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Exploring change conversations through the rhetoric of French leaders

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to capitalize on a linguistic perspective to analyze the rhetoric of French leaders about organizational change.

Design/methodology/approach – To address the research questions, the authors opted for a lexical content analysis. They use Ford and Ford's (1995) change conversational framework and the speech act theory to analyze French CEOs' letters to stakeholders, over the period 2007-2012.

Findings – The authors find that leaders' rhetoric consists of three types of change conversations, namely, initiative, for understanding and for performance, that were underpinned by a network of assertive, expressive and commissive speech acts.

Practical implications – The results reveal that the communication of change to external stakeholders can be characterized as supportive change conversations, offering assurance on the necessity, appropriateness and expected benefits of change.

Originality/value – This paper is the first work, in the French context, which integrates change conversations and speech act perspectives to examine the way leaders communicate with external stakeholders through CEOs letters. Previous research focused specially on communicating change with internal stakeholders.

Keywords Leadership, Organizational change, Stakeholders, Change conversations,
Speech act theory

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The linguistic turn in social sciences places language, conversation and discourse centrally on the "organizational change" research agenda. From this discursive point of view, organizational change represents the process of constructing and sharing new meanings and interpretations of organizational practices (Morgan and Sturdy, 2000). There is a growing body of literature on change management that considers organizations as socially constructed realities in which the reality is understood through and by leaders' conversations and discourses with various stakeholders (Barrett *et al.*, 1995; Ford, 1999; Marshak and Grant, 2011; Tsoukas, 2005).

The stakeholder concept had previously been made popular by Freeman (1984), who defined the term as "*any group or individual who can affect or be affected by a company's purpose*". From the change management perspective, Kee and Newcomer (2008) define stakeholders as "*all the individuals and organizations involved in, or affected by, a*

change initiative". Organizations should inform stakeholders about their current and future activities, strategic intentions and other information that may influence the established relationships such as change projects. Accordingly, change is becoming an increasingly important part of how leaders communicate with stakeholders. Many writers consider the management of the communication process during organizational change as being mainly about leadership, even to the point of suggesting that tropes such as metaphors and conversations constitute the essence of leadership communication associated with change (Heracleous and Barrett, 2001; Kotter, 1996; McClellan, 2011).

Recent critical reviews of the literature have been largely centered on internal communication processes (Butcher and Atkinson, 2001). They stress the need to establish a structured dialogue with internal stakeholders to overcome their resistance. Generally, leaders expect that internal stakeholders adopt their vision, participate and promote change within the organization, while external stakeholders (e.g. customers, suppliers, community, financial and social partners, investors, etc.) act as supporters and promoters of change (Lewis *et al.*, 2001). However, the communication processes to external stakeholders are missing from academic literature related to change management (Palmer *et al.*, 2004), even though they can equally cause resistance. Hence, leaders should build and maintain relationships with their external stakeholders. They systematically need to identify all individuals and groups involved in the implementation of change initiative. Knowing what external stakeholders want makes it easier to legitimate a firm's change programs. Driessen *et al.* (2013) use the term "stakeholder dialogue" to refer to stakeholder involvement and consultation in building strategy and implementing change projects. Likewise, Freeman (2010) suggests that both business and executive's job are about "managing for stakeholders". By engaging in such a dialogue, firms can understand stakeholders' fluctuating values, backgrounds and behaviors (Agudo-Valiente *et al.*, 2015).

Communicating about change from the leadership is rooted in organizational values and culture. Among the various communication vehicles used by companies, CEOs' letters are recognized as the most influential support and the most strategic of all organizational reporting means (Amernic *et al.*, 2007, 2010; Segars and Kohut, 2001). Conaway and Wardrope (2010) point out that leaders' words matter and can *"create an influential ideology"* (p. 142) with stakeholders when expressed strategically. Thus, the words contained in CEOs' letters do not necessarily reflect an objective reality but rather a sense-making effort from leaders who wish to gain stakeholders support (Conaway and Wardrope, 2010).

Through the adoption of a rhetorical perspective, our research sought to explore how French leaders communicate organizational change to external stakeholders. By drawing on the extant theoretical literature in the field of organizational discourse studies (Marshak and Grant, 2011), we seek to show the practical use of a linguistic-based approach in studying organizational change. Specifically, the work is based on the concept of "change conversations" (Ford and Ford, 1995) and "speech act theory" (Searle, 1969, 1979) to study the change communication process, through CEOs' letters in annual reports.

This article is structured in two parts. The first is devoted to a review of the literature that highlights the importance of communication in the change process. Change conversations and speech act theory are outlined for a better understanding of their use

in leaders' rhetoric and to formulate our two research questions. The second part describes the methodology and presents and discusses the results of our study.

Literature

Communication as a change-generative mechanism

Communication is an essential part of organizational change (McClellan, 2011). It is treated as a tool needed to destabilize the organization equilibrium, provide information for transforming behaviors and convince recipients to embrace a new equilibrium (Weick and Quinn, 1999). To unsettle the status quo, leaders must communicate the reasons for change (Fiol *et al.*, 1999). In this context, communication should improve its understanding (Armenakis *et al.*, 1993), promote its adoption (Washington and Hacker, 2005), reduce anxiety and prepare stakeholders to its positive and negative effects (Goodman and Truss, 2004), decrease negative feelings and cynical expectations about its failure (Washington and Hacker, 2005), reduce the resistance and develop participants' enthusiasm (Miller *et al.*, 1994), etc. The communication also reduces the feeling of dissatisfaction due to the status quo. It is a mean for motivating individuals to change their attitudes, behaviors and adherence capabilities to change principles (Battilana *et al.*, 2010; Ford and Ford, 1995).

Researchers interested in social interaction, language and discourse argue that communication has a constitutive role in an organization (Marshak, 2013; Tsoukas, 2005). There has been a focus on the importance of discourse and language in shaping organizational dynamics in general (Boje *et al.*, 2004) and organizational change in particular (Heracleous and Barrett, 2001). Discourse approaches were based on the assumption that language, such as metaphors, stories, narratives and conversations, frame and socially construct reality (Marshak, 2004).

Ford and Ford (1995) offer a wider vision of the role of communication, believing that change is a phenomenon whose occurrence happens through the communication process. Indeed, considered as an organizational phenomenon, change necessarily appears in a context of social interaction between individuals, both constitute and constituted by, communication. These interactions produce and reproduce the structures of social actions which are interpreted as a reality by these individuals (Ford and Ford, 1995). The thesis of Ford and Ford (1995) states that change production is not a process that uses communication as a tool, but a process created, caused and maintained in and by communication.

Barrett *et al.* (1995) recognize that everyday conversations are powerful means of organizational communication because they are mechanisms by which managers can effect change. What is proposed here is that explaining how people talk and think about things, how people talk to themselves – conversations – will explain how people act and therefore will lead to organizational change (Marshak and Grant, 2011). Thus, this conversational perspective considers that in general, conversations construct our social world and specifically that the change process is constituted by different types of conversations and orders of discourse (Ford and Ford, 1995, 2008).

Change conversations and speech act theory

Ford and Ford (1995) argue that change management must be understood through the prism of the management of conversations, which includes not only the language but also related facts and acts (Marshak and Grant, 2011). Ford and Ford (1995) suggest that

a successful change is prone to the manager's ability to grasp four types of conversations: initiative, understanding, performance and closure.

Initiative conversations, whose role is to draw attention to the need for change, are either reactive (following expectations regarding potential declines in performance or environmental change) or proactive while reflecting a change in vision and strategic objectives (Ford and Ford, 1995). These conversations could take the form of proposals, suggestions and recommendations by introducing new ideas and directions (Ford and Ford, 2008).

Conversations for understanding provide an opportunity for sense-making to the stakeholders. They allow a better appreciation of the change issues and problems that must be addressed by releasing information and removing confusion and uncertainty (Ford and Ford, 2008).

Conversations for performance focus on the achievement of the expected goals of change. They are conversations that call for specific actions to get specific results with particular deadlines (Ford and Ford, 2008).

Conversations for closure highlight the completion of the change process by acknowledging *"what has and has not been done and summarize the status of things"* (Ford and Ford, 2008, p. 448). Closure conversations involve actions of recognition, celebration and reward (Ford and Ford, 1995). These conversations can be considered as a starting point of new change project through by triggering new initiative conversations.

The concept of change conversations is rooted in the speech act theory. Pioneered by Austin (1962), speech act theory offers us a way of seeing business conventions within the larger context of discourse. This theory holds that when we speak or write (make utterances), we also act (perform). Relying on Austin's performative perspective on language, Searle (1979) classified all illocutionary speech acts into five categories: assertives (or representatives), directives, commissives, expressives and declarations (Table I).

Assertives are speech acts that *"tell people how things are"* and commit the hearer to the truth of proposition (Searle, 1998, p. 148). Assertive verbs include assert, affirm, claim, argue, etc. (Searle and Vanderveken, 1985, p. 182).

Directives are speech acts that try to get the hearer's behavior to match the propositional content of the directive. Directives could be orders, commands or requests (Searle, 1998). Directive verbs include request, ask, urge, order, permit, etc. (Searle and Vanderveken, 1985, p. 198).

Commissives are speaker's commitments to undertake the course of action raised in the propositional content. Verbs that indicate commissive statements include promise, vow, consent, refuse, assure, etc. (Searle and Vanderveken, 1985, p. 192).

Expressives are elements of a conversation that express the affective condition of the speech act. Expressives are apologies, thanks, congratulations, welcomes and condolences (Searle, 1998). Verbs such as congratulate, complain, complement, praise, greet, etc., are indicate expressive statements (Searle and Vanderveken, 1985, p. 211).

Declarations, associated with beginnings and endings (Ford and Ford, 1995), are communicative acts that bring about a change in some state of affairs by representing it as having been changed (Searle, 1998) under the appropriate circumstances (Kibble, 2006). Indeed, declarations require an extralinguistic institution and a special position of the speaker (Searle and Vanderveken, 1985, p. 205) that legitimizes its utterances in a

Speech act	Description	Verbs associated with speech acts	Type of change conversation
Assertives	Make a statement, an observation, description, expressing conviction	Assert, affirm, declare, claim, provide, inform, predict, suggest, stress, etc.	Initiative, for understanding, for closure
Directives	Require that the listener do something that reflects the will of the speaker	Direct, demand, request, urge, recommend, insist, etc.	Initiative, for performance
Commissives	Invite by promises or threats the listener to the completion of an action	Promise, swear, engage, pledge, grant, deny, guarantee, bet, etc.	Initiative, for performance
Expressives	Express the feelings of the speaker	Thank, apologize, congratulate, complain, compliment, protest, welcome, etc.	For understanding, for closure
Declaratives	Make a statement performing an act	Pronounce, declare, name, license, confirm, promote, give up, reject, etc.	Initiative, for closure

Table I.
Speech act taxonomy **Source:** Adapted from Searle (1979) and Ford and Ford (1995)

particular context. For example, if a speaker declares war, fires someone, declares a verdict of guilty, etc., it should be some social and institutional practices that empower him to perform such declarations (Palmer *et al.*, 2004; Searle, 1998). Declarations contain verbs such as declare, resign, adjourn, appoint, nominate, approve, etc. (Searle and Vanderveken, 1985, p. 205).

Ford and Ford (1995) argue that change conversations consist of aggregates of interrelated and combinable speech acts, by which managers' effectiveness in producing change relies on their ability to distinguish, use and move among each type of conversation.

Each speech act is as a process that includes the construction, the sharing of new meaning and the interpretation of organizational activities (Morgan and Sturdy, 2000). Change is, therefore, produced through the way individuals converse and communicate in a context of organizational activities (Tsoukas, 2005).

The language of change as strategic conversations with stakeholders
We assume that the language of change is a form of strategic conversations with stakeholders, and these conversations are mainly implemented through leadership rhetoric. Strategic conversations are multidirectional and multidimensional communication mechanisms for better shaping and integrating the change intent of firms. Typically, strategic conversations are not only based on mutual exchanges between firms and their stakeholders but are also organized and organizing dialogues of meaning.

Because organizations are constructions of discourses (Fairhurst and Putnam, 2004) whose leaders *"work with words"* (Jönsson, 1998, p. 11), leadership is thus largely

embodied through language that represents a strategic form of sensemaking (Weick, 1995).

Leadership experts stress the importance of language in influencing individual attitudes and behaviors (Gardner and Avolio, 1998). At the heart of language, rhetoric contributes to the creation of an order whose center is the legitimizing process of the leader who builds the sense of reality for others (Fairhurst and Sarr, 1996).

Oratory and rhetorical formulations use metaphors, analogies and fables. They represent effective linguistic mechanisms available to leaders (Butcher and Atkinson, 2001) to convince a particular construction of reality in accordance with their own interests (Amernic *et al.*, 2010). Their discourse, formal or informal, is as a set of speech acts disseminating symbolic, emotional, cultural and political connotations (Amernic *et al.*, 2010).

CEOs' letters in the annual reports are speech acts that provide valuable insight about the motives, attitudes and management models (Hooghiemstra, 2010). The language used in CEOs' letters may fulfill an important rhetorical need for both firms and their stakeholders (Peyrefitte, 2012) because some concepts (e.g. diversity, corporate social responsibility, citizenship, organizational change, innovation and internationalization) are expressed to convey leader's vision to organizational stakeholders. Therefore, CEOs' letters make sense, bring adherence and mobilize stakeholders resources (Amernic *et al.*, 2010), with an audience beyond the shareholders (Craig and Brennan, 2012; Mäkelä and Laine, 2011; Segars and Kohut, 2001). Indeed, such letters are documents published annually as an integral part of the annual report. They express the CEO's personal narrative accountability and offer valuable insights into organizational identity and mental models of management (Amernic *et al.*, 2007). The importance of CEOs' letters and the insights they offer have been shown in various works (Bujaki and MacConomy, 2012; Cady and Hadalupas, 1999; Conaway and Wardrope, 2010; McClelland *et al.*, 2010; Palmer *et al.*, 2004).

Research questions
In light of the literature presented, the main question we are seeking to address in this paper is whether Ford and Ford's (1995) change conversational framework is evident in the study of French CEOs' letters. The specific research questions addressed are:

RQ1. What forms of change conversations can be identified through French leaders' rhetoric contained in CEOs' letters?

RQ2. What combinations of speech acts shape the form of change conversations identified previously?

Methodology
To address our research questions, we opted for a co-occurrence text analysis methodology that leads to elaborated theories of discourse (Bolino *et al.*, 2008). A longitudinal analysis applied to the largest French companies listed on the CAC 40, ranked according to market value, over a period of six years, from 2007 to 2012. The text collection or corpus is composed of 174 CEOs' letters drawn from the annual reports of 29 French companies listed on the CAC 40, which represent a capitalization-weighted measure of the 40 most significant values. We used a computer-aided text analysis program: *Alceste* 2012 (Reinert, 1987). This tool is able to analyze large bodies of text (in

our case, the corpus is about 300 pages written in MS Word, Times New Roman, font size 12 and single-spaced) and to produce high-quality results (Kalampalikis, 2003). The sample composition is presented in Table II.

A top-down hierarchical classification was conducted. It allowed the identification of the strongest oppositions between text words and the extraction of representative statement classes. The corpus is conceived as a semantic universe and:

> […] a word is considered based on the position it takes in this space. Positioning text analysis is prepared by reducing words to their lemmas (e.g. whether a word is singular or plural may be irrelevant) and considering those words with a medium frequency (words which are very frequent, such as the particles 'the' or 'a', or very rare words are not considered). Based on these two basic rules the software computes a co-occurrence analysis of words, i.e. it identifies how words appear together in a section of text and benchmarks this against other parts of text" (Illia *et al.*, 2014).

Therefore, the software chosen for this purpose *Alceste 2012* ensures objectivity through a purely algorithmic method where data are processed without preconception of the categories to be discovered. The researchers received a number of written or visual descriptions of results, in an informative report. These elements were helpful for a comprehensive understanding of how and why semantic universes (named classes in the report) are different.

Results
The semantic universes derived from the statistical analysis of textual data
Alceste 2012 proposed a classification of five semantic universes based on 72 per cent of the elementary context units (e.c.u), representing the context in which keywords are analyzed. The representativeness of the corpus is adequate, and no anomaly was detected as per Zipf's law. The semantic universes, identified as classes were studied and named as follows: Class 1 is "Corporate Social Responsibility" (20 per cent), Class 2 is "Brand Portfolio Management" (23 per cent), Class 3 is "Economic Performance" (25 per cent), Class 4 is "Growth Market" (24 per cent) and Class 5 is "Governance" (8 per cent). We then identified the distribution of the relative forms of lexical field change within the classes and named them to obtain a typology.

Rhetoric typologies
The semantic universes represent five discursive postures that can be analyzed as follows:

Accor	Danone	L'Oréal	Schneider-Electric
Air Liquide	EDF	Michelin	Unibail
Alcatel-Lucent	Essilor	Pernod-Ricard	Vallourec
Axa	France Telecom	PPR	Veolia
BNP Paribas	GDF Suez	Publicis	Vinci
Bouygyues	Lafarge	Safran	
Carrefour	Legrand	Saint-Gobain	
Credit Agricole	LVMH	Sanofi-Aventis	

Table II.
Sample composition

Social responsible leaders. This class contains 20 per cent of analyzed e.c.u. (Table III). It clusters lemmas belonging to the semantic universe of social responsibility, referring to environmental (306) and social (190) concepts and issues (134) related to sustainable (95) development (99).

Federating leaders. This class contains 25 per cent of analyzed e.c.u. (Table III). It brings together lemmas belonging to the semantic universe of team cohesion and refers to the establishment of a collaborative work (240) turned toward the client (181) that mobilizes the talents (175) around the brand (113) and values (111) of the group.

Rational leaders. This class contains 23 per cent of analyzed e.c.u. (Table III). It brings together lemmas belonging to the semantic universe of corporate financial health and refers to the financial (195) results (551) in billions (358) Euros (643).

Conquering leaders. This class contains 24 per cent of analyzed e.c.u. (Table III). It classifies lemmas belonging to the semantic universe of growth opportunities (281) in the global market (450) and makes reference to emerging economies (208), China (213), Brazil (155) and India (134).

Reformist leaders. This class contains 8 per cent of analyzed e.c.u. (Table III). It brings together lemmas belonging to the semantic universe of corporate governance and refers to the orientations (334) of the board (1,992) of directors (1,035), the supervisory board (841), the executive (516) committee, the chairman (707) and the executive members (300).

The characteristic shapes of the five classes are presented in Table III. For each form, a value of chi-square measures the intensity of the association with significant statements class, which refers to a particular lexical world.

Analyzing change conversations by semantic universe

Inside each semantic universe, we have identified the types of conversations presented by Ford and Ford (1995) and speech acts categories according to Searle (1979). To refine our results, we analyzed the e.c.u. that characterize change and have manually studied their modalization matching the shade of the discourse from the impression that we want to perform on the recipient (the marking judgment of the speaker and the expression of his subjectivity). We have considered the tools used (degree of certainty or uncertainty of the discourse), adjectives, adverbs, expressions, opinion verbs (e.g. believe, affirm), modal verbs (e.g. must, should, may), figures of rhetoric (e.g. metaphor, metonymy, understatement) and the involvement of the leader. The results are shown in Table IV.

Rhetoric foundations of leaders discourse with regard to change

The lexical field is highly correlated with innovation, acceleration, conquest, reform, transformation adaptation and evolution. The rhetoric elements used aim to convince readers of the merits of change rationale, the relevance of the choices (strategies) made and their implementation rules, to develop the organization.

A speech based on a logical argument to convince, appealing to emotions and values to seduce. The demonstration is frequently used and can be connected to the initial conversations according to Ford and Ford (1995). It is used by the conqueror, rational and reformist leaders and draws attention to the need for change, by contextualizing the issues. "*The past two years have been marked by a profound crisis that truly changed the world in which we live*" (Crédit Agricole, 2009). The turbulent environment leads to a

	Semantic universe								
Social responsible leaders Vocabulary/reduced form	Chi 2	Federating leaders Vocabulary/reduced form	Chi 2	Rational leaders Vocabulary/reduced form	Chi 2	Conquering leaders Vocabulary/reduced form	Chi 2	Reformist leaders Vocabulary/reduced form	Chi 2
Environment	306	Collaboration	240	Euro	643	Market	450	Board	1,992
Energ	262	Client	181	Result	551	Growth	281	Directors	1,035
Social	190	Talent	175	Net	429	China	213	Supervisory	841
Water	184	Spirit	163	Billion	358	Emerging	208	General	775
Energetic	171	Team	148	Operation	223	Acquisition	206	Chairman	707
Solution	143	Man	127	Financial	195	Country	200	Committee	542
Issue	134	Woman	124	Increase	190	USA	163	Executive	516
Societal	101	Brand	113	Margin	165	Brazil	155	Govern	495
Development	99	Value	111	Bank	161	India	134	Orientation	334
Sustainable	95	Culture	108	Credit	108	Asia	130	Direction	300

Table III.
Characteristic forms
of classes

Classes	Class 1: 20%	Class 2: 23%	Class 3: 25%	Class 4: 24%	Class 5: 8%
Semantic universe	Corporate social responsibility	Team cohesion	Economic performance	Conquest of emerging countries	New forms of governance
Typology of leaders	Social responsibility	Federating	Rational	Conqueror	Reformist
Specific group of firms	Véolia; Danone; Schneider; EDF	Carrefour; LVMH; Publicis; Pernod-Ricard	Crédit Agricole; Bouygues; BNP Paribas; Michelin	Legrand; Essilor; Sanofi Aventis; Vinci	Unibail; Schneider Electric; Axa; Alcatel
Change conversations (Ford and Ford, 1995)	Initiative	Understanding	Initiative Performance	Initiative	Initiative
Speech acts (Searle, 1979)	Assertives Expressives Commissives	Assertives Commissives	Assertives	Assertives; Commissives	Assertives

Table IV.
Change rhetoric
within semantic
universes (2007-2012)

greater organizational proactivity, as in legislative and regulatory changes "*initiated by States, developed by the supervisory authorities, are being analyzed by all financial actors* "(Crédit Agricole, 2009).

Organizations also learnt from the 2008 financial crisis and tried to reassure. Assertiveness, the use of modal verbs "may, can, could", reinforces the relevance of the strategic choices made and the success of its operationalization while using temporal transitivity arguments:

> The Board of Directors of Crédit Agricole SA, decided to a significant increase of capital as well as a change in strategy was implemented […]. By refocusing on its core businesses and reforming the way it works. Crédit Agricole SA has been able to absorb the growth of risk cost occurred in 2008 and 2009 (Crédit Agricole, 2009).

Technological arguments prepare readers for the need for an innovation-oriented policy, very important in the semantic field of change. Federating leaders, reasoning by recension and using amplification figures, seek to provide understanding keys to interlocutors:

> The development of social networks, the cogeneration content, the multiplied power of consumers, their ability to intervene in the debate […], in short, a lot of innovations and changes sweeping the profession and lead us to think differently and organize ourselves accordingly (Publicis, 2009).

Stay in the competition, adjust to the market and consider consumers demand and needs are the main arguments used by federating leaders, in their conversations for understanding. A deduction argument and the use of the future invite contrast with the recognized situation of failure:

> In recent years, Carrefour has lost the initiative. To recover our step head and our leadership, particularly in France, we will create new offerings of products and services under our brand and enable our customers to enjoy new experiences in our stores (Carrefour, 2007).

Conversations for performance used by rational leaders are in turn, conveyed mainly through anaphora to provoke an emphasis effect on the expected gains for the organization:

> That's why Publicis cannot be satisfied with some partial changes but must completely revisit its mission, its operations and assets, to be simply, the most comprehensive, the best endowed and qualified communication group, to solve the major problems that our customers are increasingly faced (Publicis, 2012).

The strategy based on the Taylorian "one best way" and the inclusion of change effects. For reformist leaders, increasing efficiency can be achieved through the team mobilization and the adaptation of existing practices. Enumerations based on a logical argument, using initiative conversations, detailing the terms and presage the magnitude of change:

> Simplifying our operation and our structure, process control, cost reduction […]. After a strong growth period for the Group, it is about changing the way we work in many areas (Schneider-Electric, 2008).

Far from simple adaptations, change can cause a profound transformation, marked by the frequent use of the modal verbs "should, may, must". The use of negation then shows the idea of the Taylorian "one best way". The statement by the assertiveness of the

relevance of the strategic choices is a process to avoid opposition. The indication of a single possible route is selected and marked by the use of the present tense, which secures the stakeholders. The leader invited to continue in the same direction: "*The current scope of the Group can only encourage the promotion of social innovation, already started in recent years*" (Danone, 2007).

At an organizational level, change can be a source of suffering and stress for employees. Figures of analogy, customization of discourse (the use of "I") and pathos are used:

My […] diagnosis is that of a group with full confidence crisis, because of the magnitude of the transformation experienced. The dramatic events of 2009 revealed a deep sense of unease among our employees in France (France Telecom, 2007).

The transformation of practices creates a natural resistance phenomenon also mentioned in CEOs' letters. The use of negative emphasizes the impossibility of escaping it: "*This change does not happen without resistance, but I'm impressed by the desire of the teams*" (Danone, 2010). The manager notes the lack of support and recognition, by a figure of substitution leading to a generalization of the reflection, with a shift in meaning. "*Our businesses are questioning the growth opportunities, resources and skills*" (Sanofi-Aventis, 2008).

Opposition figures frequently detected in corporate social responsibility commitment and the use of oxymora lead to the coexistence of two antithetical terms within a same syntagm. This process marks the break and allegory, personifying an abstract idea that reinforces the trait. "*If our civilization wants to regain the lost friendship with the environment, it needs to change into restrained growth* its current *greedy growth of natural resources*" (Veolia, 2009). The affirmation of pervasive values such as entrepreneurial culture is then presented as "*a key driver of our transformation. It results in the empowerment of brands and the Group's employees, an appetence for the concrete realization, a taste of audacity and imagination*" (PPR, 2012).

Assertiveness is also used by companies, focusing their growth on new markets, while the European market is slowing. Opposition processes as the antithesis and present a contrast. Following is an initiative conversation based on commissive speech act while reassuring the interlocutor:

We have, for decades, built our growth on intensive penetration strategy from a limited number of consumers. The emergence of new markets such as China, India or Brazil, opens a tremendous reservoir of growth (L'Oréal, 2009).

The purpose of change and the expected gains are the subject of initiative and for performance conversations (Ford and Ford, 1995). Conquering new markets and seizing economic opportunities are highlighted to emphasize the perpetuity of the company. The timeless present tense used suggests the viability of operations:

In countries with strong growth, living standards of the middle class increases, which opens prospects for the conquest of midrange and marks a real change in market scale (Essilor, 2012).

Discussion

RQ1. What forms of change conversations can be identified through French leader's rhetoric as contained in CEOs' letters?

Leaders' rhetoric seeks, in general, to reassure external stakeholders and reduce confusion about the need for change. Initiatives are present within all semantic universes except for federating leaders which are mainly based on conversations for understanding. The rhetoric of rational leaders is however mixed and based on both initiative and performance conversations.

Initiative conversations emphasize the importance of engaging in change, by recognizing the challenges and contextual, environmental and technological issues. Conversations for understanding used by federating leaders expresses the reasons for change management as well as the rules and meanings associated with it. Generally, the search for competitive advantage is shown as change initiators. Finally, the performance conversations are used to communicate on financial and intangible benefits (e.g. acquiring new skills, market share development and enhancing of reputation).

Unlike Ford and Ford (1995), our study does not reveal conversations for closure. These conversations typically involve discourse focusing on the recognition, celebration and awards reserved for internal stakeholders. Our results conclude that the conversations of change differ by type of recipients. Marshak (1993) notes that the heterogeneity that affects individual experiences and reactions to change determines the vocabulary and the way the leaders converse about change. Unlike Ford and Ford (1995) whose change conversations are oriented toward employees to accomplish the change, conversations for change intended for external stakeholders show specific conversations (e.g. Why the change must be conducted? What are the results of change? How the change must be supported). We emphasize, as did Palmer *et al.* (2004), communication of change to external stakeholders as supportive change conversations, offering assurance on the necessity, appropriateness and the expected benefits of change:

RQ2. What combinations of speech acts shape the form of change conversations identified upstream?

We note that the French leaders' change conversations consist mainly of three speech acts: assertive, expressive and commissive. Directive and declarative speech acts are totally absent from leaders' rhetoric, while assertions are used in all conversations. Commissive speech acts are connected to initiative and for performance conversations, while expressive ones are used in initiative conversations.

The results of our study show that the two conversations of change are made up of various combinations of speech acts. For example, initiative conversations can be constructed from a combination of assertive, commissive and expressive speech acts, while conversations for understanding are formed by commissive and assertive acts.

The lack of declarative and directive speech acts seems logical, given the recipients of the leaders' rhetoric. Other means of communication such as articles and press releases, advertising, institutional sites, etc., represent the most appropriate means for this kind of declarations. The absence of directive speech acts, which would require from the listener certain conformity to the will of the speaker, is comprehensible. Indeed, even if leaders seek to convince external stakeholders to engage, it is difficult to compel them to do so, in the absence of a formal authority between the two parties.

In accordance with Palmer *et al.* (2004), we find that assertive and commissive speech acts represent the most performative communication linguistic forms, in describing the change process. Expressive speech acts are then used to stimulate the convergence between cognitive change perceptions and their emotional understanding.

Conclusion

This paper is based on a textual analysis of French CEOs' letters, to explore leaders' communication approaches when managing change. We have retained the perspective of change as presented by Ford and Ford (1995). According to this approach communication is the generative mechanism of change that enables the formulation of cognitive processes and the construction of reality. We have assumed that in post-modern organization, the dynamics of corporate change has been facilitated by advanced information technology and systems. Interconnections among firms and their stakeholders could be managed through language which is considered as a powerful tool to persuade audiences and coordinate social action.

The results of our research yield a number of contributions. First, the analysis of French leaders' rhetoric has revealed three forms of change conversations: mostly initiative conversations, conversations for understanding and for performance. This result indicates, unlike Ford's (1999) proposal, that change process tend to be dominated by conversations for understanding and that this form of conversation is not the most important one especially when discourses are being directed to external stakeholders.

Second, our analysis was based on five semantic universes specific to each type of discursive posture. This result gives way to an important contribution because it allows the leader-rhetorician to be aware about the definition of change conversations' forms that are the most appropriate and reliable to engage with stakeholders. Thus, as emphasized by Segars and Kohut (2001), leaders' rhetoric should contain clear and explicit statements.

Third, we noticed that our study allows us, once change conversations are defined, to know the combination of speech acts on the selection of stylistic choices and language posture. Furthermore, it is important to underline that the quality of change rhetoric also depends on the identification of special interests and the characteristics of the relationships with stakeholders. Therefore, impression management literature provides a considerable opportunity for leaders to enrich their discourses, as the impressions conveyed by stakeholders influence the content and the phrasing of the change conversations.

While our study has taken into account Ford and Ford's (1995) conversational model through the analysis of French CEOs' rhetoric, it has neither an order of prioritization nor a sequential form. These questionings represent research avenues for improving the linguistic effectiveness by identifying, within each phase of the change process, the best sequences of change conversations. Studies in this area would have considerable prescriptive implications for leaders. New research avenues, including other types of information vehicles and having different illocutionary forces, enable the formation of a composite corpus, to analyze in depth the change managerial rhetoric and to distinguish both semantic universes and rhetorical process. Future studies might further explore the language of change corresponding to leaders' perceptions of stakeholder groups leading change initiatives. Finally, we also suggest that the question of knowing whether the published CEOs' letters have the desired impact on external stakeholders has to be investigated.

To the extent that managerial discourse is structured both by its enunciation context and leader personality, we are in favor of introducing specialized courses on critical textual analysis in management training (e.g. metaphors, rhetoric and ideologies) to provide opportunities for students and practitioners to better decipher and manage language tools and change rhetoric.

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