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Coppola, Claudia; Greco, Sara; Boogaart, Ronny; Garssen, Bart; Jansen, Henrike; Van Leeuwen, Maarten; ... ; Reuneker, Alex

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Argumentation and Agency for Building *Ethos* in an Italian Bank's Institutional Website¹

CLAUDIA COPPOLA & SARA GRECO

Philosophy, Communication and Performing Arts
Università degli Studi Roma Tre
Rome, Italy, 00100
claudia.coppola@uniroma3.it

Institute of Argumentation, Linguistics and Semiotics
Università della Svizzera italiana (USI)
Lugano, Switzerland, 6900
sara.greco@usi.ch

ABSTRACT: When arguing on their ability to have a positive impact on others (i.e. agency) in their institutional websites, banks can build their *ethos* appealing to the possibly conflicting arguments of *competence* (e.g. making profit) and *benevolence* (e.g. helping people), addressing multiple text stakeholders bearing different interests. Our explorative case-study investigates whether and how the biggest Italian bank reconciles the conflict between competence and benevolence by integrating the analysis of argumentation with that of agency.

KEYWORDS: agency, banks, benevolence, competence, corporate communication, institutional advertising

1. INTRODUCTION

Research in the field of business genre studies has shown that text genres in business communication often fulfil a promotional function along an informative one (Garzone, Poncini & Catenaccio, 2007; Breeze, 2013), and that this has acquired even greater significance after the rise of digital communication (Askehave & Ellerup Nielsen, 2005).

Some of these promotional activities involving old and new genres take place in websites (Poppi, 2011; Catenaccio, 2012), that along commercial advertising also include institutional advertising. The ultimate persuasive goal of institutional advertising, therefore, points to the *institutional websites'* argumentative nature: "business enterprises argue in their institutional advertising in order to attract new clients or to reinforce their image and reputation with existing clients" (Palmieri, 2014, p. 20). Indeed, institutional websites are usually places where companies justify their action in order to legitimize it, thus building their *ethos*. In Aristotle's account, which has then been revised in corporate communication contexts (e.g. Fuoli & Hart, 2018), *competence* and *benevolence* are two aspects of *ethos*², where the former refers to the company's expertise in their field and the latter to their selfless inclination to help others.

¹ Claudia Coppola has written sections 1, 4.1, and 5; Sara Greco has written sections 2 and 3. Section 4.3 has been jointly written.

² The Aristotelian concept of *ethos* has received significant attention in the domain of business rhetoric. We choose to follow the terminology adopted by Fuoli & Hart (2018), while we are aware that there are other

In big companies' institutional advertising, such as that of banks, these two dimensions of ethos often regard the way their action affects others (or themselves): that is to say, companies can argue on the reasonableness of their action in terms of how it creates profit (proving competence) or in terms of how it does good to others (proving benevolence). Because of the connection of competence and benevolence and the representation of the company's actions, we assume that, in institutional websites, competence and benevolence are largely related to what has been defined as "agency" (van Leeuwen, 1995), the "property of those entities (i) that have some degree of control over their own behavior, (ii) whose actions in the world affect other entities (and sometimes their own), and (iii) whose actions are object of evaluation (e.g. in terms of responsibility for a given outcome)" (Duranti, 2004, p. 453).

Competence and benevolence do not necessarily go hand in hand in all communication forms. As noted by Catenaccio & Degano (2011), some speakers – in our case, a bank – may find themselves in a difficult position in which the values of competence and benevolence are of different degrees of interest for different segments of addresses, who may even interpret them as opposite cultural values. In our case, text genres comprised in an institutional website are indeed addressed to multifaceted groups of people having different expectations on the bank and bearing different (or differently prioritized) interests, i.e. to several different "text stakeholders" (Palmieri & Mazzali-Lurati, 2016). Some authors have already observed a possible argumentative conflict between the need to justify one's actions in terms of competence or in terms of benevolence, especially with regards to activities belonging to the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) domain. Catenaccio and Degano (2011, p. 80) maintain that:

[...] while social responsibility is unquestionably laudable, its exigencies frequently run counter commonly accepted principles of business culture, first and foremost the profitability principle. Thus, when engaging in CSR communication, companies are faced with considerable challenges, as their actions and declarations are likely to be heavily scrutinized by multiple publics – from investors, to customers, to regulators and pressure groups – not all of which may be sympathetic to the same arguments.

On the one hand, in the case of high-street banks (i.e. large and widespread institutions), this task may prove particularly challenging given their need to reconcile the purpose of capital growth with other kinds of activities (Rocco, 2013). On the other hand, some authors have recently pointed out how companies can in fact discursively frame matters such as sustainability as a business opportunity, thus reconciling the two dimensions (Moon & Parc, 2019). Given these apparently contradictory findings, in what follows we propose an explorative case study involving the biggest Italian bank's website, where the argumentative analysis is integrated with the linguistic analysis of agency in order to verify whether the competence and benevolence dimensions are opposed or not.

conceptualizations of the dimensions of ethos (see for example Flyvholm Jørgensen & Isaksson, 2008, who distinguish among expertise, trustworthiness and empathy).

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND STUDY RATIONALE

This study aims at investigating whether and how a bank tries to reconcile the potential conflict between the two dimensions of competence and benevolence in their institutional websites, in particular when *justifying their action* in terms of its final impact (e.g. enhancing profit or reducing inequalities).

For this reason, we focus our analysis on the argumentative bits within the websites that can be reconstructed as means-end argumentation, i.e. arguments based on the *locus from final cause* (Rigotti & Greco, 2019). Based on existing literature (see Sect. 2), we assume that the conflict between competence and benevolence is mainly found at the level of “principles” (Catenaccio & Degano, 2011, see above). In argumentative terms, this means that the conflict may be found at the level of implicit cultural premises; in particular, following the Argumentum Model of Topics (AMT, Rigotti & Greco, 2019), we posit that the potential conflict between competence and benevolence identified by Catenaccio & Degano (2011) lies at the level of *endoxa*, i.e. cultural premises that are assumed as part of the material-contextual starting points that constitute the interlocutors’ common ground and that, together with procedural-inferential starting points determined from the *locus*, are involved in argument schemes determining argumentative inference. In this study, we will reconstruct the endoxa of the identified arguments based on the locus from final cause, in order to compare competence-related and benevolence-related endoxa.

As mentioned above, in order to analyze the conflict of competence and benevolence and its possible reconciliation on institutional websites, we deem as important the complementation of the argumentation perspective with a linguistic analysis of the representation of agency in discourse. In an ethnopragmatic perspective (Duranti, 2004), agency can be linguistically encoded in different ways according to the pragmatic purpose and expressing specific socio-cultural values. Therefore, the linguistic analysis of the Bank’s agency (what kind of actions are being performed by the Bank? affecting whom?) can help better grasp whether the identified endoxa can be classified as benevolence-related or as competence-related.

Therefore, we consider those sections of the biggest Italian bank’s institutional website (Intesa Sanpaolo) where the bank’s agency is specifically addressed (see §3), namely answering the following research questions:

- 1) How is the bank’s agency linguistically encoded in arguments of competence and benevolence?
- 2) At the level of endoxa, are arguments of competence and benevolence indeed irreconcilable or can they be reconciled? If they can be reconciled, how does it happen in the bank’s argumentation?

At a theoretical level, this study contributes to fill some gaps in the literature. While the argumentative activity within banking discourse has received much attention in some genres of financial communication such as takeover bids (Palmieri, 2014), earning call conferences (Koskela & Crawford Camiciottoli, 2020; Palmieri, Rocci & Kudrautsava, 2015), statements and other texts issued in times of crisis (Palmieri & Musi, 2020), less attention has been devoted to banks’ institutional advertising, in particular the one regarding banks’ ability to impact society. Moreover, while agency in relation to argumentation has been recently explored in forms of discourse such as the polylogue around fashion sustainability (Greco & De Cock, 2021), more comprehensive discourse-

oriented studies of agency within corporate (including banking) discourse are needed (Darics & Koller, 2019). To our best knowledge, in no previous work the study of the theoretical interrelation between ethos-building argumentation and the linguistic encoding of agency has been proposed.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The corpus for the present study was collected from the original (i.e. Italian) version of Bank Intesa Sanpaolo's institutional website³.

Specifically, we focused on those pages belonging to genres fulfilling the move of justifying the bank's involvement in a general area of business (e.g. innovation, culture) or specific project (e.g. clothing distribution, climate change). These pages are presumably addressed both to mainstream users (such as private clients, employers-to-be, students etc.) and institutional actors (such as potential investors, non-profit organizations etc.). The selected corpus consists of 80 webpages, for a total number of 96263 tokens.

In many senses, the Italian high street bank Intesa Sanpaolo is a paradigmatic case (Flyvbjerg, 2001, pp. 79-80). First of all, in their institutional website Intesa Sanpaolo claims to have the aim of becoming the first "Impact Bank" in the world, showing how expressing agency is discursively relevant to them. As already mentioned, Intesa Sanpaolo is the biggest banking group in Italy and one of the biggest groups in Europe; therefore, the dimension of competence is necessarily at stake in the bank's communication. Given its purpose to be an "Impact Bank", Intesa Sanpaolo is also engaged in numerous activities in the areas of environment, social inclusion, culture, education and innovation. In this sense, the dimension of benevolence is also at the core of the bank's self-presentation. Lastly, considered its role of leader, this Bank is presumably a discourse benchmark for other banks and companies; therefore our findings, although not generalizable, may be particularly relevant, at least for the Italian context.

Given our research questions (§2), and specifically the focus on arguments regarding the reasonableness of the Bank's action in terms of its final purpose, as already mentioned in this preliminary study we have chosen to focus solely on means-end argumentation, i.e. on the *locus of final cause* (Rigotti & Greco, 2019), relying on the pragma-dialectical approach to identify standpoints and supporting arguments. As said above, we also relied on the Argumentum Model of Topics (ibid.) to analyze inferential structures, especially to retrieve the cultural endoxa that we assume are at the basis of the potential conflict that the bank needs to deal with.

Then, the analysis of the linguistic encoding of agency allowed helped with the classification of endoxa as competence-related as opposed to benevolence-related. Also relying on corpus-driven techniques⁴ (frequency lists, Key-Word-In-Context tool), we focused on predicates present in the datum and on the semantic roles of agent, patient(s) and beneficiaries in order to identify the most frequent semantic fields (Fillmore, 1976) and better discriminate whether the Bank was appealing to its own competence or benevolence when building its ethos. We then coded the endoxa against the categories of

³ The website is available at the following link: <https://group.intesasanpaolo.com/it/> (last access: 29/09/2023).

⁴ The corpus analysis software AntConc (Anthony, 2022) was used.

(i) competence and (ii) benevolence; during the analysis we then added a third category for blurry cases (see §4.2).

Lastly, for those cases where endoxa of competence and benevolence were found to be reconciled, in a subsequent phase of annotation we coded the argumentative sections for types of reconciliation, namely through (i) subordinative argumentation (ARG), (ii) multiple argumentation (MUL), (iii) semantic/syntactic means (SEM/SYN) (see §4.2).

Given the explorative nature of this study, the methodology of selecting a paradigmatic case study is particularly suited. By selecting an important high-street bank in the Italian context and exploring how the potential conflict of competence and benevolence is dealt with in its institutional website communication, our aim is not to generalize our findings, but rather to formulate more specific hypotheses for further research.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Argumentation and agency

In the selected corpus, 76 argumentative sequences including arguments based on the locus from final cause (generating either the maxim of the goals case or the maxim of the problem-solving case) were identified. These were mostly found in the introductory part of the text, thus fulfilling the move (Bhatia, 1993) of introducing the different topics by arguing on their reasonableness.

The standpoint is mostly conveyed implicitly. Fig.1 shows the AMT's inferential configuration:

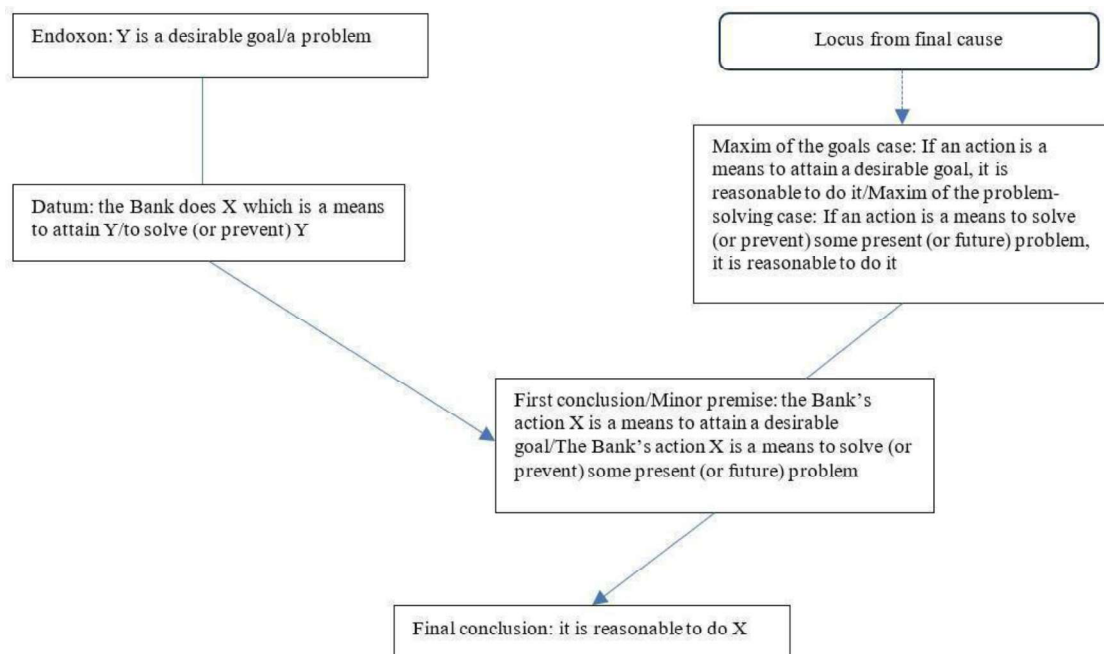


Figure 1 - AMT's inferential configuration of argumentation based on the locus of final cause

See the following example⁵:

- (1) *Investing in the young, by giving a sign of trust, openness and involvement of young people is of outmost importance to promote new paths of communication and interaction with future clients. For this reason, we developed a specific product line*⁶.

1. It is reasonable that Bank Intesa Sanpaolo developed a specific product line for young people) [standpoint]

1.1 a Investing in the young promotes new paths of communication and interaction with future clients [datum]

(1.1b and new paths of communication and interaction with future clients are a desirable aim) [endoxon]

Looking at predicates in the datum from the viewpoint of agency (in this example, ‘promote’) we could grasp which semantic fields they referred to and what is the degree of agency they carry. Looking at frequency lists of these predicates, it would seem that the Bank’s agency is constructed mainly referring to the semantic fields of creation, elimination (which can be seen as two complementary domains) and support. This is traceable in the frequent use of predicates such as ‘generate’ (‘generare’, ranking 1st in the list), ‘promote’ (‘promuovere’, ranking 1st together with ‘generate’), ‘guarantee’ (‘garantire’, ranking 2nd) ‘support’ (‘sostenere’, ranking 3rd) ‘contrast’ (‘contrastare’, ranking 4th), ‘reduce’ (‘ridurre’, ranking 5th), and their synonyms.

Predicates such as ‘create’ (‘creare’), ‘generate’ (‘generare’), ‘build’ (‘costruire’), ‘realize’ (‘realizzare’) point to the Bank’s highest degree of agency, i.e. the Bank as creator (with agency being even enhanced by the metaphor in the case of ‘build’, cf. Duranti, 2004). In such cases the Bank refers either to its own competence (as in “generate economic and competitive advantage for enterprises”) or benevolence (as in “create an efficient support network”). In the former case, patients and beneficiaries of the Bank’s action are referents such as ‘value’, ‘enterprises’, ‘stakeholders’ or the Bank itself. When referring to the benevolence dimension, these predicates collocate with referents such as “a future for current and next generations or social inclusion”. In some cases, both dimensions are simultaneously referred to through juxtaposition and/or semantic vagueness, as in “create long-term value for the Bank and for the community” where in this context ‘value’ possibly refers to different referents (i.e. money, job opportunities, better life quality etc.) depending on who the final beneficiary is, while still conveying a positive connotation (Lombardi Vallauri, 2019; Catenaccio, 2020). The predicates ‘reduce’ and ‘contrast’ are used either to refer to the economic/financial domain (e.g. in “reduce the risks”, referring to the clients’ portfolio), proving competent, or (more often) to CSR-related issues (as in “reduce environmental impact”, “contrast food poverty”), proving benevolent.

As for the support dimension, predicates such as ‘support’, ‘favour’, and causative constructions such as “make someone/something grow/prosper” point to a Bank which is

⁵ All examples are translated from the original Italian into English. For each example, links to the original Italian webpage are provided (last access: 29/09/2023).

⁶<https://group.intesasanpaolo.com/it/sostenibilita/inclusione-finanziaria-supporto-imprese/inclusione-finanziaria/soggetti-vulnerabili>

slightly less agentic, and that empowers others to act instead by giving them instruments. This domain also concerns either the competence dimension, with beneficiaries being e.g. ‘enterprises’ (as in “support private and public enterprises on a financial level”) or the benevolence one, with beneficiaries being people (as in “support families”) as well abstract concepts (as in “favour social inclusion”). Again, even in this case the Bank sometimes strategically refers to its impact on both financial and societal level simultaneously. This happens, for example through morpho-syntactic means, e.g. through noun phrases (adjective+noun) such as ‘fair development’ or ‘socioeconomic growth’. In such cases the Bank may be willing to meet both the needs of text stakeholders primarily interested in the fact that there is development or economic growth and those more interested in the fact that development be fair and that economic growth also concern social aspects.

Within this domain, when the semantic beneficiary of the company’s action is the Bank itself, we observed the use of presuppositions triggered by either change of state predicates such as ‘reinforce’ (‘rafforzare’), ‘consolidate’ (‘consolidare’) (as in “strengthen the Bank”) and definite descriptions (as in “protect the Group’s financial stability”), also jointly (as in “further reinforcing its leader Bank role”). This tendency shows that, when referring to its impact on the Bank itself, the company already takes for granted (i.e. already given in the common ground, Stalnaker, 2002) its competence (i.e. its stability, reputation, leadership and so on) and focuses on how its action can make it even more competent.

To summarize, when justifying its action in terms of impact on others (or on itself), the Bank discursively builds itself as a creator, a problem-solver and, most of all, a facilitator, either when trying to prove competent or benevolent. When referring to impacting on itself, the Bank’s competence is already taken for granted by means of presuppositions. Crucially for the purpose of this study, the analysis revealed that in many cases the Bank simultaneously refers to the two dimensions of competence and benevolence on the semantic and/or syntactic level, which arguably makes it possible to meet the multifaceted exigencies of multiple text stakeholders within the same argumentation.

4.2 Reconciliation of endoxa

Resting on the analysis of agency (see §4.1), we coded endoxa of competence and benevolence according to the categories ‘competence’ (C), ‘benevolence’ (B) and ‘both’ (C/B). In our corpus we found 86 endoxa of benevolence, 35 of competence (showing a preference of the former over the latter) and 42 blurry cases, where both dimensions are referred to. As far as the reconcilability of the two dimensions is concerned, we found that in 38 cases the Bank refers to either competence or benevolence, while in 38 cases they refer to both dimensions.

Given our research questions (see §2), here we will focus on cases of reconciliation. Among these, we found three subtypes, namely (i) reconciliation by subordinative argumentation (coded with ARG), in which competence and benevolence support each other, (ii) reconciliation by multiple argumentation (coded with MUL), in which competence and benevolence are juxtaposed, and (iii) reconciliation by semantic/syntactic means (coded with SEM/SYN), in which competence and benevolence are merged but it is unclear how their interact. We also tagged those cases when two of these strategies

cooccur (for example, ARG+SEM/SYN indicates that in that section competence and benevolence are reconciled both through subordinative argumentation and semantic/syntactic means). In our corpus we found 4 cases of reconciliation through subordinative argumentation (2 ARG and 2 ARG+SEM/SYN); 25 cases of reconciliation through multiple argumentation (5 MUL and 20 MUL+SEM/SYN) and 32 cases of reconciliation through semantic/syntactic means (10 SEM/SYN, and the above-mentioned 2 ARG+SEM/SYN and 20 MUL+SEM/SYN). Therefore, we clearly see a preference in the use of reconciliation through semantic/syntactic means and multiple argumentation over subordinative argumentation. In what follows we will show examples of and comment on each of these subtypes.

As already mentioned, the Bank reconciles the two dimensions mostly by means of semantic and/or syntactic means. Let us see an example:

(2) *In order to guarantee a future of growth and development it is necessary to invest in education and research, contrast school dropout and facilitate employment opportunities for young people, by supporting the right to education concretely and by developing Life Skills for the future*⁷.

1. It is necessary that the Bank invests in education and research, contrast school dropout and facilitates employment opportunities for young people, by supporting the right to education concretely and by developing Life Skills for the future

1.1 a the Bank's investment in education and research guarantees a future of growth and development

(1.1b and a future of growth and development is a desirable aim) [C/B]

In justifying its own action in terms of how it creates “growth and development”, which are semantically vague in this context, the Bank, on the one hand, meets the interests of the mainstream public and some institutional subjects (such as students, possible future clients, universities etc.) who may read this in terms of the Bank's goodwill to support young people (especially those subject to school dropout risk) throughout their educational path and working career. On the other hand, the Bank also satisfies the expectations of more institutional addressees (such as companies, private investors) who may see the final purpose of growth and development as a sign of the Bank's ability to make profit (in the long run) out of their investments, and therefore judge the Bank as a good partner for future collaborations. The reconciliation through semantic vagueness still holds when expressions such as ‘growth’, ‘development’ are modified by adjectives such as ‘inclusive’, ‘sustainable’ in syntactically simple and therefore little predicative noun phrases such as “sustainable development” or “inclusive growth”, “sustainable economic and social development” (see §4.1). In such cases, and more broadly when the Bank refers to things that possibly involve a benefit for the society and economic growth (such as employment) we observe an attempt to put together both ethical issues (such as inclusion or sustainability) and profit on the semantic and/or syntactic level. By these means, the Bank is asking each receiver to reconstruct the implicit meaning according to their own expectations and preferences.

⁷ <https://group.intesasanpaolo.com/it/sociale/iniziativa-per-universita-e-scuola>

In the following example, taken from a section addressing sustainable investments, the two dimensions are appealed to in a multiple argumentation; therefore, there is no explicit mention of the link between the two:

- (3) *We are constantly engaged in the creation of new solutions aimed at meeting the exigencies of our clients in order to valorize a long-term growth of their investments, in compliance with environmental, social and governance sustainability criteria*⁸.

(1. It is reasonable that the Bank is constantly engaged in the creation of new solutions aimed at meeting the exigencies of their clients)

1.1 a the Bank's solutions valorize a long-term growth of clients' investments

(1.1b and a long-term growth of clients' investments is a desirable aim) [C]

1.2 a the Bank's solutions comply with environmental, social and governance sustainability criteria

(1.2b and meeting environmental, social and governance sustainability criteria is a desirable aim) [B]

Here the comma after "investments" seems to indicate that the investments' long-term growth and the implementation of environmental, social and governance sustainability criteria are two distinct positive effects that the Bank's proposed solutions can bring about. Therefore, in such cases, even though there is an attempt to put together the two dimensions, possibly addressing the rhetorical needs of different kinds of audiences, there seems to be no full reconciliation between competence and benevolence but rather a sort of juxtaposition of the two dimensions (cf. Catenaccio & Degano, 2011).

As the data show, only in a few cases the two dimensions seem to be reconciled on an argumentative basis, as in the case of (3), when the Bank argues on the reasonableness and usefulness of their ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) Laboratory:

- (4) *The ESG Laboratory is an actual and virtual meeting point, to accompany Italian enterprises through sustainable transition, a development path aimed at generating new competitive advantages and support a long-term growth with positive impacts on the environment and people. The project is addressed to all enterprises and the respective supply chains interested in ESG – Environmental, Social and Governance-related matters.*

*The aim of the Laboratory is to foster discussion and stimulate awareness on ESG-related matters between companies and supply chains. By sharing experiences, the aim is to support Clients in taking their first steps towards initiatives that improve their sustainability profile with positive effects on the enterprise's development*⁹.

(1. it is reasonable that the Bank has set up an ESG Laboratory)

1.1 a the ESG Laboratory accompanies Italian enterprises through sustainable transition

⁸<https://group.intesasanpaolo.com/it/sostenibilita/supporto-ai-clienti-nella-transizione-esg/investimenti-sostenibili>

⁹ <https://group.intesasanpaolo.com/it/sezione-editoriale/laboratori-esg-per-la-crescita-sostenibile>

- (1.1b and sustainable transition is a desirable aim) [B]
- 1.1 b.1a sustainable transition generates new competitive advantages and support a long-term growth
- (1.1b.1b and new competitive advantages and support a long-term growth are a desirable aim) [C]
- 1.1 b.1b.1a new competitive advantages and support a long-term growth have positive impacts on the environment and people
- (1.1b.1b.1b and positive impacts on the environment and people are a desirable aim) [B]
- 1.2a The ESG Laboratory supports Clients in taking their first steps towards initiatives that improve their sustainability profile
- (1.2b and a good sustainability profile is a desirable aim) [B]
- 1.2b.1a a good sustainability profile has positive effects on the enterprise's development
- (1.2b.1b and the enterprise's development is a desirable aim) [C]

Interestingly enough, the argumentative reconciliation of the two dimensions here seems to be bidirectional: in 1.1 it is argued that sustainable transition is desirable (appealing to benevolence, in 1.1b) *because* new competitive advantages and a long-term growth are desirable (appealing to the Bank's competence, in 1.1b.1b), which in turn is desirable *because* it has positive impacts on the environment and people (appealing again to benevolence, even if in a semantically vague way through the vague noun phrase "positive impacts", in 1.1b.1b.1b); in 1.2 it is argued that having a good sustainability profile is desirable (which, *per se*, would seem to point to benevolence, in 1.2b) *because* it brings about the development of the enterprise (which points to the Bank's ability to create profit for enterprises, in 1.2b.1b). In such cases, we see a reconciliation between the two dimensions, and the link on argumentative basis seems to make the Bank's action in line with the different addressees' needs and expectations. However, it is worth noticing that the fact that the argumentative links between the dimension is signaled by the preposition 'with' (in "with positive impacts on the environment and on people") may make the link between the two dimension slightly more opaque as compared to a more explicitly causative connector such as *because*.

5. GENERAL DISCUSSION

Overall, although in its preliminary nature, our analysis led to some general considerations.

The first important finding (answering RQ1) is that the Bank, when justifying its action in terms of its impact on others (or itself), discursively portrays itself as an agent that creates things (or, conversely, reduces or eliminates them) and that supports (people and initiatives, or itself). In doing so, it appeals either to dimensions of competence (e.g. by referring to creating value, avoiding financial risks and supporting enterprises) or benevolence (e.g. by referring to generating social impact, reducing inequalities and promoting art and culture). The analysis of agency also revealed that the Bank can appeal simultaneously to both dimensions when its action affects different beneficiaries; this is

done through syntactic/semantic means, i.e. through semantically vague expressions (e.g. ‘value’) or little predicative NPs (adjective+noun) such as ‘inclusive growth’.

The second important finding (answering RQ2) that emerged from our data is that reconciliation between the dimensions of competence and benevolence does take place in Intesa Sanpaolo’s institutional website, but not systematically. This confirms previous research showing that the conflict between CSR-related and profitability can in fact be (at least, discursively) overcome (Catenaccio & Degano, 2011; Moon & Parc, 2019). In particular, it seems that, given this Bank’s mission to be a driving force of growth (affecting different groups of actors), it may be easier for them to refer to these two dimensions as interrelated or, at least, not contradicting.

The non-systematic nature of the Bank’s reconciliation strategies that we found in our data also leads to some observations. Among the found strategies, we believe that reconciliation is only effectively achieved through subordinative argumentation. As shown, subordinative argumentation makes it possible to appeal to both dimensions separately, clarifying what precise impact the action has on different beneficiaries, but at the same time linking them (even though not always explicitly) and making the whole reasoning stronger. A more systematic use of subordinative argumentation for reconciling the two dimensions, therefore, would be presumably more in line with the Bank’s objectives claimed on the website. Empirical evidence (such as surveys or other types of behavioral experiments along the lines of Fuoli & Hart, 2018) is needed to investigate whether this would also make the Bank’s communication perceived as more credible and honest on the part of the receiver. Similar considerations might be applied to the frequent use of semantically vague expressions in the bank’s website: although vagueness certainly secures some advantages such as conveying a positive connotation in a compact way, reaching a wider audience (Mannaioli, Ansani, Coppola & Lombardi Vallauri, 2024), mixing the two dimensions to the extent of making referents not retrievable may also have its drawbacks in this context (e.g., in terms of brand reputation). Again, empirical backing is needed.

On the one hand, the fact that the Bank often resorts to reconciliation on the semantic/syntactic level and multiple argumentation instead of subordinative argumentation seems to highlight the relevance of meta-argumentative awareness on the part of websites’ editorial staff, or may point (at least partly) to genre constraints. On the other hand, it seems fair to observe that the preference for semantic vagueness may also be ascribed to a difficulty in changing a strong cultural endoxon such as the irreconcilability of competence and benevolence, which seems to be particularly strong in the Italian environment, especially regarding banks. However, one cannot exclude that the conflict will be neutralized at some point, especially because in other domains this discursive conciliation between profit and CSR has already taken place.

6. CONCLUSION

We proposed an explorative study investigating whether and how a big Italian bank reconciles the dimensions of competence and benevolence in ethos-building argumentation in their institutional website advertising by integrating the analysis with the investigation of agency. Our findings suggest that reconciliation does take place but not systematically,

and that this is mainly performed through semantic/syntactic means and juxtaposing arguments, and more rarely on a real argumentative basis.

Given their case-study nature, our findings are not generalizable. However, this study not only provided insightful results for the Bank under investigation and possibly for other Banks, but also proved the theoretical and methodological validity of integrating ethos-building argumentation and other domains of discursive self-construction such as agency, possibly paving the way for more comprehensive investigations of this kind in the domain of business rhetoric.

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