The discursive construal of purpose by means of competence in German and English corporate mission statements

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The current paper investigates the dynamic construal of corporate identity in terms of the interplay between the expression of purpose and the expression of the subject-inherent modal qualities of willingness and ability (e.g. “By applying our skills in these areas we aim to prevent diseases”). The notions of willingness and ability are jointly subsumed under the discursive concept of ‘competence’ (cf. Halliday’s (1994, 2004) description of both notions in terms of ‘readiness’ or ‘active Modulation’ (1970)). More specifically, the analysis aims to answer the question of how the genre of purpose-oriented corporate mission statements builds on these inherent qualities. The relation between purpose and competence is also considered in the context of a company’s current position and identity in terms of actual success, as well as the impact of anticipated results following the strategies in the mission statement. Our proposed threefold distinction between the notions of purpose, competence and result ties in with van Leeuwen’s purpose network of *goal-oriented action*, *means-oriented action* and *effective action* (2008:126-131). It will be shown that the construal of purpose by means of competence can be seen as a special case of means-oriented communication. In addition, the analysis describes the discursive context in terms of participants in a twofold manner, viz. the participants *in* the corporate statement itself on the one hand, and the receivers, viz. the stakeholders of the statement, on the other. The latter offer the locus of corporate reputation and image building, which have been shown to enable the successful achievement of business goals (Van Riel 2003: 91-94). Our findings are drawn from an empirical analysis of a contrastive corpus of German and English corporate mission statements, which provide an excellent locus for investigating purposivity, since they contain a concise statement of an organization’s chief purpose for existence (Ran & Duimering 2007).

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