Building a corporate image
An analysis of identity markers in business speeches[1]

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0. Introduction

In today's society, the importance of a company's positive image has gradually increased. Through many features, such as the company logo or advertising, companies try to build a positive corporate image. In this paper, I look at the way speakers in professional settings refer to and present the company they work for in their speeches.

First, I will discuss the theoretical background of my analyses and the setting where my data were collected. Then I will look at four selected speeches in more detail, discussing for each how and to what extent the corporate image is built. In the final part, I will draw conclusions and briefly discuss points for further research.

1. Theoretical background and method

This paper is based on research within the framework of identity and Impression Management (Fairclough, N. and Wodak, R. 1997, Schiffrin 1996 and Van Dijk 1987). In my analyses I look at a number of different elements that are drawn from these studies. To mention but one, I investigate the use of pronouns (Chilton and Schäffner (1997), Cuvelier (2000) and Lammers (2000)) such as the presence of the speaker as an I-narrator or the use of the *we* pronoun. This pronoun can have several meanings, and for this paper the 'institutional' or 'self-referring *we*' is especially interesting. Drew and Heritage (1992, p30-31) use this term for *we*-forms that '*invoke an institutional over a personal identity*'. Another possible use is 'inclusive *we*' , which often very vaguely defines a group which involves the speaker and the public (Fairclough, 2000(2), p36).

The use of modality is another interesting element to be investigated (Fairclough (2000(1)). For this paper, only elements that help to build a corporate image are taken into consideration.

2. Information about the collection of the data

My analysis is based on a corpus of twenty speeches that were recorded during four business seminars, each on a technical subject and with an expert audience. These seminars were organised by associations that bring together people with a similar background and education.

These seminars were held to enhance the professionalization of the participants, who sometimes received a certificate of attendance at the end of the day.

Each seminar consisted of several speeches by different speakers with an identical task, namely giving an informative presentation. All the speakers were Belgian and had the Flemish variety of Dutch as their native language. Roughly, half of the speakers came from government organisations, while the other half worked for a company. The speeches were recorded on videotape and were transcribed afterwards. These transcripts form the basis of my analyses.

In addition, I also had the audience fill in questionnaires on the effects of the speeches. In these enquiries I probed for a number of different elements, such as whether the speaker was perceived to be an expert, seemed credible or insecure, or was judged to be building a corporate image. In this paper, I focus on the last question, namely "whether the speaker especially wanted to sketch a positive image of his company".

The speakers were also asked to fill out two questionnaires about their own speech. The first questionnaire was about the speaker's expectations regarding his own speech and was supposed to be filled out before the speech, while the second had to be filled out afterwards and probed for what the speaker felt and thought while he was giving his speech. The questions in these speaker-enquiries mirror those in the audience-questionnaires.

In my analyses, I combine the close scrutiny of the transcripts for identity markers with the quantitative results from these questionnaires. I use this approach because I believe that, while analysing data, one has to stick close to the reality and the setting of the speeches. By combining these two diverging methods, I want to control my findings by contrasting them with the results of the questionnaires which were filled out by the audience the speeches were meant for.

3. Discussion of the persuasive layer in four speeches

3.1 What is the persuasive layer?

In these speeches, there were obvious similarities in setting and task, but even so a considerable amount of variation was found. In this paper, I focus on the persuasive elements that built the corporate image within these informative speeches. These elements form one of the persuasive layers in these speeches.

3.2 Why were these four speeches selected?

From my corpus, I selected four speeches held at two different seminars. Three presentations were held at a seminar that dealt with the problems of sediment in rivers, the fourth speech comes from a seminar about buying energy in the new, liberated market. I chose these presentations on the basis of the results of the questionnaires, in which I focused on the question to what extent the speakers wanted to improve the corporate image of the company

they work for. The four speeches differ on this point and thus, according to the audience, they exemplify different degrees of image building. Figure 1 clearly illustrates this.
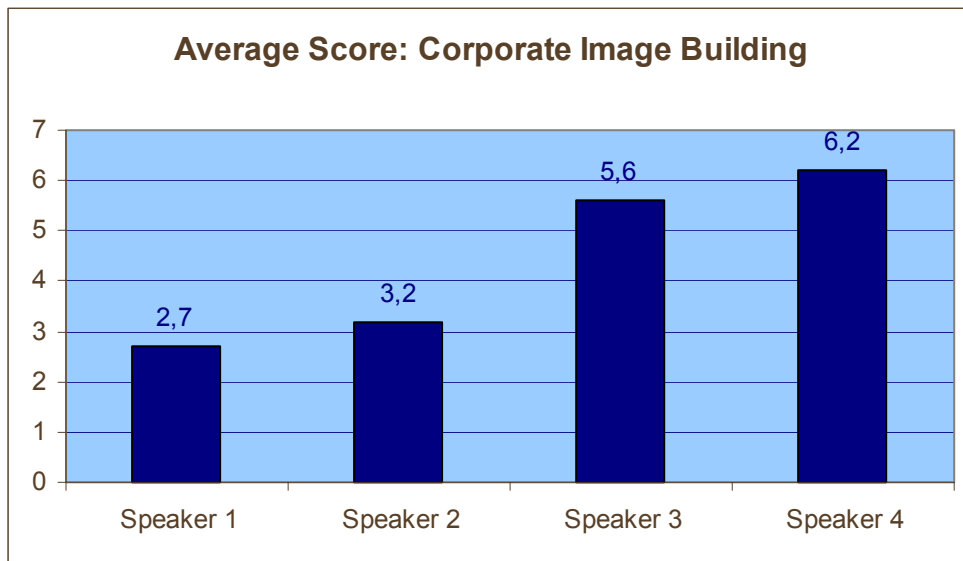
Average Score: Corporate Image Building

A bar chart showing average scores for four speakers. Speaker 1: 2,7; Speaker 2: 3,2; Speaker 3: 5,6; Speaker 4: 6,2. The vertical axis ranges from 0 to 7.

Figure 1

As the results show, speaker 1 and 2 are obviously perceived as the speakers who pay the least attention to corporate image building. Speaker 3 and 4 are clearly those who pay the most attention to corporate image.

The questionnaires provide distinctions as to the degree in which attention is paid to corporate image building in the speeches of these four speakers, but they do not explain how the audience came to these conclusions. In the following four parts, I will provide a detailed analysis of discourse, separately from these questionnaires. I will show how and to what extent corporate image is built in each speech separately.

An important remark before I start this discussion is that the analyses of the speeches were carried out before I looked at my questionnaires. For this paper, I selected the speeches on the basis of the results of my questionnaires and took the analyses of the speeches I had already prepared. So there were no preconceptions during my analyses.

3.3 Discussion of speech 1

In general, this speech has a neutral content and a neutral tone. Sometimes the speaker himself comes more to the fore, but these occasions are rare.

When looking at the content, it becomes clear that two thirds of this speech deal with legislation, which the speaker merely reports, without really going into his point of view on the matter. In this part the speech has a very neutral tone, with a lot of passives and neutral subjects like *one* or a neutralized use of *you* etc.

When the speaker refers to himself as the subject of the sentence - which happens rarely- it is usually to give certain indications on the course of the speech itself (e.g. (1)). In extremely rare cases, he adds a personal comment to what he says and even this remains fairly neutral (e.g. (2)).

    (1) Dan in een tweede stukje ga ik het dus hebben euh […]
        Then in a second part, I will talk about uh [...]

    (2) Ik maak dan altijd de vergelijking: het blad dat van de boom valt euh en dat onder de boom ligt daar kunt ge perfect compost van maken [...]
        Then I always make the comparison: the leaf that falls from the tree uh and that lies under the tree, that is excellent for compost making [...]

The use of the pronoun *we* also points in this direction. Sometimes, the speaker uses an inclusive form of we, which refers to himself and the audience. These instances are similar to the occurrence of the *I* form because they also comment on the course of the speech (e.g. (3)).

    (3) Nu, als we 'es naar die lijst kijken.
        Now, if we have a look at that list.

There are also instances of institutional *we* in this speech, which clearly refer to the speaker's company. These are very rare in the first part of the speech (the first two thirds), but they are not exceptional in the last part. There is even one instance in which the speaker clearly gives his own point of view and defends the company's stand on the issue that he is discussing (e.g. (4)). In this instance, he switches from the 1st person singular to the plural form, clearly indicating that his viewpoint matches his company's.

    (4) [...] en uiteraard kan ik of kunnen we dat knelpunt niet oplossen met de wetgeving aan te passen of met euh de procedure te vergemakkelijken
        [...] *and of course I or we can't solve that problem by adjusting the legislation or by facilitating uh the procedure*

The fact is that in general, this speech is fairly neutral. The speaker clearly does not have the intention to support his company's image, since he does not even once mention its name. The company's name is shown on the first slide of the speaker's PowerPoint presentation, but further on it is only the logo of the umbrella organization of which the company is a part that can be found on the slides. The corporate image that is weakly integrated into the final part of this presentation, is merely accidental and obviously not sufficient to change the audience's opinion on this speaker's corporate image-building.

3.4 Discussion of speech 2

The main line of this speech is that the speaker sometimes associates with his company through several means.

This second speaker gives a lot of factual information. He uses very few modal verbs, he mostly sticks to a very factual story (e.g. (5)). He occasionally expresses uncertainty however, but this is usually in a context in which he wants to check with the audience whether his opinions on the knowledge of the audience are correct (e.g. (6)) or when he gives his own opinion (e.g. (7)).

(5) [...] dat is voor één deelstaal, wordt dan in een ton overgebracht en daar gebeurt dan de menging.
[...] that is for one partial sample, (this) is transported into a barrel and there, the mixing process happens.

(6) Ik denk dat iedereen hier vrij goed van op de hoogte is, daarom zijn we hier ook, denk ik.
I think that everyone here is fairly well informed, that is why we are here, I think.

(7) Dat is eigenlijk, denk ik, dat beter in de titel had gestaan: waterbodem [...].
That is actually, I think, that would have been better in the title: bottom of the water [...].

The speaker uses the *we*-form rather often, with several different meanings. Sometimes, *we* is used with an unidentified, impersonal meaning, as a sort of *pluralis majestatis*, or as an inclusive *we*. Most of the time, the *we*-form refers to the company the speaker works for (e.g. (8)). This is a first image-building factor, namely that the speaker can be identified with his company, that he is a representative of his firm. This institutional use of *we* is very frequent in this speech, but it is inconsistent.

(8) [...] met die euh methodologie zijn we dan overgegaan naar een inventarisatie- studie, dus dan hebben we die methodologie gebruikt [...]
[...] with this uh methodology, we set up an inventory study, so we have used this methodology [...]

Although giving factual information is clearly the speaker's main objective, he also pays attention to building a positive corporate image. He does so by namedropping techniques, for instance , when he refers to his company, it is always in a positive context. In example (9) this positive context is built through his own comment, which underlines the quality of the database that is discussed (see underlined part). In example (10) the speaker repeats the content of the first part of the sentence, but changes its form, so that it is almost turned into a slogan, which shows that openness is an important value of the company.

(9) [...] dus hebben we binnen bedrijf X euh een vrij grote en <u>mag toch wel zeggen sterke</u> databank uitgewerkt [...].
[...] so we, within company X, have worked out uh a fairly large <u>and (I) dare say strong</u> database [...].

(10) Euh, zal ook via Internet beschikbaar zijn voor iedereen, alle gegevens van bedrijf X zijn voor iedereen beschikbaar, [...].
Uh, (these data) will also be available for everybody through the Internet, all data of company X are available for everyone, [...].

Compared to the *we*-form, the company's name is of course an unambiguous reference. Especially since the *we*-form has many different meanings in this speech, its exact reference is normally not immediately clear. By combining this with the name of the company in example (9), every doubt as to the exact meaning is removed. In example (10), there is no *we*-form anymore, but instead, we find a third person self-reference, which adds to the statement's objective character.

We see that in this speech the speaker identifies with his company, by using the institutional *we*-form in most cases and name-dropping techniques which have to show the values (openness and quality) of his company. These strategies occur at several points in the text, but they are not frequently woven into the story. The entire speech has mixed references (*we* versus *I*) and the "corporate speaker" is only weakly building a corporate image.

3.5 Discussion of speech 3

In this speech, a lot of attention is paid to building a positive "corporate" image. "Corporate" is not a correct word in this context, since the speaker is a local politician, more specifically an alderman of his city and he talks as a representative of his town. The speaker draws attention to the values that the town feels strongly about. The speaker strongly identifies with his city, which is shown in the analysis of the pronouns.

As an alderman of his city, the speaker comes to the seminar to talk about the way water sediment is dealt with in his town. He clearly has the intention to build a positive "corporate" image. Through what he says, it becomes clear that he wants the audience to perceive his city as one which fulfils a leading role compared to other towns and where the law is carefully respected, even though this could be harmful to the city itself (because the sediment might be polluted and would then cost a lot to be cleaned)

The picture he sketches is very idealistic, in which honesty is an important value. He shows this by stating that the city, or its representatives have to be honest (e.g. (11)). He stresses this even more by saying at the end of his story that he is a witness, a role that has as its typical feature honesty (e.g. (12)).
> (11) We moeten eerlijk zijn met onszelf en als het vervuild is [...],dan moet het maar gereinigd worden.
> *We have to be honest with ourselves and if it is polluted, [...] then is has to be cleaned.*
> (12) Euh, ik heb u niet willen overtuigen van iets, ik heb willen getuigen van de problemen waar gemeenten en steden op dit ogenblik mee zitten en kampen.
> *Uh, my aim was not to convince you of anything, I just wanted to testify as to the problems that councils and cities are faced with and have to deal with at this moment.*

When we look at the pronouns the speaker uses, it is remarkable that he almost consistently uses the institutional *we*-form to refer to the city (e.g. (13)). Sometimes he refers to the administration of the city (e.g. (14)) and sometimes he means the city itself (even geographically) (e.g. (15)).
> (13) Wij staan een beetje als stad, als gemeente onmachtig […]
> *We, as a city, as a council, are a little powerless [...]*
> (14) [...] wij hebben dan een erratum opgemaakt [...]
> *[...] we then made (a list of) errata*
> (15) [...] wij liggen aan de Schelde [...]
> *[...] we lie on the (river) Scheldt [...]*

His identification with the city goes even as far as making historical mistakes. In example (16) he still uses the pronoun *we* to refer to the historical facts of his city and he has to correct himself not to identify himself with the lockkeeper of one of the legends of his town (see underlined part).
> (16) En wij zijn dan ook overspoeld door bezetters, Romeinen, Noormannen, Engelsen, Fransen, Duitsen, alles is bij ons geweest, enkel de Fransen hebben wij een tijdje kunnen euh afhouden doordat wij euh onze sluiswachter op een nacht bij de belegering van Stad X de dijken heeft doorgestoken.

And <u>we have been overrun by occupiers</u>, the Romans, the Norsemen, the English, the French, the Germans, everything has been with us, we were only able to keep the French away uh for a while because <u>we uh our lockkeeper</u> cut the dikes one night during the siege of City X.

In some other instances, it becomes clear that what he says is not always as idealistic as he claims in the rest of his speech. It is clear that his biggest concern is in fact the cost of it all and when he answers questions after his speech, he makes a statement on the spur of the moment, an unprepared remark, which shows that he is mostly interested in getting the job done, preferably without too many problems (e.g. (17)).

(17) Maar OVAM, allee daar zijn voldoende wettelijke instanties die dat wel met kritische, met argusogen euh zullen volgen, denk ik. <u>Als dat niet zo is, des te beter voor ons.</u>
But OVAM (= a government body that is responsible for waste disposal), well, there are enough legal authorities who will watch that with critical, with watchful eyes uh, I think. <u>If that isn't the case, so much the better for us.</u>

One last remark is about the fact that the speaker is very well aware of his time-limit, which he ironically points out during his speech (e.g. (18), (19)). I will come back to this point later.

(18) […] ge moogt zo'n mannen geen micro geven, zo kort voor de middag.
[...] you shouldn't give men like that a microphone, so shortly before noon.

(19) [...] om de zaken te doen vooruitgaan en euh de voorzitter heeft intussen al sluiks naar zijn horloge gekeken en de koks kijken ook al kwaad [...]
[...] to hurry things and uh the chairman has already checked his watch furtively and the cooks already look angry as well [...]

The speaker's goal is very clear: his main objective is to show his "company" in the best possible light. He attributes positive elements to his town and strongly identifies with his city. At certain points, slips of the tongue show that the speaker is somewhat less idealistic than he appears to be from the rest of his speech.

3.6 Discussion of speech 4

This fourth speech has some very obvious image-building elements, like showing an advertisement on the PowerPoint screen or by using the figure of speech of 'paralipsis'. This speaker supports these obvious techniques by a number of elements that are less marked.

Quite remarkably, this is the one speaker who explicitly says that he is not going to promote his company (e.g. (20)). By saying this, he actually underlines that he is going to do so. This is the figure of speech that is called paralipsis.

(20) Euh, ik ga niet te veel tijd spenderen om bedrijf Y voor te stellen, het is ook niet de bedoeling dat ik hier een soort promotiecampagne voer, ik ga me daar proberen van te onthouden.
Uh, I am not going to spend too much time on presenting company Y, nor is it my intention to campaign here, I will try to abstain from that.

In the rest of this speech, it becomes clear that he is in fact campaigning. He constantly uses the *we*-form to refer to his company, which builds a strong identification between the speaker and the company he represents. In the first part of the speech, the speaker introduces his

company. The tone of this introduction is more or less neutral. Still, even there, he already introduces two key assets of his company that will be repeated a number of times throughout the rest of his speech. The first one is the fact that they have a lot of experience, which he calls "tradition". He regularly calls his company the 'traditional player' on the market (e.g. (21)). The second asset is customer-friendliness: the speaker often repeats the phrase 'we together with the customer' (e.g. (22)) and moves gradually to 'you' (audience member) together with the supplier' (e.g. (23)). His company is of course a supplier and by repeating the same idea, but changing the neutral word 'customer' into a direct appeal to the audience, the audience easily links the two together. The speaker himself also links his own company (*we*) to the audience as a customer (*you as a customer*) in one instance (e.g. (24)).

(21) [...] dat betekent toch wel wat voor een, ja, traditionele energiespeler, zoals wij toch wel kunnen genoemd worden.
[...] that means something to a, yes, a traditional energy player, as we can be called.

(22) [...] en dan probeer je samen met de klant op zoek te gaan naar een aantal optimalisaties van die tarieven [...]
[...] and then you (which refers to his company in the given context)*, together with the customer, try to search for a number of optimisations of those rates, [...]*

(23) Dit zijn zaken die u samen met uw leverancier kan doen [...]
These are things you can do together with your supplier [...]

(24) [...] dat wij proberen ons als soort tussenpersoon [...] op te stellen voor u als klant voor [...]
[...] that we try to [...] position ourselves as some sort of go-between for you as a customer [...]

This "tradition" does not have a positive sound to all customers, since the company used to occupy a monopoly position on the Belgian market, with typical features, such as high rates and no interest in advertising and customer-friendliness. The speaker is likely to be aware of this, and therefore he tries to show that his company now has the opportunity to improve, which they did not have before. So he clearly shows the difference between past and future. This becomes clear through what he says (e.g. (25)) and through the modals used: when he talks about the past, he uses a lot of modal verbs that express an obligation (e.g. (25)) or the lack of possibilities (e.g. (26)). When he talks about the present and the future, he switches to a modality of possibilities, with no obligations. Very typical examples are (27) and (28), in which the speaker very clearly stresses that there are no obligations anymore like there used to be in the past.

(25) Een activiteit die we misschien vroeger op een euh niet zo elegante manier moesten doen, was verkopen.
An activity that maybe we previously had to do uh in a not so elegant way, was selling.

(26) [...] daarin worden een aantal concrete afspraken gemaakt die vroeger niet konden gemaakt worden.
[...] a number of concrete deals are made there that couldn't be made previously.

(27) [...] als u naar zo'n all-in service stapt dan kan u de programma-verantwoordelijkheid overlaten aan - hoeft niet, kan - aan uw leverancier.
[...] if you go to such an all-in service, then you can leave the responsibility for the programme to - you don't have to, you can- to your supplier.

(28) U kan dus uw leverancier voor een stukje gaan aanspreken, gebruiken om [...]. Het is wel heel belangrijk dat u met al die vragen daar terecht kan. Moet dat? Neen, [...]
So you can partially start talking to your supplier, use him to [...]. It is very important that you can get help there with all those questions. Do you have to? No, [...]

Supporting his company is also done by regularly narrowing down the term 'suppliers' to his own company. In example (29) he says it is for reasons of simplicity that only his own company is mentioned on the projection he is showing. In example (30), he starts talking about his own company, but then generalizes smoothly to all suppliers. However, by using a conditional clause, he expresses his uncertainty about whether other suppliers will join the market.

> (29) De klant wordt omringd door <u>leveringsbedrijven - meervoud</u> - ik heb er voor de eenvoud, eenvoud, het bedrijf Y opgezet maar hier ziet u natuurlijk een.. een multitude komen aan partners, [...]
> *The customer is surrounded by <u>supplying companies - plural -</u> I have put company Y (on the slide) for simplicity, for simplicity, but here you see arriving, of course, a ... a multitude of partners, [...]*
>
> (30) Wel, dit zijn taken die wij denken als euh traditionele speler - en <u>als</u> andere leveranciers op de markt komen is dat natuurlijk ook voor hen een zeer belangrijke taak die weggelegd is voor hen - dit is een taak die, ja, leveringsbedrijven zeker en vast moeten aankunnen, dit is eigenlijk hun stiel.
> *Well, these are tasks that we think as a uh traditional player - and <u>if</u> other suppliers enter the market, then this is of course also for them a very important task that is put aside for them - this is a task that, yes, supplying companies surely have to be up to, that is their business actually.*

It is also interesting to see how the speaker stresses that there are several supplying companies. Example (29) (underlined part) is one of the instances where he says "supplying companies - plural -". He repeats exactly the same phrase three times. By obviously stating and stressing that there are several companies, he covers himself against the criticism he might get because of talking too much about his own firm. But since there is so much stress on the fact that it is plural, the speaker does more than protecting himself. He advocates the fact that there are several suppliers as if it were something new to the audience. Of course, the expert public knows that there are several new suppliers, but through the implied presupposition in this phrase, he ascribes to them the view that the speaker's firm is the only one.

In some instances, the speaker states rules about what a supplying company should or should not do. As a representative of one company among many, that is an unwarranted step. But since he sees himself and his company as the only real one and with their monopolistic background, it is logical that he feels he can judge what a supplying company ought to do (e.g. (30) cf supra, (31)). Also by using the phrase "supplying companies - plural -" he groups all the other suppliers together as some sort of leftover category about which he can make statements for all the companies together.

> (31) [...] een leverancier die daar afkerig tegenover staat, die fopt zichzelf [...]
> *[...] a supplier who is reluctant to accept this, does himself a disservice [...]*

When he reaches the end of his speech, the speaker obviously wants to make sure that the audience is fully aware of which company he represents. Therefore, the last slide of his PowerPoint presentation has an advertisement of the company he works for. He said that he only did this because of the internet address that is mentioned on the slide as well. At this point, the audience started laughing softly, which was an obvious sign that they did not believe the speaker.

A final remark on this speech is that the speaker is very well aware of the time limit. He often refers to the audience's time he is taking up (e.g. (32)). I will come back to this point in the conclusions.

(32) [...] ik weet niet of ik niet al te veel tijd gesnoept heb [...]
     [...] I don't know if I haven't used up too much time [...]

As a conclusion regarding this speech, I want to stress that the speaker uses a number of strategies to promote his company, some of which are very transparent. The paralipsis technique at the beginning of the speech and especially the advertisement slide in the end took away any doubt on this matter. In the course of his speech, the speaker uses a number of other techniques to promote his company, but these are probably less obvious to the public.

4. Conclusions

When looking at the analyses of these four speeches and comparing them, it becomes clear that certain features are strongly present in speeches 3 and 4. The two speakers both attribute certain positive values to their companies, they use the institutional *we*-form to refer to their companies in a consistent way and they pay a lot of attention to the time they are using up, even though their speeches were shorter than the given time limit. Their concern is fairly logical, since the speakers know that the audience came for factual information, not for promotional talks. They know that they are in a way *using up* the public's time, as speaker 4 put it (e.g. (33)).

Speeches 1 and 2 were characterized by the non-consistent use of the *we*-form, a lot of factual information and rare instances of image-building features, such as defending the company's viewpoint (e.g. (4)) or namedropping techniques (e.g. (9)-(10)).

These observations correlate with the results from the questionnaires, which also group speeches 1 and 2 and speeches 3 and 4 together. The results point in the same direction as the conclusions I have drawn from my analyses.

However, I would not go so far as to state that the qualitative and the quantitative results confirm one another, since the questionnaires measure the effects of the speeches, which is of course different from closely scrutinizing the text. And this immediately brings me to my next point, namely the issues for further research.

5. Issues for further research

A first point to be researched in greater depth, is the correlation between the qualitative analyses of the speeches and the quantitative results from the questionnaires. There are also certain elements in my qualitative analyses, such as the occurrence of the *we*-form, that can of course also be complemented by quantitative data.

A second point is that there seem to be certain elements that may be characterizing features of image-building or the lack of it. Of course, no general conclusions can be drawn from a study of four cases. Therefore, I think that in the course of further research on a number of other speeches it would be interesting to see, firstly, whether these elements that occur in my analyses now, are found in other speeches as well, and secondly, whether these findings can be related to the score on the corporate image-building scale.

A last, but very interesting element is the correlation between building a positive corporate image and a positive self-image, a point I could not go into now because of time limitations. An interesting question is whether the corporate image overshadows the self-image a speaker builds and, if so, to what extent.

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