

CADAAD Conference 2010

Ideology, identity and interaction

The business conception of sustainable development: a view from corpus linguistics

Alon Lischinsky
Umeå Universitet

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Overview

- An examination of the meaning of “sustainability” and “sustainable development” in financial and environmental annual reports
- Drawing on corpus methods to obtain a complete and systematic representation of language use
- Focused on providing empirical evidence for the frequent claim that business actors' concept of sustainability has served to co-opt public debate about sustainability and preclude its genuine goals

The meaning of sustainability

- “Sustainability” and “sustainable development” have become commonplace terms in public discourse over the past few decades
- However, their growing prominence has been accompanied by considerable disagreement about their exact meaning
- A minimal definition is not difficult to reach, but only at a level of generality that makes it of little use for the practical issues that the concept was intended to solve
- Different participants in the development/environment debate have different presuppositions about these issues that have proved hard to treat

Business conceptions of sustainability

- An especially acute concern is raised by business views of SD
- While development is primarily a concern of public policy, it is privately-owned companies that conduct most economic activity
- The business world has embraced the concept, but critically-oriented scholars contend that the presuppositions they bring to the debate impair the achievement of any principled form of sustainability
- Potential for "greenwash", i.e., selectively presenting decontextualised facts with no adequate criteria for evaluation, while strongly expressing a commitment to the environmental cause, in order to improve public image
- However plausible this claim, the evidence mustered for its support has been limited and inconclusive

Goals of the present research

- An empirically-based analysis of what SD means for business actors
- By means of a linguistic analysis of a large (700'000-word) corpus of annual reports, both financial and environmental
- Systematically accounting for the ways in which the term is used and “the company it keeps”: concordances, collocations, semantic preference, discourse prosody

Why annual reports?

- A very good source for corporate commentary on business, society and the economy
- Shown by previous research to devote much attention to contextual phenomena such as crises in explaining and justifying corporate performance
- Using environmental and CSR in addition to financial reports to ensure a broader focus, including social concerns

Previous research

- There is a wealth of research on the meaning of sustainable development, but most of it has worked from insufficient or inadequate data
- Many analyses take the intersection of the (dictionary) definitions of both terms as a departure point, although
 - such definitions are problematic; and
 - idioms are not necessarily compositive
- Others carry out their analysis without specifying what linguistic and lexical features their interpretation is based on, thus precluding comparison, verification or extension
- Some empirically-based analysis are available, but only in limited material

Collocates

- The company that words keep:
 - “as we acquire vocabulary it becomes loaded with the contexts (linguistic, generic and social) in which we repeatedly encounter it, such that we subconsciously expect and replicate these contexts when we read, write, hear and speak” (Hoey, 2005)
- The majority of the top collocates of S* relate not to sustainability activities, but to sustainability *communication*; a second important group is related to standard *business* activity and planning, mostly highly general and abstract nouns; a third group describes non-business *stakeholders*; terms describing the *production process* come a distant fourth

Collocates

- S* is mentioned almost exclusively in the context of planning and communicating business activities, to the exclusion of discussions of measurement and control of social and environmental impacts

Semantic preference

- Quantitative analysis, on its own, forcibly decontextualises lexical items; qualitative exploration of the concordances allows a focused, yet exhaustive, approach to their textual context
- The appearance of S* in relational clauses (definitions, etc.) are normally limited in content and tend to simply provide flat statements of subjective importance
- It seldom appears as the actor in concrete processes, i.e., as the cause or source of specific states of affairs

Semantic preference (cont'd)

- Where it does, it is described primarily in terms of (financial) benefit to the corporation, not to society
- When it appears as a complement, it tends to co-occur with a verb of orientation expressing an agent's intention to perform an action

Adjectival collocates

- Some frequent collocates appear in coordination with sustainable in fixed clusters, suggesting a similar local textual function, even though not synonymous in normal usage
- Other terms occur near S* because they are regarded as vaguely co-hyponymous of “eco-friendliness”
- This looseness is a strong indication that S* may be similarly employed as a vague, reassuringly positive but almost metaphoric warrant of environmental credentials

Noun collocates

- Mostly in N-N compounds
- One group refers *purpose*, “a state intended to result from another state or event”: sustainability work, sustainability strategy, sustainability policy, sustainability efforts
- The remaining terms express *topic*, the “subject or theme dealt with by the head noun”: sustainability report, sustainability information, sustainability index, etc.

Conclusions

- S* shows a clear business-oriented quality in these reports that can be traced back to its collocational and prosodic profile
- Typical collocates are drawn from economics and management, and semantically related to profit, corporate prestige and the market
- Expressions of orientation dominate reporting to the exclusion of material considerations
- The nature of sustainable development occupies a peripheral role in these reports

Conclusions (cont'd)

- Corporate commitment to sustainability is often explicitly instrumental
- The elevated moral tone used to explain the adoption of sustainability principles does not translate to a restriction of traditional business goals and tenets
- Discourse on the effects of adopting sustainability practices is limited to the furtherance of market objectives

Conclusions (cont'd)

- Claims of unsustainability are extremely rare
- Describing oneself as “sustainable”, in this context, has less to do with the long-term viability of the production process than with participation in industry-wide initiatives to mollify internal and external challenges to corporate prestige, and with the public display of ethical credentials.
- The use of the term in the reports in the corpus shows several deviant features from the original intent of the term, and provides support for the “greenwash hypothesis”.