

Variation in Persuasive Financial Discourse: Face-to-face vs. Teleconference Earnings Presentations

¹ John M. Swales and Priscilla S. Rogers, "Discourse and the Projection of Corporate Culture: The Mission Statement", *Discourse & Society*, 6.2 (1995), 223-442; Ken Hyland, "Exploring Corporate Rhetoric: Metadiscourse in the CEO's Letter", *Journal of Business Communication*, 35.2 (1998), 224-245.

² Catherine Nickerson and Elizabeth De Groot, "Dear Shareholder, Dear Stockholder, Dear Stakeholder: The Business Letter Genre in the Annual General Report", in Paul Gillaerts and Maurizio Gotti, eds., *Genre Variation in Business Letters* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005), 325-346.

³ Hyland, "Corporate Rhetoric", 230.

⁴ Priscilla S. Rogers, "CEO Presentations in Conjunction with Earnings Announcements: Extending the Construct of Organizational Genre", *Management Communication Quarterly*, 13.3 (2000), 426-485.

⁵ Ken Hyland, *Metadiscourse. Exploring Interaction in Writing* (London: Continuum, 2005).

Financial disclosure, or the periodic reporting of company's financial results, is of paramount importance in the corporate world. It serves not only to fulfill legal obligations, but also to maintain visibility and consolidate a positive corporate image with key stakeholders, among which are investors, employees, management, the media, and the general public. In the wake of recent financial scandals (e.g. Enron, Parmalat, WorldCom), company executives have become increasingly concerned with promoting transparency and goodwill, in addition to persuading potential investors of the present soundness and future worth of their companies.

Recognizing the key contribution of language in achieving these goals, a number of studies have investigated how various linguistic devices are used rhetorically in corporate settings. However, in communications originating from the upper levels of executive management is where we find some of the most salient rhetorical strategies. Previous studies have shown how company executives use interpersonal metadiscourse (e.g. inclusive pronouns, hedges and emphatics) to persuade readers and listeners.¹ In addition, it has been determined that evaluative language plays an important role in projecting a positive corporate image,² while metadiscursive appeals such as frame markers and logical connectives help to enhance the argumentative effectiveness of business texts.³ However, top managers may also adopt a more subtle rhetorical style approach. For example, CEOs (Chief Executive Officers) who reported poor earnings to investment analysts preferred an informational and relational approach, rather than engaging in blatant positive rhetoric. In this way, the CEOs sought to explicitly address their audiences' informational needs and, at the same time, consolidate the business relationship by promoting an atmosphere of trust and sincerity.⁴

Persuasion

While the above-mentioned studies do not look at persuasion explicitly, the linguistic and rhetorical features analysed all contribute to the general persuasive imprint of the discourse. Focusing more specifically on the rhetoric of persuasion in CEOs' letters to shareholders, Hyland takes up Aristotle's rhetorical constructs of *ethos* (appeals to credibility), *pathos* (appeals to affect) and *logos* (appeals to rationality).⁵ By using logos (or reason) as a persuasive strategy, the speaker brings the listener to accept an argument. This is carried out by defining problems, supporting claims, giving evidence, and stating conclusions. Just as important is the way the argument is structured and connections are made between the elements of the discourse. In addition to the Aristotelian framework, argumentation theory can also provide insights in the nature of persuasion, e.g., Toulmin's claim-data-warrant model, where

warrant logically links data to a claim.⁶ However, the analysis of rhetorical features in this study will be limited to the notion of logos as described above.

Example (1) below illustrates the close argumentation and complex rhetorical organization employed in financial presentations. Note that the examples throughout the paper are derived from the two corpora under investigation and have been coded as follows: FTFP = face-to-face earnings presentations and TCP = teleconference earnings presentations. The numbers after the slash refer to firms as numbered in Tables 1 and 2.⁷ For purposes of anonymity, company and product names have been replaced with 'X'. This example contains repetition ("result", "choices", "made", "making" - underlined) connectives ("not just", "or", "indeed" - bold), and hyperbole ("exciting", "first-class" - italics), with the whole resulting in a crescendo of persuasive effect.

⁶ Stephen Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958).

⁷ See *infra*, pp. 45 and 46.

(1) The post-merger X is **not just the result** of complex integration, **or the result** of *exciting* growth over a number of years, or **indeed** what I see as my colleagues' *first-class* execution of the strategy. It is the result of some very clear choices: choices that we have made and are making. (FTFP/2)

On a linguistic level, logos often involves the use of logical connectives, typically in the form of linking adverbials and prepositional phrases. When discussing Aristotle's notion of persuasive proof, Hyland observes that "people are not persuaded until they are convinced that something is true, and the rhetoric involves demonstrating how something is true and how it can be shown to be true".⁸ Logical connectives that elaborate an argument by means of comparing, adding, sequencing or explaining contribute to accomplishing this goal, and are thus "critical to a text's overall persuasive force".⁹ In oral business contexts, logical connectives may be exploited by speakers to steer listeners towards a desired interpretation, which becomes difficult to refute and thus highly persuasive.

⁸ Hyland, *Metadiscourse*, 64.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 75.

Ethos is also a significant component of persuasion in financial discourse because it serves to give the speaker credibility and legitimacy (an important feature of modern capitalism). The perceived integrity and authority of the speaker are all important in a situation where honesty and candour are regarded as key elements of effective communication. Obviously, in financial communications, the credibility of a speaker is also closely linked to the audience's perception of company success (incidentally 'success' is a frequent lemma in the presentations investigated in this study). Therefore, credibility is established and indeed negotiated during interaction both for the speakers as individuals and as representatives of a company. This credibility may then be leveraged to present the company in the most positive way possible. Positive evaluations of company performance can be expressed and strengthened with very emphatic lexis, often taking the form of hyperbole, i.e. overstatement or exaggeration of the truth. This contributes to conveying a confident, decisive and commanding image which instils trust in investors, thus fostering an impression of assurance and conviction, i.e. a strong and positive ethos.

¹⁰ Michael McCarthy and Ronald Carter, “‘There’s Millions of Them’: Hyperbole in Everyday Conversation”, *Journal of Pragmatics*, 36 (2004), 149-184; Laura Cano Mora and Antonia Sanchez Macarro, “Going to Extremes: The Pragmatic Functions of Hyperbole in Discourse”, in JoDee Anderson, J. M. Oro and Jesus Varela Zapata, eds., *Linguistic Perspectives in the Classroom. Language Teaching in a Multicultural Europe* (Santiago de Campostela: Universidad de Santiago de Campostela, 2004), 309-321.

¹¹ Vijay K. Bhatia, *Worlds of Written Discourse. A Genre-based View* (London: Continuum, 2004).

¹² Ibid., 60-61.

¹³ Ibid., 59 and 81.

¹⁴ Erving Goffman, “The Neglected Situation”, *American Anthropologist*, 66.6 (1964), 133-136.

¹⁵ Aimee Drolet and Michael W. Morris, “Rapport in Conflict Resolution: Accounting for How Face-to-face Contact Fosters Mutual Cooperation in Mixed-motive Conflicts”, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 36 (2000), 26-50.

¹⁶ Amitai Etzioni and Oren Etzioni, “Face-to-face and Computer-mediated Communities, A Comparative Analysis”, *The Information Society*, 15.4 (1999), 241-248.

¹⁷ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964).

In this way, hyperbole carries out a persuasive function similar to that found in everyday conversation.¹⁰

Aristotle, of course, defined the three components of persuasive rhetoric with political discourse in mind. However, they can all be used to good effect in financial discourse. Although not the focus of this paper, pathos, or appeals to the emotions, as realized by declarations of belief through personal testimony and by attempts to involve the listener through the use of questions and direct second person pronoun address, are also important persuasive techniques used by corporate speakers.

Financial presentations

Both face-to-face presentations and teleconference presentations arguably belong to the same genre and are also part of the burgeoning category of what have been called hybrid, embedded or mixed genres.¹¹ In the present day competitive business environment and globalized market, the role of discourse in business has come to take on an increasingly salient role, with promotion, marketing and advertising activities becoming almost more important than the end product. Advertising, according to Bhatia, stands out as the dominant influence over other genres and the arena where this is particularly prominent is in corporate presentations.¹² Such presentations constitute a hybridisation of two discourse colonies (to borrow Bhatia’s terminology): the reporting and the promotional.¹³ They ostensibly report the financial performance of the company over a certain time period to an audience of largely professional investors. Yet given the nature of the publicly quoted company and the volatility of stock markets, their purpose is not only to inform, but also to promote the firm and persuade the audience that the company merits the trust of the investor. Thus, the promotional and the informational coexist in the form of two merging discourse colonies.

Financial presentations may be delivered through different media. Goffman first discussed the influence of the medium of communication on the characteristics of the interaction.¹⁴ Since then a number of studies in various disciplines have emphasized the advantages of face-to-face interaction over telephone talk and videoconferencing for conflict resolution and establishing trust. The social psychologists Drolet and Morris, for example, claim that business negotiators travel across the world enduring jet lag and many other hardships to have even a brief conversation with their interlocutors rather than making a telephone call, because this is more effective.¹⁵ However, Etzioni and Etzioni are more cautious and claim that in fact hybrid communications (both face-to-face and technology-mediated) can be the most effective way of creating communities.¹⁶ Yet generally speaking, there is an agreement that the medium influences the message¹⁷ and that face-to-face communication, being the first and most important form of human communication, has several advantages over telephone or computer-mediated interactions, particularly when dealing with issues of a complex or delicate nature.

Despite this awareness, in recent years the increasing pressures of global competition have pushed businesses to take advantage of new technologies which allow them to interact with their stakeholders ‘virtually’. In fact, one of the most widely used forms of communication in the business world today is teleconferencing. To disclose financial information, companies now make extensive use of corporate earnings calls, i.e. meetings between company executives and investment analysts via telephone which are organized through a teleconferencing service. During these multi-party calls, the executives first give a presentation of their financial results. Then, participating analysts have the opportunity to interact directly with the speakers in lengthy question and answer sessions moderated by the teleconference operator. While such audio-only interaction may deprive interlocutors of some benefits of face-to-face meetings, it is undoubtedly more cost-effective, flexible and far-reaching, and is thus highly attractive to business organizations.¹⁸

In this paper, I examine some persuasive strategies in two corpora of financial presentations that represent two of the most common interactional settings of today’s global financial community: face-to-face and teleconference. It will focus on two rhetorical devices often used by speakers to persuade listeners through recourse to Aristotelian constructs of logos and ethos. Firstly, ‘logical connectives’ used to elaborate an argument will be analysed across the two corpora to demonstrate the role of logos in persuasiveness. I will then look at ‘hyperbole’ to show how it is used to establish and reinforce credibility, and hence promote ethos. In this way, the study aims to shed more light on the role of these key persuasive features in financial discourse.

Methodology: the corpora

This study is based on two highly specialized corpora of roughly the same size (approximately 111,000 words), both dealing with the disclosure of financial results: face-to-face presentations (hereinafter FTFP) and teleconference presentations (hereinafter TCP). The two corpora were compiled to be similar in word count to allow for simple and straightforward comparisons of numerical data.

Regardless of the medium, financial presentations have the communicative purpose of providing important financial information and, at the same time, promoting a positive image of the company, as one CEO very explicitly says:

(2) ... so that we can concentrate on what we are really here for. To tell you why X should get your investment pound, dollar or euro ahead of the next guy. (FTFP/2)

Financial presentations are thus a type of goal-directed or transactional discourse.¹⁹ The speakers are usually company officials at the top of the management hierarchy, with the CEO often a frequent speaker. Although the authorship of the presentations is not explicitly acknowledged, informants tell us that they typically go through various drafts and may have several authors, due to their vital role in

¹⁸ Bertha Du-Babcock, “An Analysis of a Video-conferencing Project: Intercultural Communication, Administration and Student Reactions”, paper presented at the 6th Association for Business Communication European Convention (Milan, 2004).

¹⁹ Michael McCarthy, *Spoken Language and Applied Linguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

corporate financial disclosure. Generally speaking, the linguistic characteristics associated with presentations include the use of the non-inclusive ‘we’ pronoun, through which speakers refer to themselves and the firm as one entity. ‘We’ is also used to promote the idea of a close knit ‘team’ in a work environment where top management change jobs and allegiances with great frequency. This is reinforced by the use of first names for example, to indicate the next speaker, as in example 3.

(3) With that, I’ll turn the call over to Tom. (TCP/2)

For the FTFP corpus, some of the transcripts were downloaded directly from company web sites, others were transcribed from the video available online with the help of the power point slides (also available online), still others were recorded live and transcribed. The face-to-face earnings presentations corpus is part of a larger corpus which also includes other typologies of presentation. The presentations were given in a variety of settings, often at events organized by merchant banks for the benefit of potential investors. The companies varied from banking to retailing, services, software and included companies from a wide range of national origins, even if most of the companies were multinationals operating worldwide. The audience was not always visible and therefore it was necessary to glean information both from informants and the questions and answer sessions that followed the presentations, where members of the audience sometimes gave their name and affiliation before asking the question. We can surmise that it consisted mostly of experts in the field, such as institutional investors, merchant bankers and representatives of other financial institutions. Table 1 gives an overview of the FTFP corpus.

Table 1. The FTFP corpus

Firm	Sector	Location	Words
1	Consumer credit	US	7005
2	Banking	UK	17004
3	Building society	UK	14344
4	Banking/insurance	UK	25513
5	Software	US	7270
6	Software	US	12085
7	Food and drink	UK	6685
8	Computers	US	3798
9	Merchant Bank	UK	2810
10	Media	Global	2619
11	Aviation	Brazil	2418
12	Oil	Global	2977
13	Chemicals	UK	7042
			111570

The TCP corpus consists of the transcripts of presentations given by company executives via teleconferencing (audio only). The presentations were drawn from a larger corpus of complete corporate earnings calls which also include extensive question and answer sessions between the presenters and investment analysts

participating in the teleconference. The transcripts were collected from an Internet-based firm specializing in information services for the international corporate community and for the investment community. These services are normally available to carefully screened financial professionals and by payment only. However, after contacting the firm and explaining the purpose of this research, complimentary access to the site was granted for a period of thirty days, during which time the complete transcripts of a series of teleconference calls were downloaded. The financial results were jointly presented by members of the executive management of the company, typically including the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and the Chief Financial Officer, along with other key figures such as Chief Operating Officers, Executive or Senior Vice Presidents and Directors of Investor Relations. The number of speakers ranged from one to six (average of three). The presentations represent a wide range of business sectors and most refer to quarterly financial periods at the end of 2003 or the beginning of 2004. The corpus is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. The TCP corpus.

Firm	Business sector	Location	Words
1	Information technology	US	6801
2	Internet retail	US	2411
3	Consumer finance	US	3452
4	Computers	US	1404
5	Banking	US	4446
6	Hotels and restaurants	US	2839
7	Food products	US	5645
8	Chemicals	US	4812
9	Internet retail	US	3658
10	Media	US	1812
11	Pharmaceuticals	US	3852
12	Textiles and apparel	Germany	2101
13	Telecommunications	France	4933
14	Biotechnology	US	7158
15	Energy	US	6237
16	Semiconductors	US	3133
17	Aviation	Holland	3143
18	Hotels and restaurants	US	4302
19	Clothes retailing	UK	694
20	Banking	US	3109
21	Chemicals	US	4089
22	Electronic equipment	Finland	3076
23	Food & staple products	US	3345
24	Oil and gas	UK/Holland	2642
25	Electronic equipment	Korea	3961
26	Telecommunications	Italy	1426
27	Electronic equipment	US	2309
28	Media	US	5618
29	Electronic equipment	US	3109
30	Internet services	US	6292
			111809

In both corpora, an effort was made to include as many international firms as possible, thus seeking to offer a more realistic picture of business transactions which are increasingly conducted among speakers of diverse language backgrounds using English as a *lingua franca*.²⁰

By comparing the word counts of the presentations listed in the two tables, an interesting trend emerges. On average, those in the FTFP corpus were longer than those in the TCP corpus which therefore required more than twice as many presentations (30 vs. 13) to reach a comparable word count. It would seem that the face-to-face medium encourages more lengthy presentations.

Methodology: analytical approach

The analysis of the two corpora combines qualitative, quantitative, and ethnographically-inspired techniques. As a preliminary step, both corpora were read carefully in order to get a 'feel' for the data and to identify linguistic features which contributed to the persuasive force of the discourse. During this process, it was possible to detect a strong presence of both logical connectives (e.g. 'however', 'therefore', 'in addition', 'similarly') and hyperbole (e.g. 'phenomenal', 'huge', 'staggering').

The two features were then processed with the concordancer of *Wordsmith Tools* to obtain frequency data and to identify interesting trends for follow-up qualitative analysis to better interpret the data.²¹ Logical connectives were searched across both corpora according to a pre-established list, based first of all on the close reading of the corpus and secondly on Hyland's taxonomy articulated into three categories of items: contrastive, additive and resultative.²² A different approach was instead necessary for hyperbolic expressions which represent an essentially open-ended class. A list of potential search candidates was also compiled from reading the two corpora. This was integrated with indications from previous studies which had identified intensifying/extreme adjectives/adverbs and nouns of numerical exaggeration (e.g. 'thousands', 'tons', 'gazillions') as key forms of hyperbole.²³ While such a procedure cannot produce the exhaustive results of detailed textual analysis (only feasible with relatively small text samples), given the characteristics of this study, it seems to represent a reasonable methodological compromise.²⁴

Finally, taking inspiration from ethnographic research, interviews were conducted with informants in the professional business world, representing two different communicative perspectives.²⁵ On the delivery end for the FTFP corpus, the informant who agreed to be interviewed is one of the top managers of a multinational energy company based in Italy. He corroborated the findings of the empirical research of Drolet and Morris mentioned above, that being physically present at face-to-face presentations was considered very important by investors.²⁶ This is because presentations, although well prepared, can be interpreted not only relying on content or lexico-grammatical choice, but also using intonation, body language and facial expressions to 'read between the lines'. This need to

²⁰ Leena Louhiala-Salminen, "The Business Communication Classroom vs. Reality. What Should We Teach Today?", *English for Specific Purposes*, 15.1 (1996), 37-51.

²¹ Mike Scott, *Wordsmith Tools* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

²² Ken Hyland, *Disciplinary Discourses: Social Interactions in Academic Writing* (Edinburgh: Pearson, 2000).

²³ McCarthy and Carter, "There's Millions of Them", 171; Neal R. Norrick, "Hyperbole, Extreme Case Formulation", *Journal of Pragmatics*, 36 (2004), 1727-1739.

²⁴ McCarthy and Carter, "There's Millions of Them", 167 (for more on the challenges of open-class item analysis).

²⁵ John M. Swales, *Genre Analysis. English in Academic and Research Settings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); see also Norman Fairclough, "Intertextuality in Critical Discourse Analysis", *Linguistics and Education*, 3.4 (1992), 269-293, for more on the importance of insights that go beyond textual analysis.

²⁶ Drolet and Morris, "Rapport in Conflict Resolution", 27.

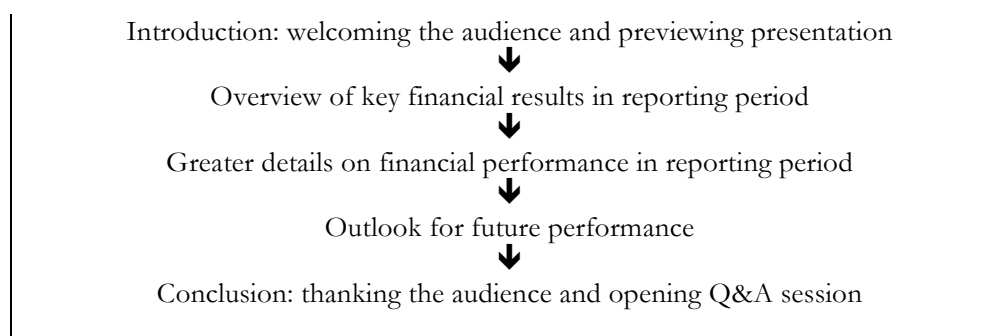
closely interpret every possible communicative channel in financial reporting is so important that investors attend courses in interpreting non-verbal signals in order to gather as much as possible of what remains unspoken because of its potentially damaging impact on stock market quotations. The informant spoke of the case when his company's stock price fell several points and indeed had to be suspended due to the CEO's unguarded use of language during a presentation question and answer session.

On the receiving end, for the TCP corpus, the informant is an investment analyst and portfolio manager for a leading mutual funds institution who participates in approximately 200 corporate earnings calls per year. He regularly uses the information services of the Internet firm that provided the data for this corpus and frequently consults the transcripts of corporate earnings calls. He also pointed out that one of the advantages of teleconferences is the tendency to stay more focused without 'going off on tangents' as often happens during face-to-face meetings, and thus participants perhaps succeed in accomplishing more business in the long run. On an anecdotal note, when asked why he took the time to read through lengthy transcripts rather than simply scanning over a series of concise published statistics that are readily available to the public at large, he replied: "The transcripts contain subtle nuances and colours that are not available through the public filings", once again confirming the crucial role of language in the business world.

Results and discussion: macrostructure of the presentations

Because financial presentations, as a spoken genre, have received relatively little attention in the literature, it seems useful to provide readers with some information about their content and structure. From the preliminary overview of the two corpora, it was possible to identify a general macrostructure that was broadly similar across both (Figure 1), even if the FTFP corpus, having several much lengthier presentations, showed a bit more variation.

Figure 1. Macrostructure of financial earnings presentations.



Generally speaking, the presentations of both corpora appear to be polished and smoothly flowing performances. The tone is largely informal and relaxed (e.g. first names, contracted forms, colloquial expressions). In the FTFP corpus, there are also some jokes and digressions from the business at hand. In one case, a CEO took time to present one member of the audience who apparently had a birthday with a cake. However, the TCP corpus contains no such asides and the presentations very much ‘stick to business’, likely due to the lack of physical proximity and visual contact as suggested by the TCP informant. In fact, only two calls have any reference to non-business matters: a welcome to those calling in from “warm and sunny Honolulu” and wishes for a happy and prosperous New Year to all on the part of an Asian CEO.

Judging from what informants said and even from the speakers themselves who at time referred to their own ‘prepared remarks’, financial presentations tend to be carefully planned and undergo extensive drafting. However, because we do not find the kind of hitches, repeats and break-downs that are typical of much extemporaneous speech, it would appear that speakers have even planned the coordinative aspects of the joint presentation, probably in an effort to make the best impression possible on listeners and to exploit the time available with maximum efficiency.

Results and discussion: logical connectives

²⁷ Hyland, *Disciplinary Discourses*, 111

Table 3 illustrates the quantitative analysis of selected logical connectives across the two corpora, grouped into the three broad semantic categories of Hyland’s taxonomy.²⁷ Common coordinating conjunctions (i.e. ‘and’, ‘but’, ‘so’, ‘also’, ‘because’, and ‘since’) were excluded from this analysis as their frequencies were too high to permit the manual inspection of concordance output necessary to distinguish simple syntactical coordination from the more rhetorical uses of interest to this study. The analysis, therefore, focuses on logical connectives which tend to be more overtly rhetorical, usually in the form of linking adverbials or prepositional phrases.

The quantitative output of the connectives ‘while’ and ‘yet’ required extensive editing in order to eliminate unwanted temporal meanings. ‘While’ was somewhat more problematic since it often functioned as a conjunction of direct contrast without any particular rhetorical force. These instances usually involved the reporting of facts (e.g. numerical data, geographical regions, business units) as shown in example 4. I opted to exclude such usage and to consider only instances where ‘while’ was being used more rhetorically (example 5).

- (4) European segment revenues were up 48% year over year **while** Japan was up 13% and Asia Pacific up 55%. (TCP/4)
- (5) **While** our cost performance has been very strong, we do need to continue to invest for the future. (FTFP/3)

Table 3. Logical connectives in FTFP vs. TCP

Logical connective	FTFP corpus	TCP corpus
<u>Contrastive</u>		
However	49	68
Although/even though/though	48	47
Despite/in spite of	16	30
While	20	38
Yet	6	7
On the other hand	-	3
Notwithstanding	9	2
Nevertheless	6	1
In contrast	2	1
Whereas	7	1
Besides	6	-
Instead	5	1
Even so	4	1
Subtotal	178	200
<u>Additive</u>		
In addition/additionally	22	82
Again	12	10
Similarly	3	4
Likewise	4	2
Moreover	1	1
Furthermore	5	1
Equally	3	-
Subtotal	50	100
<u>Resultative</u>		
As a result	32	40
Therefore/thereby (1)	17	24
Consequently/as a consequence	33	7
Thus	6	7
Hence	5	3
Accordingly	4	1
Subtotal	97	82
Grand total	325	382

As can be seen from the table, the overall usage of connectives was broadly similar across both corpora (325 in FTFP vs. 382 in TCP). Among the categories, in both corpora contrastive connectives were by far the most frequent compared to additive and resultative connectives. Much of the difference between the two corpora could be traced to additive connectives (50 in FTFP vs. 100 in TCP), and especially to the item ‘in addition/additionally’. While the FTFPs were slightly more interactive and conversational and used additives such as ‘and’ frequently, other types of ‘written-like’ connectives were used equally in both corpora. Thus, the reason for this difference is not clear. Although beyond the purview of this study, a possible explanation could be linked to cultural preferences. More specifically, in the TCP there were many speakers of American English who may tend to privilege certain lexical items such as ‘in addition/additionally’, compared to their British counterparts in the FTFP.

Within each category, a rather wide range of items was found, even if some distinct preferences were evident. Perhaps this is due to individual proclivities

which must not be ruled out in small corpora studies. It could also be that certain connectives tend to be preferred in financial presentations where speakers are very keen on persuading their listeners. Overall, the speakers made more frequent use of ‘however’, ‘despite/in spite of’, ‘in addition’, ‘as a result’, ‘consequently’ and ‘therefore’ compared to other possible alternatives. According to Biber *et al.*, in comparison with conversation, fiction and news, linking adverbials are more frequent in written academic prose, with particularly high frequencies of overt links, such as ‘however’ and ‘therefore’, used by writers to present and support their argument.²⁸ The fact that we find a considerable number of very explicit logical connectives in these spoken presentations underlines their persuasive function. Their presence is also further evidence of advance planning on the part of the speakers as discussed in the previous section, as they are relatively infrequent in extemporaneous speech.²⁹

²⁸ Douglas Biber *et al.*, *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (Essex: Longman, 1999).

²⁹ *Ibid.*

Follow-up qualitative analysis revealed that contrastive connectives were often used by speakers in negative contexts, either to immediately counter with a positive comment (examples 6 and 7), or to foreground the positive in relation to the negative (examples 8 and 9). Much less frequent were contrastive connectives used to mitigate the positive in order to present a ‘realistic’ picture, similar to Rogers’ findings (example 10).³⁰

³⁰ Rogers, “CEOs Presentations”, 451.

- (6) X prices have peaked during Q4 and started to decline at the end of the quarter. **On the other hand** XX prices were strong throughout the quarter. (TCP/25).
- (7) We took a more cautious stance in certain markets – for example, in mortgages and some areas in personal lending. **Even so**, we achieved good volume growth in Personal Banking products. (FTFP/2)
- (8) This is a business that has delivered – and continues to deliver substantial returns to its shareholders **despite** less than benign conditions in a number of markets and aggressive competitive pricing over the holiday season. (FTFP/7)
- (9) After cost of ownership, our operating income was 0.5% better than last year, **although** in absolute terms clearly still \$10m below last year. (TCP/17)
- (10)[...] or in the life and pensions sector where the effective scale of consolidation has been substantial, but where **even though** the balance sheets have improved, it’s more a case of ‘sleeping at night’ than a solid platform for competing away shareholder value. (FTFP/4)

Given their prominence throughout the two corpora, contrastive connectives can be seen as a powerful strategy exploited by the corporate speakers to draw listeners’ attention away from the negative and towards the positive in an attempt to persuade them of the overall soundness of their companies despite admitted set-backs.

Both additive and resultative connectives tended to appear where speakers systematically build up and consolidate positive results. The additive connective ‘furthermore’ in example 12 is used to link two consecutive positive comments, thereby reinforcing both, while ‘similarly’ in example 13 is used to wind up a series of positive statements, thus leaving listeners with an even stronger impression of

success. In examples 14 and 15 resultative connectives highlight the logically positive consequences of successful initiatives.

(11) In terms of financial strength, being part of X provides confidence to our customers and distributors. **Furthermore**, Standard & Poors have reconfirmed X's credit rating at AA, consistent with the Groups rating overall. (FTFP/4)

(12) In just a year, we have moved a system of 30,000 restaurants to serve our customers better. Our momentum is a direct result of focusing on our customers and making improvements in our restaurants. **Similarly**, we are stronger as a system today because we are poised to execute this strategy. (TCP/6)

(13) Profitability, gross margin went up by 5% mostly due to higher ASP and cost cutting. SG&A went up by about 2% because of the increased marketing expense and **thus** we end up with operating profit margin going up by 2 percentage points to 20%. (TCP/25)

(14) Our income growth was up 11%; our cost growth fundamentally flat; and, **as a result**, everything flows straight through to shareholder returns with positive jaws of plus 10.6%. (FTFP/10)

Results and discussion: hyperbole

The distribution of hyperbolic expressions in the form of intensifying or extreme adjective and adverbs across the two corpora is illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4. Hyperbole in face-to-face vs. teleconference earnings presentations

Hyperbolic expressions	FTFP corpus	TCP corpus
Great	77	65
Dramatic/dramatically	31	8
Fantastic	16	1
Phenomenal	15	2
Exciting	14	10
Huge	12	12
Tremendous/tremendously	11	12
Excellent	8	17
Exceptional/exceptionally	6	11
Enormous	8	3
Outstanding	8	10
Massive	5	1
Amazing	5	3
Magnificent	2	-
Terrific	1	10
Spectacular	1	2
Unparalleled	1	1
Staggering	1	-
Remarkable	1	4
Extraordinary	-	4
Unlimited	-	2
Blowout	-	1

Perhaps the most immediately striking result is that in both corpora hyperbole is uniformly positive. Since hyperbole serves to upscale reality, it is particularly suited to financial presentations which have to convey a favourable image of the company. Therefore, not surprisingly, there are no instances of items such as ‘awful’, ‘terrible’ or ‘catastrophic’. Moreover, negative results tend to be expressed with mitigated choices. For instance, there was only one instance of ‘bad’, but several of ‘flat’ and ‘disappointing’. On this point, the TCP informant confirmed that he has never heard company executives use negative hyperbolic expressions to describe performance, and added that even milder adjectives as ‘disappointing’ sometimes needed to be interpreted more realistically.

Although initially the investigation of hyperbolic numerical expressions which are common in conversation was the focus, none of these were found in either of the corpora. All occurrences of ‘hundreds’, ‘thousands’ and ‘million’ could be interpreted literally and not as exaggerations.³¹ Apparently, in financial presentations, numerical overstatement is not an option, possibly due to the mandatory requirement for maximum accuracy and transparency. However, in the FTFP corpus some occurrences of the hyperbolic fixed collocations or pre-patterned expressions discussed by McCarthy and Carter were found, as shown in the following example:

(15) In general insurance it is clear that the reinsurance sector is **miles** away from being strong enough to support price competition amongst insurers. (FTFP/4)

Among the extreme adjectives/adverbs, there seem to be some preferred forms of hyperbole. ‘Great’ was by far the most frequent item across both corpora, probably representing the exaggerated version of the less impressive ‘good’. Although the other items in the table were not present in particularly high quantities, they do suggest an interesting trend. The speakers preferred some strong lexical items (examples 18-21), while dispreferring others, such as ‘wonderful’ or ‘marvellous’, perhaps considered too common to achieve the desired rhetorical effect. We even find the creative adjective ‘blowout’ (example 22), as well as the noun phrase ‘global rollout’ (example 23), suggesting that speakers need constantly new and more dramatic ways to emphasize good results if they want to impress and persuade their listeners. In fact, there may be a generalized escalation of positive evaluation in business settings. On this question, the TCP informant commented that highly positive evaluation is fairly standard in these presentations and therefore does not have a particularly strong effect on listeners. However, he also added that the use of such expressions is not necessarily unwarranted. For example, an ‘amazing quarter’ usually means that the company did in fact perform very well. But most analysts can gauge true meaning on the basis of the performance data in their hands, in addition to their personal experience with the company executives in question; some simply have a more upbeat speaking style and wider range of vocabulary, while others have a more sober approach. He also mentioned that sometimes it is the tone of voice that indicates that the company is in trouble regardless of what is said. This

³¹ McCarthy and Carter, “‘There’s Millions of Them’”, 169.

corroborates the importance attributed to the non-verbal features of these events already pointed out by the informant of the FTFP corpus. Also interesting in these examples is the great variety of hyperbolic adjectives/adverbs which suggests that linguistic innovation is an important strategy to keep rhetorical force at a high level and to prevent them from getting worn out from overuse.

- (16) The gains in gross margin dollars was **spectacular**. (TCP/16)
(17) I emphasize again that X has had a very **huge** impact on growth. (TCP/10)
(18) This gives **tremendous** mix leverage. (FTFP/2)
(19) [...] how have we motivated, rewarded and incentivized colleagues to deliver this **staggering** volume growth. (FTFP/2)
(20) We had a **blowout** quarter. (TCP/4)
(21) That's a remarkable start – our **fastest global rollout** ever. (FTFP/11)

Although initially only adjectives and adverbs were taken into consideration, it became apparent that hyperbole in some instances stretched across whole sequences with persuasive lexical items reinforcing each other reciprocally. In example 24, the credibility of the speaker is established by the combination of lexical items (i.e. 'genuinely', 'blessed', 'strongest') that together constitute the persuasive force of the utterance. In example 32, the hyperbolic adjectives 'unlimited' and 'huge' are further strengthened by 'powerhouse', 'success', and the boosted comparative adjectives 'ever bigger/faster' to convince listeners of the brilliant future prospects for the company.

- (22) We **genuinely** believe we are **blessed** with the UK's **strongest** set of financial services brands. (FTFP/4)
(23) The X market place is a **powerhouse**. We continue to enjoy **ever bigger, ever faster** cycles of **success**, fuelled by **unlimited** opportunity of our **huge** addressable market. (TCP/9)

This synergic effect can also be seen in examples 26 and 27 where there is a series of adjectives/adverbs ('excellent', 'top tier', 'important', 'strong and great', 'terrific', 'outstanding', 'tremendously') whose cumulative effect creates a hyperbolic qualification of the firms' performance. Another factor that could be involved here is desire on the part of speakers to pre-empt challenges from listeners. According to Pomerantz, 'extreme case formulations' are commonly found in contexts where speakers have a strong interest in legitimizing their claims and discouraging others from contradicting them.³² Earnings presentations would seem to be an ideal setting to enact this strategy. In fact, it would be difficult for listeners to challenge these hyperbolic 'clusters'.

- (24) I can sum up the year with one word: **excellent**. We achieved **top-tier** financial performance, made a number of **important** strategic changes to our company, and delivered **strong** returns. (FTFP/2)

³² Anita Pomerantz, "Extreme Case Formulations: A Way of Legitimizing Claim", *Human Studies*, 9 (1986), 219-229.

(25) X had another **great** quarter and a **great** year. Revenue up 7 and op profit up 14. Just a **terrific** fall season [...] Our consumer finance business had an **outstanding** quarter, **great** revenue growth [...] Our international mortgage business in growing **tremendously** well. (TCP/15)

In the TCP corpus this particular strategy seems to have been successful. In a previous study that investigated the question and answer sessions of the calls, it was found that analysts do not make any especially challenging comments even after hearing negative results.³³ When asked about this, the TCP informant said, “Analysts tend not to be too harsh on companies in its public forum. They may also show restraint in public if they hold a large position in the company’s stock and don’t want to fuel negative sentiment”.

Concluding remarks

Using a three-pronged methodological approach (quantitative, qualitative and ethnographic), the findings of this study suggest that persuasive strategies are indeed a prominent feature of both the face-to-face and the teleconference presentations. The corporate speakers skilfully constructed their arguments with logical connectives, using logos to appeal to the rationality of their listeners and, most importantly, to guide them towards an interpretation that emphasizes success and downplays failure. They also exploited various forms of hyperbole to emphasize the positive, and thus through ethos sought to establish and consolidate the favourable image and credibility of both the firm and the speakers. There was a wide variety of intensifying adjectives/adverbs, often taking on quite creative forms. A number of insights from both informants served to confirm the importance of well-structured and carefully planned presentations with a strongly positive orientation which had emerged from the linguistic analyses. Although the size of the two corpora precludes any broad generalizations, the findings nonetheless indicate that logical connectives and hyperbole are characterizing features of the genre itself which transcend the medium of interaction.

During the analysis of the two corpora, some differences emerged which seemed to be influenced by face-to-face vs. telephone-only mode. Further research in these areas would be useful to have a better understanding of the role of the medium of interaction in financial presentations. For example, it would be interesting to investigate the underlying reasons for the much lengthier presentations in the face-to-face medium compared to teleconferencing as discussed previously, which could be linked to the lack of jokes and digressions noted in the teleconference presentations. Other variables that would merit more study are the use of forms of address, personal pronouns and engagement strategies to involve both other members of the ‘team’ and the audience, all of which appeared to be more prominent in the face-to-face presentations. The prosodic features of financial presentations would be another worthwhile topic to develop. Prosodic analysis of relatively large

³³ Belinda Crawford Camiciottoli, “Rhetorical Strategies of Company Executives and Investment Analysts: Textual Metadiscourse in Corporate Earnings Calls”, in Vijay K. Bhatia and Maurizio Gotti, eds., *Explorations in Specialized Genres* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2006), 115-133.

samples of language typically requires a different methodological approach using highly specialized software to analyse paralinguistic features of speech. It is thus clearly beyond the purview of the present study which intended to focus exclusively on linguistic features. Moreover, for reasons of privacy, the corresponding audio files/tapes of the two corpora investigated in this study were not made available. However, some companies have recently begun to post audio files of financial presentations on their websites. If this trend continues, prosodic analysis of corpora of financial discourse could be more feasible in the future.

Cultural influences on choice of persuasive lexis would be another interesting topic to pursue. In addition to possible differences in the use of logical connectives between speakers of British vs. American English as mentioned earlier, certain hyperbolic expressions may also show cultural alignments. For example, in the FTFP corpus (British English) items such as ‘dramatic’, ‘phenomenal’ and ‘fantastic’ were found to be somewhat more prominent. On the other hand, in the TCP corpus (American English), the items ‘terrific’ and ‘excellent’ were more frequent. To shed more light on this aspect, it would be necessary to conduct a targeted investigation based on specially collected data.

In conclusion, the findings of this study are useful not only for a better understanding of the characteristics of persuasive discourse in business settings, but they can also be applied towards the development of more finely-tuned training courses for finance professionals who currently give presentations and more effective teaching methodologies and materials for finance students who are learning to do so.

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