AUTHORIAL PRESENCE AND STANCE IN GERMAN AND FRENCH LETTERS TO SHAREHOLDERS

Anne Küppers

1. INTRODUCTION

In the past decades, several studies have analyzed the distribution of speaker stance elements in texts from different genres and languages. Most of this research is of qualitative nature, includes English as (one of) the language(s) under investigation, and concerns academic language (e.g. Baumgarten, 2008; Baumgarten & Özçetin, 2008; Bernhardt, 1985; Hyland, 2001, 2002; Samson, 2004). The present chapter describes the characteristics of writer representation in German and French external business communication through the use of nominative personal pronouns in subject position and their co-occurrence patterns with certain verbs, in order to outline authorial presence and stance in letters to shareholders. Stance is understood here as an umbrella term for expressions of opinion, evaluation, judgment, attitude, feeling, and emotion in texts, and the presence of speaker-deictic elements is an explicit indicator of authorial presence in the text, personalizing the propositional content.

Existing analyses of external business communication mostly focus on material and economic characteristics in order to describe financial accounting strategies in different cultures and to define international standards. Research on linguistic aspects of business communication only developed during the last decade, simultaneously with studies on speaker stance elements in communication (Bextermöller, 2002; Ditlevsen, 2002; Gazdar & Kirchhoff, 2001). Focusing on the language used in French speaking business communication, the studies of Suomela-Salmi and Gambier (1994), Bolten, Kalverkämper, and Baumann (1996), Ammon and Knoblauch (2001), and Schlierer (2004) give first insights in the field. As to our knowledge, there are no studies
combining the analysis of business communication and the expression of authorial stance in German and French when the study was carried out (but see Kranich, 2011).

The present analysis is of interest in at least two respects. First, as there are only few systematic, contrastive studies for the language pair German-French, we make a first attempt at closing this gap with respect to the description of business communication. Second, we assume our work to be useful for translators. In order to adapt translations to the respective target culture, comparative studies outlining communicative preferences along the lines of the studies by e.g. Byrnes (1986), Clyne (1987, 1993), Kotthoff (1989), Doherty (1996, 2003), and House (1996, 1999, 2003) for German and English are needed for a greater variety of language pairs. As the number of companies that translate their annual reports into diverse languages increases – triggered by globalization processes – contrastive studies like the present one seem useful, if not essential.

The chapter is structured as follows. Section 2 gives a brief overview of previous studies on business communication and on the use of speaker/writer-deictic elements. Section 3 presents the corpus and introduces the method of analysis. The results are presented in Section 4 and discussed in Section 5. We conclude the chapter in Section 6.

2. AUTHOR’S ROLE IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

Previous studies on business communication in French and German have suggested that the typical German style is characterized by an unemotional, theoretical, highly structured, and factual way of presenting information (Bextermöller, 2002; Gazdar & Kirchhoff, 2001). When it comes to addressing the reader, the German author’s role is to guide the readers by expressing her/his personal attitude and by evaluating the information presented. The style is simple, sometimes even colloquial, and neither lexically nor syntactically marked as unconventional or nonstandard (Bextermöller, 2002; Gohr, 2002). First person personal pronouns (‘I’ and ‘we’) are used in German texts in order to allow for reader identification with the chief executive officer (CEO) and the company (Gohr, 2002). In contrast, French corporate communication is said to focus on ‘elegance.’ The style is also theory-oriented and rational, but the aesthetic component of language use is more important (Bolten et al., 1996). French texts are said to be more dialectic and dynamic but at the same time impersonal (Suomela-Salmi & Gambier, 1994). In general, the presence of the author in the text facilitates the establishment of a writer-reader relation and the reader’s text comprehension (Ammon & Knoblauch, 2001) and particularly highlights the role of the CEO in French companies.

With respect to the use of speaker/writer\(^1\)-deictic elements, some studies suggest that their use is not random, but based on conscious choices made by the individual author (e.g. Samson, [1] Since the present analysis is concerned with authorial stance in written texts, the expression “writer-deictic” will be used.