Self-Praise in an Institutional Context: Analysis of a Corpus of French and U.S. Press Releases

Within the framework of politeness theory, self-praise has traditionally been described as a problematic speech act, as it violates the "modesty maxim" (Leech 1983) and disregards the interlocutor's feelings, thus posing a threat to their positive face (Brown & Levinson 1987). Although subsequent studies have demonstrated that certain contexts, such as job interviews (e.g., Stevens & Kristof 1995) or social media (e.g., Dayter 2018), impose fewer restrictions on self-praise, most research focusing on this speech act in offline contexts (Speer 2012, Maíz-Arévalo 2021, Itakura 2022) or online interactions (e.g., Dayter 2014, Matley 2018, Tobback 2019a, b, Ren & Guo 2020, Rüdiger & Dayter 2020) has found that self-praise is frequently accompanied by pragmatic strategies designed to mitigate its risky nature.

This paper shifts the focus from self-praise by individuals to the self-praise strategies employed by corporate entities, specifically French and U.S. companies, in press releases published on their corporate websites. The inherently self-promotional nature of press releases, as well as the potential risks associated with excessive promotional language in this genre, have been well documented in the literature (e.g., Pander Maat 2007, Catenaccio 2008, De Cock & Granger 2021). Similarly, Jacobs (1999) described a set of pragmatic strategies, some of which align with Brown & Levinson's (1987) negative politeness strategies, aimed at enhancing the credibility of press releases. However, to date, no study has explicitly adopted the framework of linguistic politeness to examine the realization of self-praise in press releases.

Our study is based on a corpus of 40 electronic press releases published between 2021 and 2022 on the corporate websites of two major French and two leading US retail companies. To ensure consistency, we selected only press releases focused on commercial information. Textual analysis was conducted on the full content of the press releases, except for the "boilerplate" sections.

This research aims to identify the specific self-praise strategies used in French press releases and compare them with those observed in U.S. press releases. Special attention will be given to more boastful forms of self-praise (see, e.g., Dayter 2021), by focusing on sentences containing at least one evaluative or intensifying element (e.g. adjective, adverb, noun, verb.), which contribute to enhancing the company's positive image (van Mulken & Schellens 2012).

First, it will be demonstrated that, on average, U.S. press releases contain a higher number of "self-praise markers" than their French counterparts. The analysis will then explore whether these intensified forms of self-promotion are mitigated by pragmatic strategies that render self-praise less direct and, therefore, less threatening to face. The findings will show that companies on both sides of the Atlantic employ largely similar sets of pragmatic strategies, though in different proportions. While self-praise is commonly accompanied by distancing mechanisms such as pseudo-direct speech (Jacobs 1999) and shifts in footing (i.e., attributing positive characteristics to the company via third-party statements, Speer 2012), French press releases more frequently employ implicit self-praise strategies. These include praising business partners or referencing the company's cognitive or affective stance on social issues or its own achievements. In contrast, U.S. press releases more often rely on presuppositional accommodation (Lewis 1979, De Saussure 2018) to subtly introduce self-promotional content without asserting it directly.

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