

Rodolphe

Making Sense of Social Responsibility: The French Discourse

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the notion of corporate social responsibility. The focus is on analyzing, using different semantic tools, the perception that companies have of their social responsibility as well as the action plans that they initiate in this field. Based on four institutional communications produced by the companies, we establish various levels of reading thanks to narrative analysis and to metaphors, in particular of the fuzzy borders between the map and the territory or the undulation of the positioning of the writer. The reports on social responsibility were then identified like instruments of speech seeking to praise the actions of the companies, in the form of a type of communication which one could describe as propaganda. Beyond what is said, the article aims at identifying the sense given by the corporate world to social responsibility.

INTRODUCTION

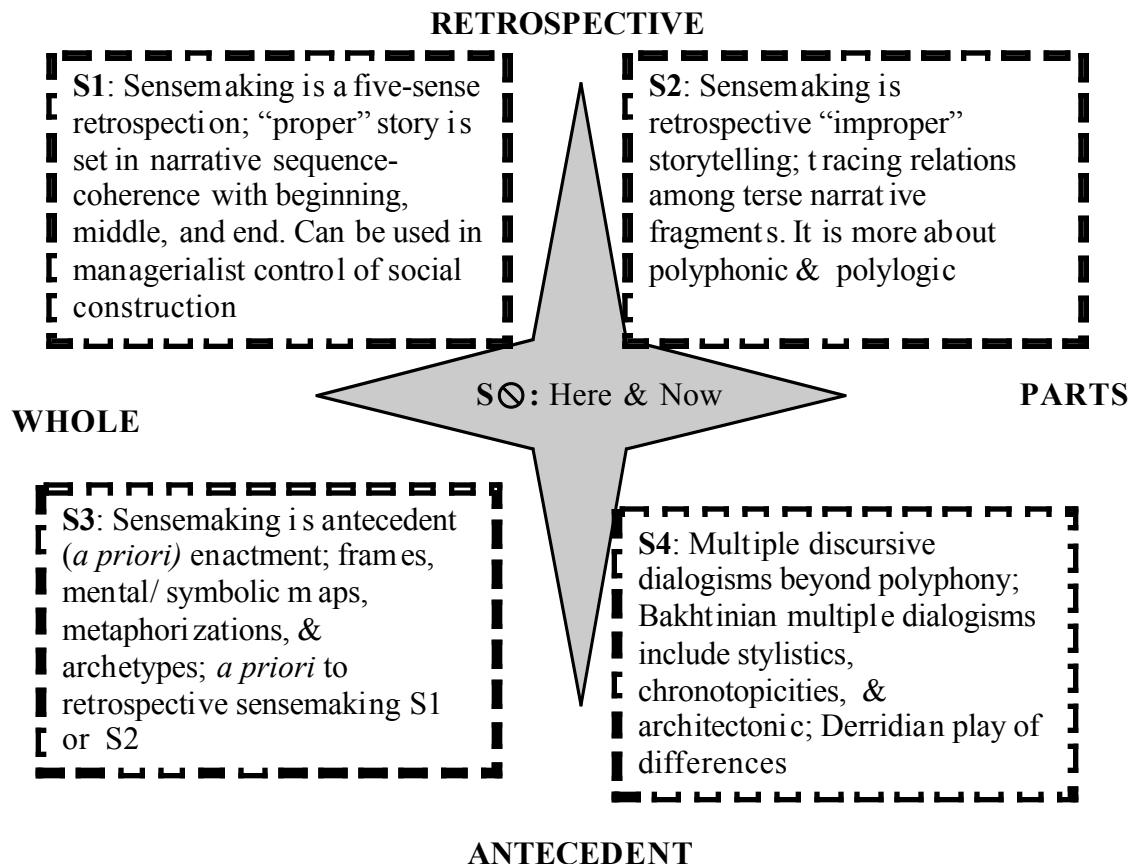
The topics of social and environmental responsibility for companies—deontological rules, codes of control and ethical charters, exercise of voting rights, sustainable development, choices of investment of the funds, and ethical placements, to name a few—are more and more often discussed. Companies and their stakeholders, investors, and financial managers, all feel increasingly concerned by these questions. As a result, more and more literature can be found on those subjects and more specifically on strategies developed by firms to implement social responsibility. The attitudes held by companies regarding their social responsibilities, as well as the actions they undertake in this field, can be analyzed using panoply of semantic tools. We will analyze four institutional communications produced by the companies themselves by means of Rosile and Boje's (2002) grid and Morgan's (1983) principal metaphorical families. In this way, we deconstruct the literal texts in order

to reveal what the corporate world really says about social responsibility. The alternative use of two types of tools will enable us to reveal, beyond simple expression, the way in which these organizations conceive their social role.

Discourse and Analysis

Our aim to identify both what is said and what is to be discovered using different point of analysis using specific scales of interpretation. We start our analysis by widening the view of Boje on story telling and sensemaking. As seen in the following figure, Boje (2006) identifies four different ways of analyzing story telling within organizations. In order to have a better understanding of the corporate discourse, tools and methods coming from all the boxes of the matrix will be used. During our demonstration, each time we will refer to a part of the matrix, we will mention the header (S1, S2, S3, or S4).

Figure 1: Types of Story/Narrative Sensemaking (Boje 2006)



Additionally, we use a grid based on storytelling strategy for change, which may be applied at both the personal and organizational levels (Rosile and Dennehy, 1998). This grid is mainly used here to identify what is not said and how we can account within a discourse for silence and unsaid, as defined by Savall and Zardet (1995). This grid will be used to understand what is meant by firms when speaking of social responsibility. The grid is composed of seven indicators used to tell a story again or, in other words, to restory (Rosile and Boje 2002):

1. **CHARACTERIZE** (true identity): Describe the organization at its best, if it were functioning perfectly and living up to all its ideals.
2. **EXTERNALIZE** the problem: Tell us about a problem the organization currently faces, as if the problem were separate from any individual in the organization.
3. **SYMPATHIZE**: What benefits does the organization derive from the problem? What feeds the problem?
4. **REVISE** (commitment to change):

Rodolphe

- Explain the ways in which this problem has had negative effects.
5. STRATEGIZE (unique outcome) Tell about a time when there was a "unique outcome," when this problem was not as strong, or when it was completely eliminated.
 6. RE_HISTORICIZE (re_story) Take this unique outcome and instead of it being the exception, make it the rule, the dominant story. What evidence is there to support this "alternative" story?
 7. PUBLICIZE Who would say they could already see the basis for, or that they would support this new organizational approach which is overcoming the old problem?

Thirdly, we use a metaphor analysis based on the organizational metaphors described by Morgan (1986), described below. First, however, we briefly turn our attention to metaphors. In rhetoric, the metaphor is a stylistic device pertaining to the family of the tropes: a trope itself a figure being diverted of its own direction. According to Burke (1969), the tropes are divided in four categories:

- Metaphor: a transfer of direction (concrete term in an abstract context) by analogical substitution for example "That's a bag of peanuts" when referring to something being a deceit;
- Metonymy: expression of a concept by means of a term indicating another concept which is linked to him by a relation necessary, for example the expression "the cause for the effect";
- Synecdoche : to take the first for the least, the matter for the object, the species for the kind, the part for the whole for example using "wheels" for car;
- Irony (Socratic or verbal): manner of questioning by pretending ignorance or using words in opposition to their meaning or intent for example "What lovely weather

we are having!" when it's raining.

When we analyze the various approaches of the production of knowledge in management, we note that the use of different types:

- Ontological: realistic/nominalist approach,
- Epistemological: approach positivist/constructivist,
- Praxeologic: the role of the metaphor as a tool for comprehension of reality;
- Paradigmatic: use of one or several metaphors. (Ocler 2002)

In a realistic approach, the metaphor is appreciated compared to its capacity to retranslate the essence of a given reality: existence of a reality in oneself that the metaphor will light. In a nominalist approach, the multiple uses of metaphors must make it possible to avoid a bulk-heading and to privilege with excess a point of view among the others: no reality in oneself but a multitude of interpretations of reality. (Ocler 2002)

Metaphors are traditionally used to allow a large variety of analyses (Palmer and Dunford (1995), particularly in models that privilege a transdisciplinary approach, filtering the details, magnifying what connects various methods, emphasizing what brings them closer (see in particular Macroscopic of Rosnay (1975)). Certain authors (Barley and Kunda (1992), Palmer and Dunford (1996), Boje and Summers (1994)) insist that metaphor analysis makes it possible to exceed the paradigmatic analysis and thereby to amalgamate fields that at first seem mutually exclusive. As we recognize the value of metaphors within the process of scientific construction and communication of scientific results, we also note the value of the empirical phase which makes it possible to test the model suggested. Too often, the use of concepts borrowed from "hard sciences" confers a scientific pretence of validation.

We propose using a metaphorical analysis to

view four communications relating to the companies' social responsibility. This approach will be developed using the principal metaphors identified by Morgan (1986):

- The mechanical organization: the vision of the company is composed of a mechanical group of elements, assembled in order to answer a particular objective;
- The organic or biological organization: this vision leaves behind the mechanical ideas of structures and output to the benefit of new concepts such as positioning, coherence and the effectiveness of the organizations in their environment;
- The central brain: this vision of the company makes it possible to conceive the organization as the result of an interaction between various entities,
- The culture or shared values and beliefs: this metaphor makes it possible to study the organization under the aspect of the values, the ideas and the beliefs;
- The political system (power and conflict): this perception of the organization proposes the dialectical one of the employee and the citizen;
- The prison of psyche (norms of behavior): the metaphor of the prison of psyche comes from the idea that conscious and unconscious phenomena create the organizations and maintain them in the state;
- Flux and transformation: this analysis consists of studying the nature and the source of the change and to include/understand the organizational logic behind it. Through this metaphor, the art of management turns out to be quite useless as it emanates from these various theories, that it is practically impossible to predict, organize and order systems with such a wide complexity;
- Instruments of domination: The image of the organization seen as an instrument of domination extending the

political system and culture, but introduces the idea of domination and of subordination.

Although we are using tools for analysis derived from semantics and the study of communication situations, we would like to specify that we do not place ourselves in the field of speech analysis, even if the heart of the matter is the speech centered on the social and ecological concerns integrated into the daily management of the company (Igalens 2004). For Pierre Kuertz (1977) the analysis of speech governs the constitution of the corpus of the phases on which is built a grammatical theory. According to Garric, Léglise and Point (2005) the analysis of speech can be approached in a qualitative way, centered on the shape of the texts or supported by textual analysis software (lexicostatistics, logometry). Our methodology does not relate to a textual analysis, we have favored the qualitative approach for the texts. This type of treatment, within a framework of speech analysis, attends particularly to the enunciative marks, methods of argumentation, and the convened reference frames. If our method borrows from these elements, it cannot be regarded as a study of the speech, which should be more deeply researched from a lexical and syntactic point of view.

According to Alain Prost (1998) the corpus must be contrastive, to allow comparisons; diachronic, to space out gradually to allow to locate continuities and turnings; and made up of significant, assignable texts with situations of given communications. The corpus which we constituted corresponds to the first and the last criteria on this list. It does not answer the diachronic element, the perspective not being based on the duration of the discourse but more on the transversality. This separation can be justified by the fact that the companies, listed on the stock market, were not obliged by the New Economic Regulation (NER) law of 2001 to produce reports specifying the way in which (they) take into account the social and environmental consequences of their activities. Our corpus is made up of topics (management report) and

Rodolphe

of discursive formations (the topic being the social responsibility), two of the types of units defined by Maingueneau (2003).

The limits of our study are those of the tools we have chosen. Concerning the narrative analysis, the main one comes from the choice of the communication support having generated our corpus. The four reports which were collected *via* internet do not enable an analysis in terms of feedback, of relationship or analogical mode. This consequently implies that our work will be concerned mainly on the contents and not the relationship. From then on for what reason would we have selected this tool, knowing from the very start that we could in no way use it in an optimal manner? The foremost criteria underlying the narrative analysis appear relevant to us to describe the perception that the companies have of social responsibilities. Linked to the method developed by Henry Savall and Véronique Zardet (1995) in terms of diagnosis and the selection of key ideas, the narrative analysis enables us to use an analysis grid that is structured and recognized. Concerning our second tool for analysis, the metaphors, they have been used in management science by integrating explanatory data that their epistemological status does not always

confer to them. According to Douce (2000), the major difficulty in the reasoning by analogy relates to the scientific status of the analogy itself and thus appears of an epistemological nature. This difficulty is all the more marked, since different orientations could be given to the use of metaphors. Our purpose is to use metaphors to allow the identification of the hidden face of the arguments contained in the company speeches on their social responsibility.

Social Responsibility, Speech, and Insinuation

The texts of reports relating to social responsibility, emanating from four major French Corporations, SNCF (year 2004), Carrefour (year 2004), France Telecom, (year 2004), and Renault (year 2001) reflect the S1 header of the matrix. They are structured following a narrative sequence-coherence with beginning, middle, and end. Representative sentences that both Characterize (describe the organization at its best) and Externalize (attribute the problem as separate from any individual) are presented below.

Table 1 Characterize & Externalize

CHARACTERIZE	EXTERNALIZE
<p><i>Renault applies the standards and rules in a proactive way, by extending the most restrictive rules to the whole of its sites each time it is reasonable (Renault)</i></p> <p><i>Relations with our suppliers are based, in all countries, on the respect of ethics and of transparency (Groupe Carrefour)</i></p> <p><i>The Permanent search for excellence and performance is today the key to credibility for the group with regard to its stakeholders, in particular of its shareholders. (France Telecom)</i></p> <p><i>This approach is participative: the industrial customers of the SNCF were regularly informed during the meetings with the management of the firm and were consulted on the definition of their present needs and futures in terms of the offer. It is at this price that a durable competitiveness will be acquired. (SNCF)</i></p>	<p><i>The solutions not only depends on technical progress which falls within their competence (car manufacturers) but at least as much on the behavior of the other players, in particular of the users who choose between the offers and determine their methods of employment, and on the authorities that decide on the infrastructures and have statutory and fiscal incentives. (Renault)</i></p> <p><i>In France, the year 2003 was marked by the signature of the Agreement on the Use and the Management of Competences, signed with four trade unions. This agreement stresses anticipation as a factor for reducing the risks on employment. It closely associates the unions to the treatment of the reorganizations. (France Telecom)</i></p> <p><i>The size and the weight of the Groupe Carrefour in the world, 11 080 stores, 90,681 billion euros of sales turnover, more than 430,000 collaborators in 32 countries, gives it exceptional responsibility, not only with respect to its customers, employees, suppliers, and shareholders, but also to all the players of the economic world and society. (Groupe Carrefour)</i></p> <p><i>[the SNCF] played a major role in the conclusion of the social agreement of the train crews in Europe, concluded in 2003 between the railway companies and the European unions. (SNCF)</i></p>

Rodolphe

We note that in each report the speech is based on a double aspect. It is either very general or fully instrumentalized. It discusses at the same time the map and the territory Korzybski (1933), by mixing the various levels, without transition. Concerning the map, the terms used are generally in a fixed way (slogans) without defining the concepts which are attached there. SNCF for example is "naturally responsible, voluntarily committed." Using the "contents or relations" and the "degree of general information" headers, we quickly see a refusal of theoretical speech, counterbalanced by an arsenal of examples or actions implemented, with the use of terms qualifying pragmatism, such as "as testifies , thanks to..." .

This antonymic use of language reinforces the feeling of waffling (Petiot 1994). The speech varies then between a very vague description (justification of the positioning of the company vis-à-vis the concept of social responsibility) and a catalogue of actions or indicators seeking to prove its pragmatic implication. This confusion of the map then reflects on the definition of the territory. It shadows the responsibilities of each actor at the time of distribution of the specific roles in the implementation of social responsibility.

This same aspect is clarified when we study the variations relating to the speaker. We notice first of all that the use of "I" is generally missing from the speeches of the CEO, appearing at the beginning of the reports, (except for that of the SNCF). This distance between the CEO and the writer brings a new light to the implication, often announced

as "personal" of the CEO. In addition, we see multiple spaces of references, correlated in the use of the first person plural. Seeking to answer plural receivers (stakeholders generally included in the company unit), the writers employ "we" in a variable way, the identification of who is writing is sometimes difficult for the speaker. The royal "We" is used by the leader or the managers, always generating a distance, in order to develop the impact and the personnel role which they play in the implementation of social responsibility. When we look at the center of matter and the satisfaction headers, we can identify various ways of referring to the firms and their environment.

When speaking of the entire entity (the firm) and its intrinsic parts, the writers use the generic name of the firm. While trying to highlight the bonds which link the company to its environment, in order to underline its implication in the development of healthy and caring relations, the use of the generic name creates a distance between the companies and the various stakeholders. When describing the firms and their actions, the terms are always either very specific (the firm seen as an entity with multiple linkages with the society) or very generic (the firm seen as a space of technical and professional exchange).

Next, we present sentences that either Rehistoricize (make the unique outcome the rules) or Publicize (enlist support for the new narrative).

Table 2 Rehistoricize & Publicize

REHISTORICIZE	PUBLICIZE
<p><i>To reply to consumers' demands for quality, increasingly attentive to the characteristics of the products, to the conditions and the social and environmental impacts of their production, their transport and distribution, Carrefour chose to associate quality and global corporate performance. (Groupe Carrefour)</i></p>	<p><i>I have the very strong conviction that in this beginning of the 21st century, the companies which prepare their future, while committing themselves in a clear and responsible way to a durable development strategy, are the companies which will gain by preserving the confidence of their workers and their partners. (SNCF)</i></p>
<p><i>The environmental policy of France Telecom is founded on the one hand on a program of continuous improvement aiming at reducing the impacts of our activities and our services on the natural environments, on the other hand, on the search for telecommunications solutions integrating dimensions of global corporate performance and answering the needs of society". (France Telecom)</i></p>	<p><i>Carrefour's way of progressing is centered on three strong commitments: quality and safety, the respect for the environment, economic and social responsibility. 22 key performance indicators; set up in 2002, have now made it possible to evaluate the evolution and the realization of the objectives over a period of time (Groupe Carrefour)</i></p>
<p><i>The corporate global performance use the synergy among economic performance, social progress and environmental concerns (SNCF)</i></p>	<p><i>In 2002, Renault published a first report on the three components of the global corporate: economic efficiency, social equity and environmental preservation. Created as a complement to the financial statement, it is short and factual.(Renault)</i></p>
<p><i>Thanks to this mode of integrated management, environmental protection and the work improvement are taken into account as well as the costs, quality and deadlines. (Renault)</i></p>	<p><i>As this document testifies, our actions already produced rich results, obtained thanks to the mobilization of the collaborators in the Group. (France Telecom)</i></p>

Using the matrix of Boje (2006) we are now in the S2 and S4 headers. The multiple spaces of references deal with about

Rodolphe

polyphony and polylogy. But we are also analyzing multiple discursive dialogisms beyond polyphony since different reports were used. Moreover, all the reports and pieces of information consigned within aim at considering the companies under their most favorable aspect. It is worth mentioning the absence of negative sentence either on the syntactic form or the subject matter. The satisfaction degree raised vis-à-vis the social responsibility for each studied institution indicates the will to see the social responsibility as an opportunity, making it

possible to decrease the social or managerial strains. Within this framework, the organization recreates its environment, the objective first being to increase its zone of influence and appeal by developing a notoriety built on elements selected and combined in order to reach the broadest possible audience as testify by the following sentences: those that Sympathize (identify benefits derived from the problem) and those that Strategize (find an unique outcome from the past, even a potential which allowed the organization to defeat the problem).

Table 3 Sympathize & Strategize

SYMPATHIZE	STRATEGIZE
<p><i>Charters or shared norms endeavor to create such a dialogue (nourished dialogue) in a climate of open-mindedness and partnership. (Renault)</i></p> <p><i>It is by following a dialogue policy with the whole of the actors concerned, communities, associations, partners, suppliers, politicians, that Carrefour could develop a true strategy as regards to global corporate performance and social responsibility. (Groupe Carrefour)</i></p> <p><i>Our policy of responsibility for company concerns a voluntary approach. It is based on a logic which must implicate and motivate all the players in the company. It interests all our partners, i.e. stakeholders because it reveals our dynamics of growth and progress. (France Telecom)</i></p> <p><i>SNCF approaches the European market by conserving its own values: those of the public services, of security, the will to remain an integrated company which refuses dumping and poses the bases of a social agreement on a continental scale (SNCF)</i></p>	<p><i>Railway appears to all players(economic, political, the public) as a means of transport relevant in terms of energy efficiency, combating the greenhouse effect, reducing traffic congestion or traffic safety (SNCF)</i></p> <p><i>Participant in several international programs which favor social responsibility, requesting the judgment and the evaluation of external organizations, developing innovating initiatives, the responsibility of Carrefour is expressed each day, showing its will to be regarded as a leader of responsible world distribution. (Groupe Carrefour)</i></p> <p><i>It [global corporate performance] is a commitment of belief and responsibility, it is a long-term strategic vision that has to take shape in the daily actions of the various parts of the Group, and it is an innovating, realistic, specific, concrete path, in which we progress, with, our stakeholders". (France Telecom)</i></p> <p><i>In the same spirit, Renault intends to intensify and structure its dialogue with certain stakeholders of the civil company, in particular associations, in order to better include, understand and integrate their concerns (Renault)</i></p>

Moreover, this social and economic role is presented in such a way to indicate

partnerships based on win-win relationship (with employees, customers, shareholders,

organizations, communities, etc.). In order to include the whole of these stakeholders, the speech, in terms of hierarchical positioning, superimposes two distinct fields. In the first one, the hierarchical elements refer to the position taken by the company in society, its role and influence, the bonds and pressures (positive) which it can exert on its environment. The second level defines the position of the social responsibility vis-à-vis the various components of the company, and notably the financial ones. The report on social responsibility is then generally presented as additional, and is subordinate to the financial one. It is significant to note that when the company refers to global corporate performance, the first concept suggested refers to the economic and financial aspects, the social development appearing only after, as if the economic factors were a prerequisite before becoming interested in social responsibility.

Social responsibility is generally approached in a positive way, with little need to ever "revise." The institutional speech was always designed to not target the problems that were generated by social responsibility. This presentation is conceived with an aim of giving an indication of responsible groups, in all points integrated into the society which surrounds them. According to Garric, Léglise and Point (2005), we can then clearly imagine that the report makes it possible for the firm to build its own reality, to redefine its image so that it conveys an appealing impression to its shareholder or any stakeholders. Then begins a work of smoothing the actions committed and marketing the report on social responsibility, in order to make of it an asset in an institutional communication system. It builds up a vision of the world in which any negative variation is erased (Alpha studies 2004).

It should be noted that the actions related to the social responsibility are legitimated not by lawful requirement, but by choice. The legal constraint imposed by the NRE Law is not accounted for, transformed into advantage, the companies generally presenting the

publication of the report like a major strategic choice, of their initiative. We are now in the S4 header, in a chronotopic dialogism, specifically the *Idyllic* type.

Supplementing this first analysis while enriching it, the study of metaphorical positioning, enables us to detect the predominance of the mechanical model. The whole analysis here is located in the S3 header of Boje's matrix (metaphorization), and it reveals a predominance of the "mechanical model" (Morgan, 1983). When they describe which actions they are developing, the companies generally mention the roles, duties and priorities of each one. The durable development is then expounded in terms of procedures, which are reflected on the entire territory of the company. The Carrefour Report specifies, for example, that the 2004 report on social responsibility was controlled by a transverse committee, including managerial boards of the group concerned (*Direction Qualité Développement Durable, Direction Ressources Humaines, Direction Audit Interne, Direction Juridique, Direction Marketing, Direction Actifs, Direction Achats, Direction logistique*) as well as representatives of global corporate performance of the main European countries.

The report presents then 22 indicators of performances to be implemented and measured regularly. This approach gives the illusion that the company controls each component of social responsibility. Therefore each component plays a specific role in the achievement of an integrative policy aiming at implementing the directives given by ILO or OECD¹.

Oddly enough, this vision locks up the concept in a system favoring stability well before adaptability. Social responsibility becomes manipulated then, obeying preset phases, determined a priori. Whereas the required goal is to corroborate the abilities to cope with managing change the actual

¹ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

Rodolphe

process of reducing the number of organizational tools — generally designed for a long-term management and aiming at controlling specific performance — does not reflect a genuine motivation to account for environmental changes.

While the metaphorical speech relating to the implementation of social responsibility enables us to do a somewhat quick detection of the mechanical metaphor, the other topics approached within the framework of the reports studied integrate a metaphorical dimension which melts references. The descriptions of the relations between the companies and their stakeholders are based either on the organic or the brain metaphor. Whereas the tools used refer to a mechanical vision, the companies emphasize the connection that they build up with their environment. This vision brings to the organization a dimension of anticipation, which supposes close contact with their environment, and a dimension of effectiveness, since it includes technical, economic and socio-cultural parameters, connected with each other as well as mutually dependent (organic vision).

In addition, the brain metaphor regards the organization as the mix of an interaction between various entities. While this vision calls into question the importance of a hierarchical structure, the setting up of specific objectives, the vertical configuration of the authority and competences within the company, it appears only when one considers the company in relation to its environment, and, to be strictly accurate, its social responsibility. One must also bear in mind that the speech does not integrate some metaphors, in particular that of flux and transformation and that of the political system. Indeed, we note that there is little if any mention of forces at play between the various social actors, each one working in search of a common ideal. Moreover, the reports stress the density of the connections

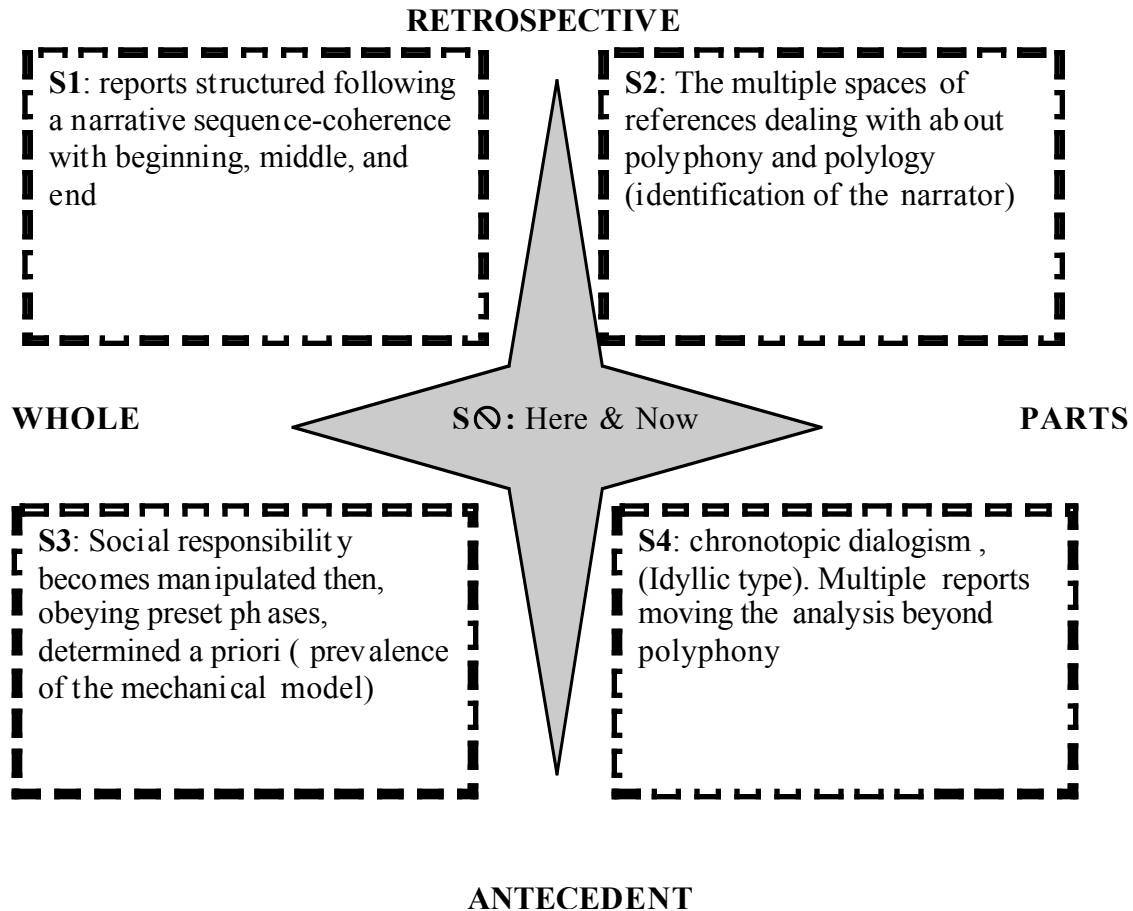
in-between various stakeholders. There is no opposition between the employee and the citizen for example, each actor having an interest to take part in the global corporate performance, thus rejecting the concept of position of rents. The rejection of the metaphor of flux and transformation finds its source in the idea that it becomes possible, thanks to fixed indicators, to manage the future. The mechanical vision of the tools of the social responsibility erases the state of flow to the profit of a static world, more easily checked.

The other metaphors are more or less partially used. It is possible for example to see in these reports an ideal representation of the model desired by the companies, linked to the materialization of the metaphor of the prison of the spirit. This concept of prison of psychism developed by Plato highlights the transformation of the reality which the individuals operate in starting from perception that they have of particular situations. The instruments of domination are also used to insist, not on their role of domination, but on the positive dynamics of the construction a “better world can insufflate.”

CONCLUSION

By analyzing institutional communications on social responsibility of four companies, we use semantic tools to identify company attitudes toward social responsibility. We then established various levels of reading thanks to the narrative analysis and to the metaphors, in particular of the fuzzy borders between the map and the territory or the undulation of the positioning of the writer. The reports on social responsibility often sought to praise the actions of the companies, as in propaganda. Our contribution, though always already partial, illustrates the usefulness and limitations of the 4-square model developed by Boje.

Figure I.2: Example of the Adaptation of the grid on Story/Narrative Sensemaking



Extension of this work would consist of the study of various companies integrating lexicological and statistical features.

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