

## **Being the bearer of bad news: an analysis of corporate reporting on negative outcomes**

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An area of social life that is generally less susceptible to sociolinguistic analysis is business communication. Businesses frequently have legal and other concerns that limit the amount of conversational data they are willing to release or allow to be recorded. At the same time businesses do release letters to shareholders, recorded press briefings, and other official communications originating principally from a single corporate figurehead. Now with the widespread use of the Internet and other social media outlets analyzing business communication has become a possibility as more businesses are trying to connect with both customers and shareholder. While some previous studies focused on the rhetorical structures of these communications, we focus on a cross section of the banking sector from the year 2008 composed of fifty banks of differing sizes and geographic locations that all received money from the federal government. The year was selected as it represented the height of the financial crisis and the banks were determined by examining previous performance and their perceived presence in the industry.

Our analysis focuses on the construction and presentation of corporate identities in each letter relative to current market conditions. Specifically, we find that, based on the size of the bank, a different narrative form is employed by the business leader to present negative results for the year and the reasoning behind receiving federal funds. Letters from the set of twenty-five small regional banks emphasized the success of the organization over the past fiscal year in contrast to the rest of the market and downplayed receiving any federal funds. At the same time letters from the large national banks in our study portrayed present market conditions as deteriorating and the need for federal funds to stay afloat. By examining how each bank represents its market performance we aim to build a model for how negative corporate news is presented and how this can be used to understand other forms of corporate communications. An ongoing component of our research is to relate our model of letters to shareholders to its reception and discussion by shareholders and other commentators on social media outlets.

One problem that was encountered in conducting this research was the lack of good tools to aid in the analysis of the textual data. As a result, we had to construct a suite of applications to allow for our team of researchers to quickly browse, search, and analyze texts. These tools are being made freely available to other researchers and, we hope, will prove invaluable in both managing textual sociolinguistic data, analyzing its structure and content, as well as preparing data for further statistical analysis.