



# An Institutional Approach to the Critical Analysis of Sustainability Discourse: Advocating for Work with Small Organizations and Comparable Corpora.

Enhancing Sustainability:  
Bridging Corporate Practices with Academic and Popular Discourse.  
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“SKY KITCHENS IS  
COMMITTED TO  
THE ENVIRONMENT

PACKETS ARE FREE  
HELP YOURSELF

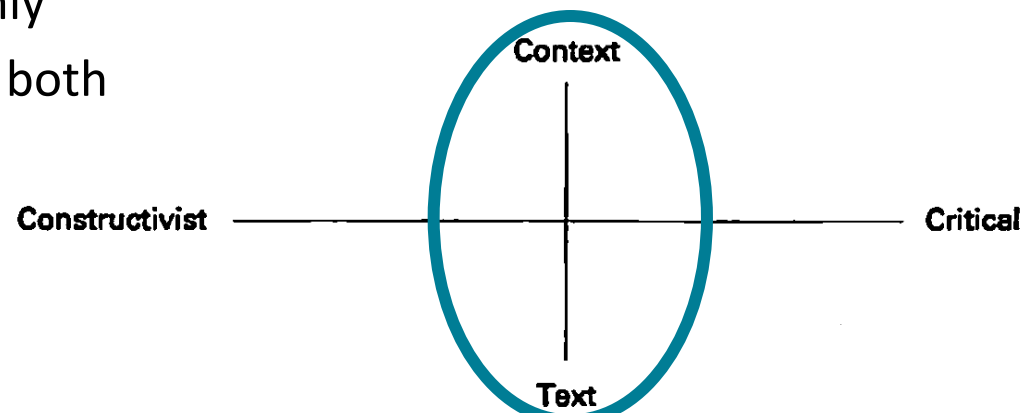
SOY SAUCE  
WASABI – GINGER”



# CSR Discourse Analysis

CSR / Sustainability communication:

- Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)
  - Fairclough's (1992) TODA model
    - Textual dimension, discursive dimension, social practice
  - In opposition with Phillips and Hardy's (2002) point of view
    - Focus on one dimension only
    - Impossible to specialize on both



Different approaches to Discourse Analysis

Adapted from Phillips and Ravasi (1998, in Phillips and Hardy, 2002:20)

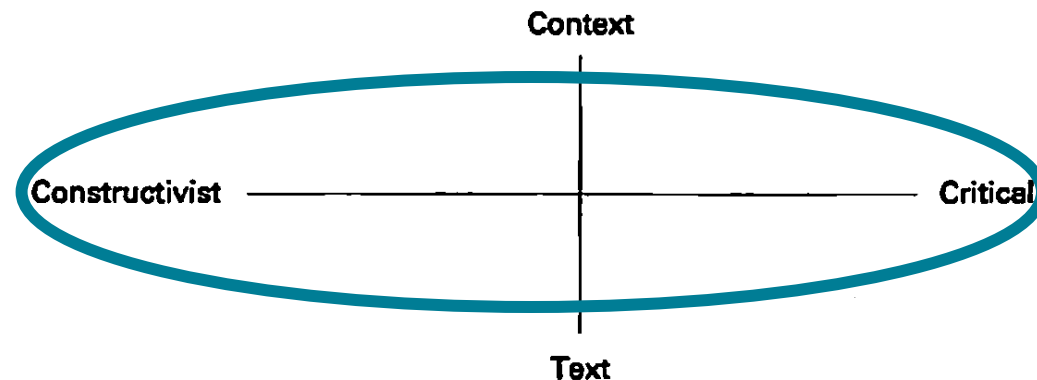
# CSR Discourse Analysis

## CSR / Sustainability communication:

- Institutional theory
  - « Why do organizations tend to become similar? » (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2017)
  - Discursive institutionalism (Schmidt, 2010; Peters, 2019)
    - Institutions as abstract structures
    - Ideas, beliefs, understandings... (Peters, 2019)

# Power

- Institutions only exist « to the extent that they are powerful » (Lawrence, 2008:170)
- Power = focal point of CDA
  - Fairclough (1992:12) : critical approaches show *“how discourse is shaped by relations of power and ideologies, and the constructive effects discourse has upon social identities, social relations and systems of knowledge and belief, neither of which is normally apparent to discourse participants.”*
  - Non-critical approaches do not question how representations come to be (Fairclough, 2010:45ff).



Different approaches to Discourse Analysis

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# CDA

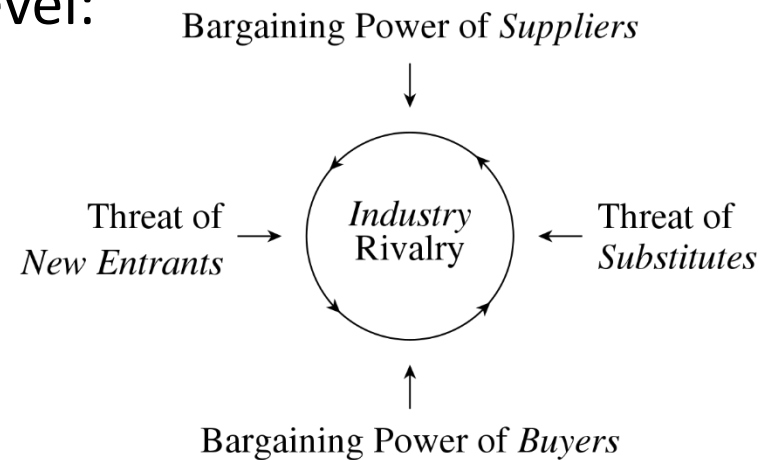
- Relevance of CDA for CSR / sustainability analysis
  - Organizations need legitimacy to operate (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2017)
  - CSR / sustainability issues carry a lot of expectations from the civil society (Pesqueux, 2009)
    - Approval of civil society = essential
  - Discrepancy talks / action = decoupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977)
    - Decoupling in CSR / sustainability = greenwashing (Pedersen & Andersen, 2023)

# Advocating for SMEs

- SMEs absent from the literature on CSR / sustainability discourse analysis (?)
  - Focus on multinational / oil & gas companies (e.g. Fuoli, 2012; Jaworska & Nanda, 2018)
  - SMEs by far more numerous than MNC
    - Communication expected to be less « professional », more « authentic »
    - Less scrutiny from the public = less constraints
- Less power than MNC
  - Not powerless
  - « Ecology of power »

# An « ecology of power » (?)

- Notion borrowed from Hardy & Maguire (« ecology of risk », 2020)
  - Power as an ecosystem
    - E.g. Porter's five forces (Porter, 1989)
    - MNC hold a lot of power
    - Shell instrumental in popularising the Triple Bottom Line (Livesey, 2002)
    - SMEs hold power at a collective level:
      - Recurrence of ideas, representations:
        - Testimony to their diffusion
        - Acceptance in the population (taken for granted)



Porter's five forces (Wikipedia)

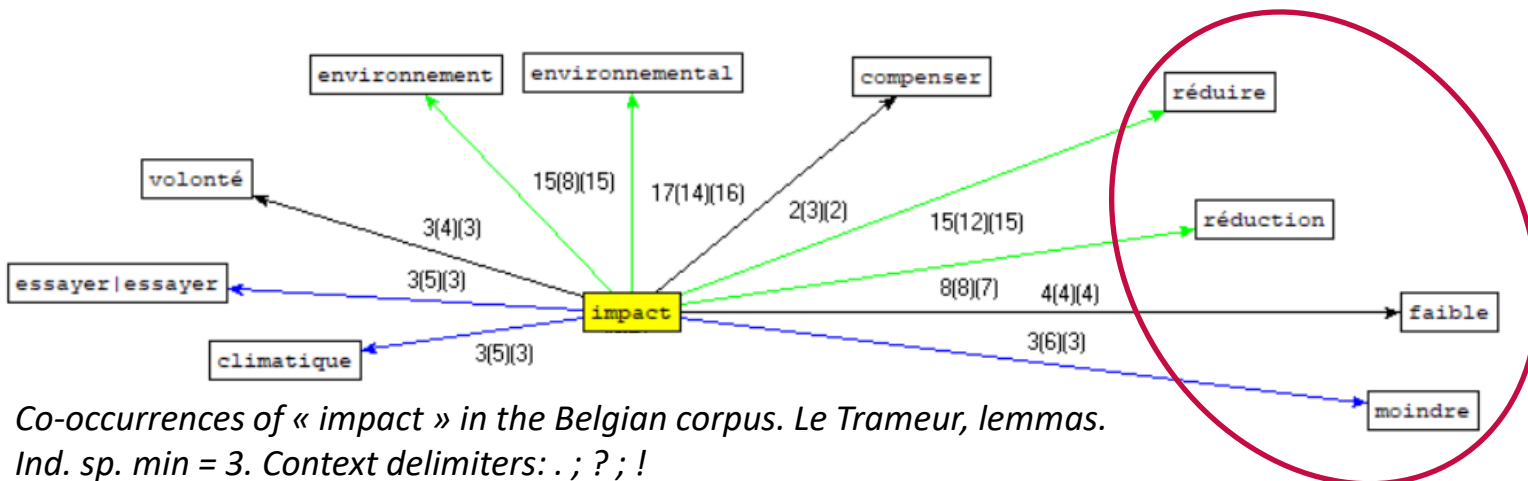


# Advocating for comparable corpora

- Look into recurrence
  - Extent of the spread of a concept?
    - E.g. ideas / understandings connected to sustainability / CSR
    - Set of texts representative of the population
  - Comparable corpora:
    - What better proof of institutionnalisation than discourses, ideas, beliefs... traveling across countries and languages?
- Corpus: 5 different countries
  - (French-speaking) Belgium, Denmark, France, Norway, Sweden

# Results

- Recurring syntactic-lexical structures
  - Widely discussed in discourse analysis
    - Salem (1987) ; Krieg-Planque (2009); Née *et al.* (2016)...
  - The most widespread (all 5 corpora): « environmental impact »
    - Connected to notion of « limiting » or « reducing » said impact
      - Framing (control)
      - « vi skall bedriva verksamheten [...] så att [...] miljöpåverkan minskas » (SW-3)  
*'we shall do business in such a way that our environmental impact is reduced'*



# Results

- Myths
  - “*solutions to widely perceived problems of organizing*” (Boxenbaum and Jonsson, 2017)
    - Emergence and legitimation of standards / certifications (e.g. ISO 14000 series) as myths
      - Undisputable solutions to challenges:
        - “ISO 14001 er din garanti for grøn produktion [...]” (DK-6)
        - ‘ISO 14001 is your guarantee for a green production process’
    - Predicted importance of scientific/technical discourses in the future in CSR (Livesey, 2002)
      - Become “dominant discourses” (“*a clearly defined, convergent body of knowledge through the way in which texts and practices reinforce each other*” (Hardy, 2022:12))
      - Legitimacy becomes more important than efficiency (Meyer and Rowan, 1977)
      - Strengthens the myths further

# Results

- Framing
  - Central in discursive institutionalism (Peters, 2019)
  - A fuzzy concept (Stibbe, 2015)
  - Widespread in discourse analysis (Catenaccio, Garzone & Reisigl (eds.), 2023)
- Correlation of extra- and intratextual modes of framing (MacLachlan & Reid, 1994) is statistically significant at the sentence level:
  - Confirmed for the two French-speaking corpora (Dalodiere, forthcoming)
  - Confirmation underway for the Scandinavian corpora (Dalodiere, 2023)
    - « elle contribue ainsi au développement [...] de filières de recyclage efficaces et respectueuses de l'environnement. » (FR-15)  
*'thus, it contributes to developing [...] efficient and environmentally-friendly recycling processes'*

# Results

- Framing

- « Sky Kitchen is committed to the environment. Packets are free. Help yourself »
- “Committed to the environment” (and variations) is a recurring syntagm in the French-speaking corpora:
  - « [COMPANY] s'engage pour l'environnement » (FR-42)  
'[COMPANY] is committed to the environment'
  - « notre engagement pour la planète » (BE-56)  
'our commitment to the planet'



- An obvious framing strategy with unclear intentions:
  - What's the intended relationship between the free packets and the commitment to the environment?
  - « Any argument is better than no argument » ?

# Results

- Societal communication
  - 2 pillars out of the 3 in the corpora (environment, society)
  - Fewer texts whose dimension is at least partially societal:

	<b>BE</b>	<b>DK</b>	<b>FR</b>	<b>NO</b>	<b>SV</b>
<b>Nr. of texts</b>	62	58	53	58	56
<b>At least partially envtl</b>	51	42	47	47	46
<b>At least partially sctl</b>	22	18	17	21	18

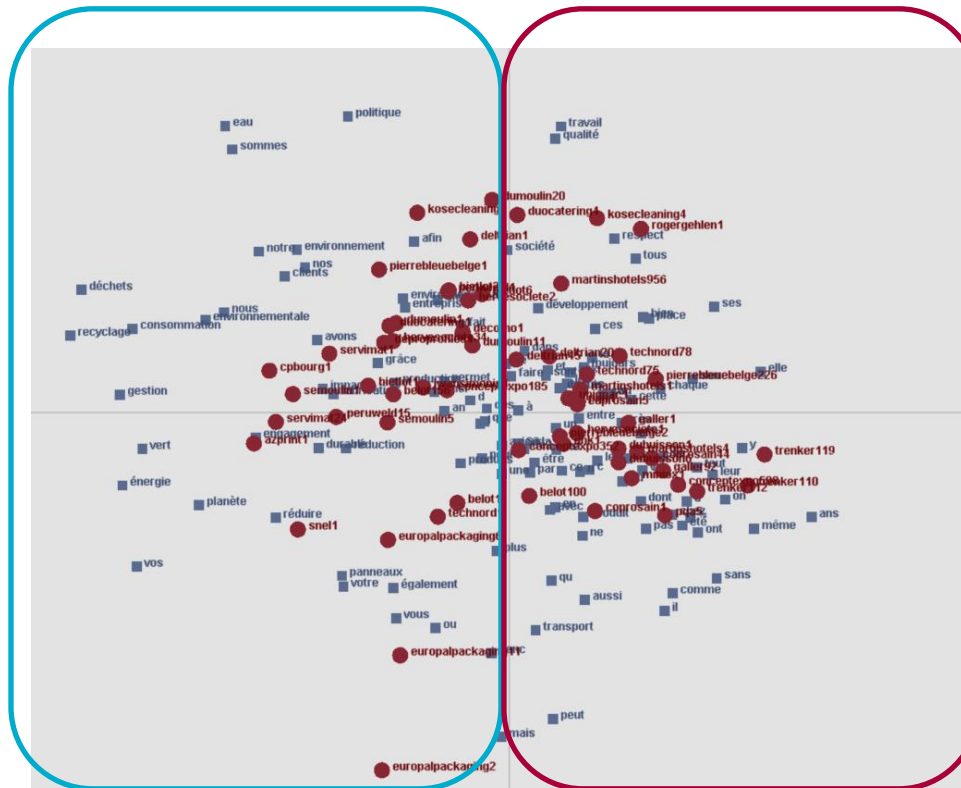
- No community of shared lexical constructions

# Results

- Societal communication
  - No community of shared lexical construction

Left side :  
Majority of texts  
whose focus is at  
least partially  
environmental (31  
out of 51)

Strong thematic  
markers  
(environmental):  
« green »  
« environment »  
« recycling »  
...



Right side :  
All texts whose focus is  
entirely societal (10)  
Half of texts whose  
focus is partially  
societal (6 out of 12)  
  
No thematic markers  
(societal)

Factor analysis. TextObserver, Belgian corpora (neutr.).  
Following forms were excluded from the calculation : pierre,  
bleue, belge.  
Min frequency = 20. 1st axis = 7,7%, 2d axis = 6,8%.

# Results

- Societal communication
  - No recurring objects of discourse in societal communication?
    - Environmental communication relies on strong lexis and syntagms
      - « Environmental impact »; « environmentally-friendly », « protect the planet »...
    - General themes seem to be recurrent in societal communication, albeit at to a small extent only:
      - Children, cancer...
- SMEs look differently at environmental and societal issues



# Conclusion

- Results consistent with an « ecology of power »
  - Companies hold power (framing strategies)
  - Companies endure power (submit to organizational myths)
  - Diffusion of concepts, représentations, stances...
- Societal discourse neglected?
  - What understanding do SMEs have of CSR / sustainability?
  - Compliance with the public's requirement first and foremost?
  - Difficulty to properly address environmental challenges?
- SMEs need to be considered at national and transnational level to account for circulation and reappropriation of key concepts

Thank you for your attention!

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