A model of trust-repair discourse

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Abstract

This article proposes a novel theoretical framework for examining trust-repair discourse. The model identifies two fundamental discourse strategies available to the trust-breaker when trust is at stake (i) to engage with and act upon the discourses that represent a potential source of distrust – *neutralize the negative*, (ii) to communicate a trustworthy discourse identity – *emphasize the positive*. These strategies are realized in discourse through the use of dialogic engagement and evaluative/affective language, respectively. The ultimate communicative goal of the strategies is that of promoting the addressees' positive (re-)assessment of the speaker's *ability*, *integrity* and *benevolence*. The model is applied to the analysis of the CEO letter published by BP one year after the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. The analysis has the twofold purpose of demonstrating the viability of the model and determining the discourse strategies deployed by the CEO to repair trust in the company after the accident.
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1. Introduction

Trust is pervasive in social life and a basic element of both intimate and distant interpersonal relations. As social relations are subject to change, trust is a dynamic interpersonal construct; it is constantly negotiated and renegotiated through social and communicative interaction (Cook, 2001; Gillespie, 2011; Ingenhoff and Sommer, 2010; Linell and Marková, 2013; Marková and Gillespie, 2008).

Certain events or behaviors can undermine trust. When this happens, compensatory action by the trust-breaker (TB) is expected. Trust can be repaired by modifying one's behavior, but it can also be renegotiated through discourse. Discourse plays a particularly prominent role in situations where the deceived party cannot monitor the TB's behavior directly. One such case is the relation between companies and their stakeholders.

Trust is a valuable asset for business organizations (Barney and Hansen, 1994; Ingenhoff and Sommer, 2010; Pirson and Malhotra, 2011). However, some actions or events initiated by a company can damage trust between the company and its stakeholders, creating distrust and threatening its social legitimacy and survival (Poppo and Schepker, 2010). A recent and widely reported case of this kind is the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, which was provoked by the explosion and sinking of an offshore oil platform operated by the British multinational oil and gas company BP in the Gulf of Mexico on the 20th of April 2010. The accident killed eleven crewmembers and caused a major oil spill that has had profound consequences for the environment and the economy of the Gulf of Mexico. The spill triggered a wave of public distrust in BP, due to the company's responsibility in the accident and the controversial way in which it handled both the situation itself and communications about it.

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What happens when trust is broken? How is trust re-negotiated in discourse? In order to seek answers to these questions, this article proposes a novel theoretical framework for examining trust-repair discourse and applies it to the analysis of the CEO letter included in BP's 2010 annual report, published one year after the spill. The analysis is qualitative and performed through a systematic close reading and interpretation of the text. It focuses on the linguistic resources that can be directly associated with two main types of trust-repair discourse strategies, (i) engaging with and acting upon the discourses that constitute an actual or potential source of distrust – *neutralize the negative*, (ii) constructing and communicating a trustworthy discourse identity – *emphasize the positive*. The former strategy draws on the resources for dialogic engagement (Martin and White, 2005; White, 2003, 2012), involving expressions of epistemic modality, attribution and denial. The latter is mainly realized through evaluative and affective language (Bednarek, 2008; Hunston, 2011; Martin and White, 2005). The use of these resources in discourse is interpreted in light of the behavioral model of interpersonal trust described in Mayer et al. (1995). The ultimate goal of these strategies is seen as that of repairing trust by promoting the addressees' positive (re-)assessment of the TB's *ability*, *integrity* and *benevolence*.

The main purpose of this study is to improve our understanding of the discursive and pragmatic dynamics of trust, by providing the conceptual tools for systematically analyzing and explaining how trust is (re-)negotiated in discourse. In addition, it offers a novel perspective on BP's communicative response to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. While this topic has generated substantial scholarly interest (e.g. Breeze, 2012; Choi, 2012; Diers and Donohue, 2013; Harlow et al., 2011; Harlow and Harlow, 2013; Howell et al., 2014; Muralidharan et al., 2011; O'Connor, 2011; Schultz et al., 2012; Smithson and Venette, 2013; Wickman, 2013), none of the previous studies has, in fact, investigated it from the point of view of trust repair.

The article is organized as follows. Section 2 discusses previous work on trust. In section 3, our model of trust-repair discourse is described. Section 4 illustrates the model through a detailed analysis of several excerpts from BP's CEO letter and provides a concise overview of the analysis results. Finally, section 5 discusses the main findings and section 6 makes some concluding remarks.

2. Trust

This section presents the background to this study. It starts with an overview of the model of interpersonal trust developed by Mayer et al. (1995), which serves as the starting point for our model of trust-repair discourse. This is followed by a review of previous work focusing on the relationship between trust and discourse.

2.1. Mayer, Davis and Shoorman's model of trust

Being a pervasive and critical element of social relations (Luhmann, 1979; Misztal, 1996), trust has been widely investigated across a range of disciplines, yielding a number of conceptualizations and definitions. One of the most influential models of interpersonal trust is the one developed by Mayer et al. (1995). The model originally stems from the business management literature, but it has been extensively applied in a number of different areas, including marketing, accounting, psychology, sociology and communication (Schoorman et al., 2007).

Mayer et al. (1995:712) define trust as "the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party". Central to this definition is the idea that risk-taking in an inescapable aspect of trust relations. Trust necessarily involves risk-taking, as individuals may exploit their position of trust for personal gain. Therefore, when we trust someone we become vulnerable to their potential opportunistic behavior. As Mayer et al. (1995) explain, we generally trust other people under the assumption that they will behave in a way that is beneficial to us. In turn, this belief hinges on our assessment of their *trustworthiness*.

According to Mayer et al. (1995), we assess other people's trustworthiness on three main criteria: (a) *ability*, (b) *integrity* and (c) *benevolence*. Ability concerns the trustee's skills and expertise in a specific domain, i.e. how competent he or she is in handling a particular task or situation. Integrity relates to the trustee's moral and ethical values, e.g. how honest, fair and sincere he or she is. Finally, benevolence refers to the trustee's care and goodwill to the trustor, i.e. the extent to which the trustee is believed to have the trustor's interests at heart, beyond egocentric concerns. Each of these factors, as Mayer et al. (1995:717) argue, "contributes a unique perceptual perspective from which to consider the trustee, while the set provides a solid and parsimonious foundation for the empirical study of trust for another party".

Fig. 1 provides a visual representation of Mayer et al.'s (1995) model. As the diagram shows, the trustor's assessment of the trustee's trustworthiness is mediated by their propensity to trust. Accordingly, the amount of trust the trustor has in the trustee is positively correlated with both their assessment of the other party's ability, integrity and benevolence and their (dis)inclination to trust others (Mayer et al., 1995). In addition, the feedback arrow indicates that the outcomes of a relationship will affect and dynamically shape the trustor's impressions of the other party's trustworthiness and, in turn, the trust relationship itself.