business activities. If business discourse analysts are able to cultivate such relations, their research will gain greater visibility beyond academia, which could ultimately favour more **open doors** for purposes of data access.

2.2. Interpretation of findings

The 'outsider' status of business discourse analysts gives rise not only to the access challenges discussed above, but also to interpretive challenges, i.e., how to accurately interpret the results of an analysis. Unfamiliarity with the social settings and discourse practices that contribute to meanings expressed in company-produced texts may lead to a certain degree of opaqueness. More specifically, the interpretation of linguistic phenomena can remain largely speculative unless insights from vital contextual knowledge can be gained from people who have direct experience in relation to the type of discourse being analysed. This is especially important when data have been collected from third-party sources, e.g., texts available on the Internet.

In the following paragraphs, I reflect on three different approaches that have been used to enhance the interpretation of the findings of business discourse analysis. The first is the use of ethnographic methods which allow researchers to gain an 'insider' perspective. According to Hammersley/Atkinson (2007: 3), ethnographic research involves "participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts […]". The acquisition of this type of knowledge enables researchers to formulate 'thick' or explanatory descriptions of language which take into account the social processes of the communicative context that contribute significantly to meanings, instead of 'thin' descriptions based only on textual evidence, to borrow two terms first used by the anthropologist Geertz (1973). This approach is particularly helpful when discourse presents a ''rich point'' (Agar 1996: 30), i.e., a linguistic phenomenon that cannot be clearly interpreted because of a gap in knowledge between the world of the researcher and the world being studied. However, as pointed out by Van Praet (2009), in business discourse studies, there have been relatively few in which linguists were able to enter into companies for extended periods in order to observe communicative practices and collect data, again likely due to the numerous access issues discussed in the previous subsection. However, the ones who have succeeded in doing so have made important contributions to the business communication literature that would not have been possible otherwise. For example, Bargiela-Chiappini/Harris's (1997) seminal study in which they were able to observe and record management meetings over a number of weeks greatly enhanced our understanding of the pragmatics of pronoun usage in corporate contexts. Samra-Fredericks' (2000) research based on the observation and recording of boardroom meetings over time suggested that, unlike interviews, an ethnographic approach makes it possible to understand how the participants used language strategically to influence boardroom processes. Holmes et al.'s (2011: 32) cross-cultural study of leadership in New Zealand workplaces adopted a "participatory research design", which not only facilitated the col-

4 http://www.irmagazine.com/

lection of extensive amounts of data, but also engendered a high degree of trust. The latter is particularly important when researchers and participants come from different cultural backgrounds, in this case Māori and Pākehā, i.e., the Māori term for people in New Zealand of European descent. This approach resulted in key insights into how leadership is constructed through language in "differently ethnicised" communities of practice (Holmes et al. 2011: 25).

The second approach is what is known as **micro-ethnography**. It has a narrower scope than traditional ethnography and focuses on interactions that occur within very limited timeframes. This technique was originally developed by Erickson (1992) for educational research and is based on a detailed micro-analysis of video recordings. However, the idea can be extended to business settings by reducing the scope of the research to limited amounts of data and shorter periods of time. This could be seen by business professionals as considerably less risky and intrusive. Researchers would still be able to benefit from at least some level of access to in-house communicative practices for interpretive insights. Louhiala-Salminen (2002) used this method in her case study of the discourse of a Finnish manager in an international company. In particular, she adopted a shadowing technique to collect and analyse the participant's spoken and written discourse over a one-day period. This resulted in an enhanced understanding of the company's corporate literacy practices in relation its use of English "as a business lingua franca" (Louhiala-Salminen 2002: 215), while also highlighting their multimodal and intertextual dimensions. Gimenez (2014) recently implemented a micro-ethnographic approach in a study that offered a detailed analysis of workplace communication over a period of one day, during which the author was allowed to observe the discourse practices of a group of employees from a central vantage point.

Finally, when research is based on data that have not been collected directly in a workplace, insights can be procured from **professional informants** who are not actual discourse participants, but nonetheless have vital real-world experience within a particular communicative context, either as producers or consumers of texts. For this reason, they are able to shed light on "how the speech events/texts under investigation fit into the overall communicative context" (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich/Fortanet-Gómez 2009: 72). The reliance on professional informants to illuminate research findings is a well-consolidated method in academic discourse studies (cf. Swales 1998, Hyland 2000, Flowerdew 2002, Samraj 2008), where a spirit of collaboration among academics for the general advancement of knowledge is perhaps a facilitating factor. For all the reasons outlined in the previous section, finding informants who are willing to be interviewed about business discourse practices is often challenging, and likely even more so when there has been no contact between the researcher and the source of the data. Yet the interpretive value of input from professional informants in such cases cannot be overestimated. For example, in my experience analysing data collected from a third-party source recounted in the previous sub-section, the professional informant with whom I engaged provided crucial information relating to the communicative event itself, the degree of familiarity and the nature of the relationships among the discourse participants, as well as their motivations and underlying objectives. Thus, the informant's knowledge of the dynamics of this communicative context acquired from his direct experience in the professional world proved to be indispensable for interpreting the results of the linguistic analysis.

To conclude this section, the research experiences that have been discussed above underscore the numerous challenges faced by business discourse analysts when accessing data and when interpreting findings, while also highlighting the interrelatedness between the two issues. In other words, business discourse must be accessed to be interpreted, but its accurate interpretation depends on the possibility to have access to people with knowledge of contextual features that impact meaning. In the next section, I shift the focus away from challenges to move towards opportunities that can contribute to facilitating both access and interpretation.

3. Opportunities

In recent years, the academic world has begun to emphasize the importance of interdisciplinary research. The US government's National Science Foundation offers the following comprehensive definition of interdisciplinary research:

> a mode of research by teams or individuals that integrates information, data, techniques, tools, perspectives, concepts, and/or theories from two or more disciplines or bodies of specialized knowledge to advance fundamental understanding or to solve problems whose solutions are beyond the scope of a single discipline or area of research practice.[5]

The interdisciplinary approach to research is now often valued and encouraged, with an increasing number of research funding bodies prioritizing projects that cross disciplinary boundaries, as can be verified from the websites of public finance sources around the world.[6]

With particular reference to business discourse, interdisciplinary research allows language-oriented scholars to expand their network of contacts by exploiting the knowledge and practices of co-researchers in other business-related disciplines. It can thus provide a fresh perspective not only on how academics working in other disciplines gain access to data, but also on how they establish ongoing collaboration with companies in a way that is mutually beneficial.

In the following sub-sections, I reflect on an interdisciplinary research experience with marketing colleagues. I begin with some background on data collection methods used in this field, and then provide highlights of our study, with particular reference to opportunities linked to its interdisciplinary nature.[7] In fact, this research demonstrates the fruitful combination of qualitative marketing research processes and in-depth linguistic analysis of data of interest to companies, while also exploring ways to connect business discourse research with professional practice.

3.1. Interdisciplinary approaches to accessing data

In the context of marketing research, there are three traditional methods for collecting data: questionnaires, interviews and focus groups. These are used by marketing academics to understand consumer attitudes and perceptions in relation to companies, products and brands. Although these techniques are well consolidated in the field, they nonetheless have some drawbacks. Even if questionnaires can be distributed to many consumers and thus retrieve potentially large amounts of data, they are constrained by response rates over which researchers have little control. In contrast, interviews and focus groups give researchers a high level of control, but they tend to be used on a relatively small scale and are thus, by their very nature, limited in the number of consumers they can reach. In addition, these three methods may be seen as invasive by consumers. To overcome this problem, a qualitative research technique known as **netnography** has been proposed by Kozinets (2002).[8] Essentially, netnography adapts ethnographic methods to analyse consumer perceptions and behaviours that emerge from the Internet discourse that they produce. In other words, netnography aims to acquire an understanding of "tastes, desires, relevant symbol systems, and decision-making influences of particular consumers and consumer groups" (Kozinets 2002: 61). By observing the interactive processes of an online community through their computer-mediated discourse (e.g., blogs or forums), rather than during live encounters with the participants, netnography offers a more unobtrusive and naturalistic way of collecting data. More specifically, virtual interactions that take place during online communications are considered by marketing researchers to be spontaneous exchanges among consumers who engage in 'conversations' about common interests on digital platforms. According to Muniz/O'Guinn (2001), these online

---

5 http://www.nsf.gov/od/iia/additional_resources/interdisciplinary_research/definition.jsp

6 See, for example, the websites of Research Councils UK, the ERC (European Research Council) and the Australian Research Council (ARC).

7 The complete study is available in Crawford Camiciottoli et al. (2014).

8 Other terms that have been suggested to characterize this research process include *digital ethnography* (Murthy 2008), *virtual ethnography* (Domínguez Figaredo et al. 2007), and *cyberethnography* (Rybas/Gajjala 2007)

communities are new market spaces that can be studied for research purposes and are free from the constraints of situations fabricated by external researchers to achieve their objectives (Rheingold 2000). In addition, collecting consumer-related data by means of netnography is also faster, simpler and less expensive than traditional methods. As a research process, netnography incorporates several phases, including entrée (i.e., identifying a suitable online community), data collection, data analysis and data interpretation (Kozinets 2002).

In linguistic research, the use of texts available on the Internet as a source of data has been a common practice for a number of years, and therefore does not seem particularly innovative *per se*. However, what is interesting is the underlying rationale behind the netnographic approach. This type of data is construed as direct access to the attitudes and perceptions of communities of consumers, potentially on a very large scale, which can then be analysed and converted into actionable business intelligence to the benefit of companies.

The importance of the linguistic dimension of marketing research has been recognized by academics in the field, as seen in the following comment by Kozinets (2002: 67): "Understanding the language of consumer segments and its specific underlying social motivations is a key aspect to achieving the market orientation." However, marketing studies that implement a netnographic approach have typically been limited to a qualitative content analysis of virtual interactions among consumers, without focusing on their particular language features (see Kozinets 2002, Dubosson/Broillet 2008, de Valck et al. 2009). To address this gap, concepts and instruments from the field of linguistics, specifically corpus linguistics, can be proposed as a method to systematically analyse language used to describe products and brands in online consumer discourse.

3.2. Highlights of an interdisciplinary study

This research aimed to determine the degree of alignment between how consumers perceive brands and how companies define them, based on a detailed linguistic analysis of the texts that they produce, i.e., consumer blogs and company websites. The setting of the study was the fashion industry as a business sector that has significant global influence. According to the market research database *Companies and Markets*, it has maintained a steady growth rate notwithstanding the critical economic situation that has characterized global markets over the last few years. In addition, a considerable amount of scholarly research is dedicated to the fashion industry in publications such as *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, *Fiber: Online Journal of the International Fashion and Apparel Industry* and *International Journal of Fashion Studies*. Interestingly, the latter publication describes fashion studies as an interdisciplinary field in itself that draws from the social sciences, the arts and the humanities, pointing out that "understanding fashion means approaching it from various perspectives".[9] From a linguistic perspective, fashion discourse, i.e., "ways of talking about fashion" (Thompson/Haytko 1997: 15) is a particularly rich source of data. The elaborate visual component of fashion products, the charismatic personalities of designers and the emotions evoked by fashion brands often translate into vivid descriptions that are loaded with evaluative adjectives, e.g., *stunning, irresistible, cosmopolitan, luxurious*. From a marketing perspective, when consumers use such adjectives to qualify brands, they are actually expressing their perceptions of it, and are thus entering into a sort of 'dialogue' with the brand itself. Thus, the possibility to collect and analyse linguistic expressions of brand perceptions constitutes an important way for companies to gauge the effectiveness of their marketing and communication strategies.

In what follows, I summarize the interdisciplinary research process. We first perused Internet fashion communities until we identified a top-ranking fashion blog as the most suitable source of data for our research purposes. The blog contains multi-authored posts that express opinions in relation to fashion brands. Following the original posts, an unlimited number of user comments can be added to join in the 'conversation'. Textual data were collected for three leading luxury

9 http://www.intellectbooks.co.uk/journals/view-Journal,id=230/

fashion brands that operate on an international scale and compiled into three separate corpora of consumer conversations relating to each brand. For comparative purposes, parallel corpora were compiled from promotional texts about products on the websites of the same three brands. In this way, it would be possible to determine the level of alignment/disalignment between how consumers perceive the brands and how companies represent them.

The three sets of parallel corpora were then analysed with methods of corpus linguistics to investigate the adjectives that had been used (1) by the bloggers to express their perceptions of the brands, and (2) by the companies to promote their brands. In particular, each corpus was processed with *WMatrix* (Rayson 2008), a corpus analysis tool that is able to tag each word in a corpus according to its part of speech. It was then possible to query the corpora using the general adjective tag (JJ), which enabled the extraction of all adjectives in each corpus. When dealing with an open class grammatical category such as adjectives, the use of automated corpus methods is the only feasible way to perform exhaustive analyses. The extracted adjectives were then compiled into parallel lists representing the blogs and company websites, and cross-checked manually to identify common items. This procedure determined a substantial level of alignment between consumer perceptions and company representations for all three brands. In addition, 'themes' of brand attributes were also revealed, i.e., attributes that were expressed by both companies and consumers, but were extended by the latter, often in creative ways and with different nuances of meaning. Figure 1 illustrates some of the themes that emerged from the analysis of the adjectives used in relation to the three brands, i.e., *lightness* (Brand 1), *seduction* (Brand 2) and *softness* (Brand 3). For example, within the theme of *seduction*, the item *femme-fatale* adds an aura of glamour by recalling female characters in classic Hollywood *noir* films. This type of information can be very important for effective marketing strategies because it provides indications of which aspects of a brand are perceived most strongly and favourably by consumers. What was also quite interesting was that each of the three brands had unique themes that did not overlap with the others. This suggests that the three brands have been successful in shaping distinct perceptions among consumers as a way to distinguish themselves from their competitors.

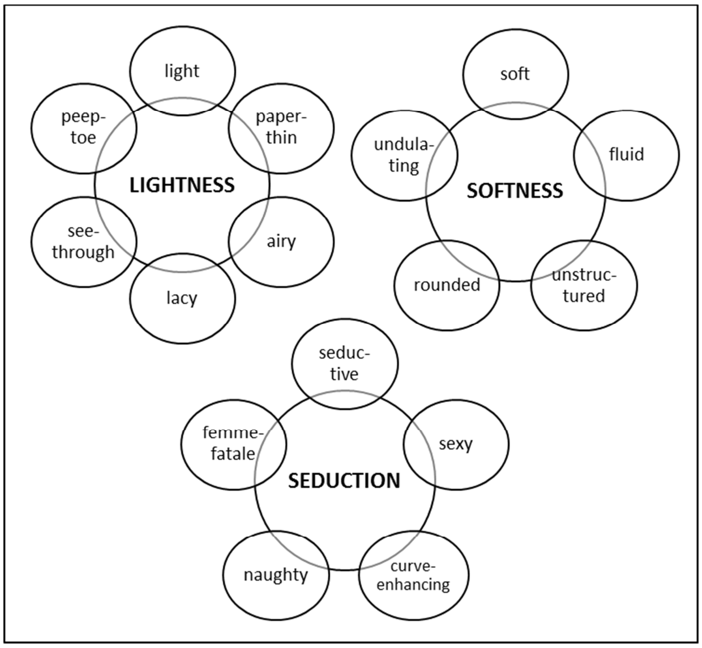

Figure 1. Themes of consumer perceptions of brands in fashion blogs

The benefits of the interdisciplinary research briefly outlined above can be articulated on three different levels: (1) for marketing researchers, (2) for business practitioners and (3) for business discourse analysts.

For marketing researchers, the use of online texts as a source of data is a methodology that is less obtrusive than interviews, focus groups and conventional ethnography based on live encounters. At the same time, elaboration of the data with corpus instruments offers a way to better understand how consumer perceptions of brands are encoded by language. In recent years, some marketing studies have begun to exploit text-mining software to extract information about consumers' attitudes towards brands from Internet texts in the context of **sentiment analysis** (see Lee/Bradlow 2011, Feldman et al. 2008). However, this work has been mainly limited to identifying positive vs. negative sentiments, without performing finely-tuned analyses of linguistic elements that encode various facets of meaning that contribute to a consumer's perception of a brand, which requires expertise from the field of linguistics. In other words, only in-depth linguistic analysis can reveal important nuances of meaning in relation to consumer perceptions of brands.

For business practitioners, the methodology developed in this interdisciplinary research can serve as a relatively user-friendly tool to analyse online consumer interactions that focus on their own brands. Clearly, the implementation of this method would require brand managers to have a good set of language skills. However, the analytical tools and processes are flexible enough so that managers could adapt them according to the degree of complexity desired. In this way, companies would be able to enter into a spontaneous natural 'dialogue' with their consumers to understand more about their perceptions, especially those that consumers may be reluctant to express in the presence of researchers when traditional marketing research methods are implemented. All of this translates into valuable marketing intelligence that can be used in the context of a branding strategy to reinforce or reshape aspects of brand identity on the basis of the information that is gleaned. The methodology could also be applied to analyse the brand-related communications of competitors that are freely available on the Internet and thus easily accessible. This type of knowledge would constitute important input for making decisions about how a company wants to position itself in the market with respect to its competitors.

Finally, for business discourse analysts, this type of interdisciplinary research provides opportunities to understand more about how academics in other disciplines go about establishing relations with companies that can favour access and encourage on-going collaboration. In particular, working with marketing colleagues can offer new perspectives on issues that are of crucial importance to those who wish to gain access to company-produced discourse, as well as possible strategies for overcoming the challenges that this often entails. For example, to establish initial contacts with companies for research purposes, marketing academics often go through intermediaries, such as trade and industry associations that promote initiatives to bring together educational institutions and the business community. In addition, they regularly invite working professionals, e.g., brand managers or communication directors, to speak to students. This creates opportunities for rapport-building before and after the manager's intervention in the classroom, which can then lead to research collaboration.

4. Concluding remarks

In this paper, I have reflected on the challenges and opportunities involved in accessing discourse in business settings, drawing on insights from previous studies and my own research experiences. Perhaps what has emerged most clearly is the need to strengthen the connection between research and profession in a way that is perceived as advantageous for both. In an era that is dominated by digital technology which is having a growing impact on how companies communicate with their stakeholders, businesses may become more interested in gathering language-related intelligence, and therefore more open to collaboration with business discourse analysts who can contribute the linguistic expertise that they may be lacking. In this way, some of the challenges involved in accessing data could be mitigated.

This paper has also shown how an interdisciplinary approach can create opportunities for business discourse research with particular reference to the field of marketing. However, other related disciplines are beginning to pay closer attention to the importance of language in economic activity. For example, finance academics who carry out practice-oriented research in the area of corporate disclosure have called for more work based on textual analysis that can shed new light on empirical findings (see Beyer et al. 2010, Berger 2011, Loughran 2014).[10] Finally, it is worth noting that some types of business discourse (e.g., reporting and informative genres) are becoming much more accessible with respect to the past. This may be the result of a generalized push towards greater transparency to regain the public's trust following a series of major scandals in recent years. These are encouraging signs that can lead to more opportunities for business discourse analysts as we move forward into the future.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the professional informant (who chose to remain anonymous) whose 'insider' knowledge was fundamental to understanding more about the challenges in accessing data in some corporate settings, as well as possible ways to overcome them.

5. References

Agar, Michael 1996: *The Professional Stranger: An Informal Introduction to Ethnography*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Bargiela-Chiappini, Francesca (ed.) 2009: *The Handbook of Business Discourse*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Bargiela-Chiappini, Francesca/Harris, Sandra 1997: *Managing Language: The Discourse of Corporate Meetings*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Bargiela-Chiappini, Francesca/Nickerson, Catherine/Planken, Brigitte 2013: *Business Discourse*. Second Edition. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

Berger, Philip G. 2011: Challenges and Opportunities in Disclosure Research – A Discussion of 'The Financial Reporting Environment: Review of the Literature'. In *Journal of Accounting and Economics* 51, 204-218.

Beyer, Anne/Cohen, Daniel A./Lys, Thomas Z./Walther, Beverly R. 2010: The Financial Reporting Environment: Review of the Recent Literature. In *Journal of Accounting and Economics* 50, 296-343.

Crawford Camiciottoli, Belinda 2013: *Rhetoric in Financial Discourse. A Linguistic Analysis of ICT-mediated Disclosure Genres*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

Crawford Camiciottoli, Belinda/Ranfagni, Silvia/Guercini, Simone 2014: Exploring Brand Associations: An Innovative Methodological Approach. In *European Journal of Marketing* 48, 1092-1112.

de Valck, Kristine/van Bruggen, Gerrit. H./Wierenga, Berend 2009: Virtual Communities: A Marketing Perspective. In *Decision Support Systems* 47, 185-203.

Domínguez Figaredo, Daniel/Beaulieu, Anne/Estalella, Adolfo/Gómez, Edgar/Schnettler, Bernt/Read, Rosie 2007: Virtual Ethnography, Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum Qualitative Social Research, Vol. 8, No. 3 [online]. http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0703E19 (accessed 15 January 2012).

Dubosson, Magali/Broillet, Alexandra 2008: Analyzing Web 2.0 Internet Users in order to Drive Innovation in Distribution Strategy of Luxury Watches. A Netnography Analysis. Haute École de Gestion de Genève, Cahier de Recherche: N° HES-SO/HEG-GE/C--08/6/1-CH. Geneva: CRAG – Centre de Recherche Appliquée en Gestion [online]. http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1126222 (accessed 9 March 2011).

Ehlich, Konrad/Wagner, Johannes 1995: Introduction. In Konrad Ehlich/Johannes Wagner (eds.), *The Discourse of Business Negotiation*. Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter, 1-6.

Erickson, Frederick 1992: Ethnographic Microanalysis in Interaction. In Margaret D. Le Compte/Wendy L. Millroy/Judith Preissle (eds.), *The Handbook of Qualitative Research in Education*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 201-255.

Evans, Stephen 2013: Perspectives on the Use of English as a Business Lingua Franca in Hong Kong. In *Journal of Business Communication* 50, 227-252.

10 Further testimony to this increasing interest in linguistic aspects of financial discourse was the recent *International Conference of Discourse Approaches to Financial Communication. Bridging the Gap between Texts and Markets* that took place in February 2014 in Ascona, Switzerland.

Feldman, Ronen/Fresko, Moshe/Goldenberg, Jacob/Oded, Netzer/Ungar, Lyle 2008: Using Text Mining to Analyze User Forums, International Conference on Service Systems and Service Management [online]. http://ieeexplore.ieee.org/stamp/stamp.jsp?arnumber=04598504 (accessed June 3 2011).

Flowerdew, John 2002: Ethnographically-inspired Approaches to the Study of Academic Discourse. In John Flowerdew (ed.), *Academic Discourse*). London: Pearson Education Limited, 235-252.

Fox, Renata 1999: The Social Identity of Management Ergolect. In *English for Specific Purposes* 18, 261-278.

Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, Pilar/Fortanet-Gómez, Inmaculada 2009: The Presentation of Self in Résumés: An Intercultural Approach. In *English for Specific Purposes across Cultures* 5, 69-90.

Geertz, Clifford 1973: *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.

Gimenez, Julio 2014: A Day in the Life of…: Using Microethnographies to Understand Workplace Practices. *Paper presented at ABC International Symposium on The Ins and Outs of Professional Discourse Research*. Modena, March 6-7, 2014.

Hammersley, Martyn/Atkinson, Paul 2007: *Ethnography. Principles in Practice.* Third Edition. London: Routledge.

Holmes, Janet/Marra, Meredith/Vine, Bernadette 2011: *Leadership, Discourse and Ethnicity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hyland, Ken 2000: *Disciplinary Discourses: Social Interactions in Writing*. Harlow: Longman.

Kankaanranta, Anne 2005*: "Hej Seppo, Could You Pls Comment on This!" – Internal Email Communication in Lingua Franca English in a Multinational Company*. Jyväskylä: Jyväskylä University Printing House.

Kozinets, Robert V. 2002: The Field behind the Screen: Using Netnography for Marketing Research in Online Communities. In *Journal of Marketing Research* XXXIX, 61-72.

Lee, Thomas Y/Bradlow, Eric T. 2011: Automated Marketing Research Using Online Customer Reviews. In *Journal of Marketing Research* 48, 881-894.

Loughran, Tim 2014: Measuring Readability in Financial Disclosures. *Paper presented at the International Conference of Discourse Approaches to Financial Communication. Bridging the Gap between Texts and Markets*, February 2-6. Ascona, Switzerland.

Louhiala-Salminen, Leena 2002: The Fly's Perspective: Discourse in the Daily Routine of a Business Manager. In *English for Specific Purposes* 21, 211-231.

Louhiala-Salminen, Leena/Charles, Mirjaliisa/Kankaanranta, Anne 2005: English as a Lingua Franca in Nordic Corporate Mergers: Two Case Companies. In *English for Specific Purposes* 24, 401-421.

Muniz, Albert M. Jr./O'Guinn, Thomas C. 2001: Brand Community. In *Journal of Consumer Research* 27, 412-432.

Murthy, Dhiraj 2008: Digital Ethnography: An Examination of the Use of New Research Methodologies for Social Research. In *Sociology* 42, 837-855.

Rayson, Paul 2008: From Key Words to Key Semantic Domains. In *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics* 13, 519-549.

Rheingold, Howard 2000: *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.

Rybas, Natalia/Gajjala, Radhika 2007: Developing Cyberethnographic Research Methods for Understanding Digitally Mediated Identities, Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum Qualitative Social Research, Vol. 8, No. 3 [online]. http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0703355 (accessed January 20 2012).

Samra-Fredericks, Dalvir 2000: Doing 'Boards-in-Action' Research - An Ethnographic Approach for the Capture and Analysis of Directors' and Senior Managers' Interactive Routines. In *Corporate Governance. An International Review* 8, 244-257.

Samraj, Betty 2008: A Discourse Analysis of Master's Theses Across Disciplines with a Focus on Introductions. In *Journal of English for Academic Purposes 7*, 55-67.

Stubbe, Maria. 2001: From Office to Production Line. Collecting Data for the Wellington Language in the Workplace Project. Wellington Language in the Workplace Occasional Papers 2 (November 2001) [online]. http://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/centres-and-institutes/language-in-the-workplace/docs/ops/op2.pdf (accessed March 8 2015).

Stubbe, Maria/Ingle, Megan. 1999: Collecting Natural Interaction Data in a Factory: Some Methodological Challenges. *Paper presented at Murdoch Symposium on Talk-in-Interaction, Murdoch University*, Perth, 23-24 September, 1999 [online]. http://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/centres-and-institutes/language-in-the-workplace/docs/articles/Stubbe-and-Ingle-1999.pdf (accessed March 8 2015).

Swales, John M. 1998: *Other Floors, Other Voices. A Textography of a Small University Building*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Thompson Craig J./Haytko, Diana L. 1997: Speaking of Fashion: Consumers' Uses of Fashion Discourses and the Appropriation of Countervailing Cultural Meanings. In *Journal of Consumer Research* 24, 15-42.

Van Praet, Ellen 2009: Staging a Team Performance. A Linguistic Ethnographic Analysis of Weekly Meetings at a British Embassy. In *Journal of Business Communication* 46, 80-99.