Transparency and Vague Language: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Rail Sector

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Abstract

The present case study aims to investigate how Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) are discursively constructed not only in response to the pandemic, which has led to a crisis in the job sector, but also in the wake of recent events and movements, such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo. In particular, the aim of this study is to explore changes in the use of vague language in the communication of DEI in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) reports of rail companies operating in Europe, North America, and Asia from the pre-pandemic to the post-pandemic context.

In parallel to Malavasi's study (this issue), this paper takes into account the same micro-diachronic corpus of CSR reports of rail companies operating in Germany, North America, and Japan, namely Deutsche Bahn, Amtrak, and West Japan Rail Company. The corpus will be analysed under the lens of vague language from 2018 (pre-Covid) to 2022 (post-Covid) and will examine any diachronic changes that may have occurred in the communication of DEI issues across the timespan under consideration.

Results shed light on both changes and new paths that transportation companies have adopted in terms of transparent communication as well as the self-presentation of their image according to stakeholders, potential employees and the public in general.

Keywords: Vague language, Micro-diachronicity, DEI, CSR communication, Rail sector

1. Introduction

The present study aims to explore how discourse around issues of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) has changed and evolved in corporate communication over the years. Specifically, in parallel to Malavasi's study (this volume), this paper aims to address the use

of vague language surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion in corporate social responsibility reports issued by rail companies operating in Asia, Europe, and USA.

1.1 Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: An Introduction

The growing interest in issues of DEI has led to changes in the social and job landscape: for instance, from 2018 to 2023 positions dedicated to such aspects have quadruplicated in the US (Cunningham, 2024). This might be linked in some way to the murder of George Floyd, which caused much debate both in the US and in Europe as the event certainly raised awareness on issues of equality and diversity. Defining the DEI acronym is not an easy task. First, when it comes to 'diversity', definitions are not always unanimous. Nevertheless, there seems to be some general consent on the fact that diversity is concerned with dyads and groups: in other words, where there appears to be some difference. Diversity has been classified as objective and subjective, with the latter being something visible and that people can see, and the former with how people perceive themselves and how they are perceived from the outside (Kochan et al., 2003; Roberson, 2006; Mor Barak, 2015; Cunningham, 2024). Secondly, 'equity' is related to what is equitable and fair treatment in the workplace, differing from equality, the underlying principle of which involves providing the same treatment to everyone. Finally, 'inclusion' is the need of people to feel valued and appreciated, to build in them a sense of belonging and connectedness. According to Cunningham, there are different factors affecting DEI, namely three levels: the macro-, the meso-, and the micro-level. Respectively, the first level has to do with societal norms and values, the political environment, the meso-level concerns organisational policies and the culture of business, while the micro-level factors are the previous experiences, the demographics and behavior of an individual. As we can see, policies on DEI might vary according to different factors, such as for instance, changing demographics, with migration patterns affecting the population, as well as variable legal mandates, or social pressure. When it comes to business, for instance, social pressure appears in many forms such as the need for accountability and transparency, meaning that stakeholders and the general public might be interested in knowing whether and how a company is inclusive (Cunningham, 2024, p. 13).

1.2 DEI and CSR Communication

Over the years companies have started to pay much more attention to aspects of diversity, equality, equity, and inclusion in the workplace (Eldelman et al., 2001; Litvin, 1997; Page, 2007; Perriton, 2009; Zanoni & Janssen, 2007). More specifically, interest in diversity and diversity management seems to coincide with the publication of the *Workforce 2000* report in 1987 by Johnston and Packer which predicted a change in organizations' hiring strategies in the US due to a shift in demographics (Oswick & Noon, 2014, p. 24). Through a systematic review of the literature and a biometric analysis of publications, Oswick and Noon (2014) explored trends in diversity, equity, and inclusion over a timespan of 40 years (1970-2010). Of course, results showed an increase in the number of publications referring to all subcategories, with a sharp preference for issues diversity. However, some argue that diversity and inclusion are codependent, as by managing diversity one has also to find ways of inclusion.

Many studies have been conducted on companies' management of diversity and inclusion and mostly from a US-centric perspective, which has pointed out the need of a non-US point of view (Klarsfeld, 2009; Jonsen et al., 2011; Ravazzani, et al., 2021). However, while studies have focused on the strategies used by companies to manage diversity and inclusion, the field of how companies discursively target such issues still needs to be addressed (Singh & Point, 2006). The construction of diversity has been explored on companies' websites within a content-analysis framework and in relation to diversity management models (Uysal, 2013), under the lens of appraisal (Turnbull, 2023), and from more comparative and thematic cross-cultural perspectives (Point & Singh, 2003; Jonsen et al., 2011; Turnbull 2023). In the particular field of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) reports, Malavasi (2023a; 2023b) explores the linguistic resources adopted in CSR reports to disclose issues of transparency of Banking, Pharmaceutical, and Personal & Household Products and Services' companies operating in the USA, UK, and Japan. Zaupa (2024) looks at the use of the words *equity* and *equality* in the Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) reports of companies belonging to the car sharing and car renting sector, showing how *equity* implies a pragmatic and policy-oriented approach, while *equality* holds a more idealistic connation. In their findings, authors (Malavasi, 2023a, 2023b; Zaupa, 2024) highlight the presence of vague language and the need to further explore how this is constructed within issues of transparency and corporate discourse.

The use of vague language has been widely explored in specialized communication, especially in the field of legal discourse (Channell, 1994; Anesa, 2007; Engberg & Arinas Pellón, 2011; Arinas Pellón, 2012; Scotto di Carlo, 2015; Li, 2019) and more recently in that of business communication (Handford, 2010; McCarthy, 2020; Jin, 2022). Research has also focused on the function and classification of vague language, looking at its strategic use in either emphasizing positive effects or hindering private information and details (Choi & Triantis, 2010).

Set against this background, the aim of this study is to explore the use of vagueness in the communication of diversity, equity, and inclusion in a sector where transparency needs to be carefully addressed, namely that of transport. Specifically, this study will focus on how vague language is used to address issues of DEI in specific sections of CSR reports of rail companies operating in Asia, Europe, and the USA. The paper will follow with a description of the Materials and Methods used to explore the aims of this study (Section 2), which will then lead to an overview of the quantitative results (Section 3.1) and to the qualitative results (3.2). The paper will then close with Discussions and Conclusions (Section 4).

2. Materials and Methods

In order to explore the use and changes of vague language in corporate communication, I have carried out a micro-diachronic analysis focusing on rail companies' CSR reports issued in 2018 and 2022. This allowed me to trace any trends and changes that might have occurred after the Covid-19 pandemic or after specific mediatic cases (e.g., George Floyd). More to the point, companies were selected according to the Global Revenue List of rail companies adopting the most sustainable measures (Note 1). As visible from Table 1 below, this paper

focuses on three different rail companies operating respectively in Germany, Japan, and United States, namely Deutsche Bahn (DB), West Japan Rail Company (JR-West), and Amtrak (AM). Reports were selected for each year under analysis (i.e., 2018 and 2022) according to their structure: that means that even with a different denomination (e.g., Integrated Report), they had to include a section dedicated to aspects of social responsibility, such as community, people, planet, environment, and governance. For a more qualitative approach and in order to focus on aspects of DEI, only the Social and People's sections were then extracted and taken into account. Table 1 shows in detail the reports, sections, and number of tokens for each company and year under analysis.

Table 1. Micro-diachronic corpus data

Continent	Country	Rail Company	Type of report: 2018	Social section (no. tokens)	Type of report: 2022	Social section (no. tokens)
Asia	Japan	West Japan Railway company	Annual Report	546	Integrated Report	3,376
Europe	Germany	Deutsche Bahn	Integrated Report	3,305	Integrated Report	9,177
North America	USA	Amtrak	Sustainability Report	0	Sustainability Report	2,441

Given the micro-diachronic approach, the corpus was explored taking into account the two sub-corpora: namely reports issued in 2018 and those published in 2022. These were analysed under the lens of vague language, following Lin (2019) and Jin's (2022) semantic categories of vagueness, which are all related to elements of approximate boosters ('degree'), quantity, time, and downtoners ('softening stance-taking'). The list below shows the lexical items belonging to each semantic category:

'**degree**': *acceptable, adequate, applicable, appropriate, considerable, effective, good, necessary, reasonable, relevant, significant, substantial, sufficient, suitable*

'**quantity**': *a group of, (a) few a list of, a mass of, a number of, a period of, a proportion of, a range of, a series of, a set of, a volume of, a weight of, about, almost, an amount of, approximately, around, many, or less, or more, roughly, several, some*

'**time**': *as soon as, at any time, (at/by) the end of, at the latest, from time to time, no(t) later than, occasionally, often, sometimes*

'**softening stance-taking**': *assume, estimate, may, might, probably, possible, think, suggest*

In order to carry out a micro-diachronic analysis, for each of the two years under analysis, texts were computed on Antconc 3.5.8 Software. First, for each of the semantic categories,

lexical items were double-checked from the wordlist of each sub-corpus (2018 and 2022) and, whenever it was necessary, further items have been added to the lists. Then, the surrounding context of the aforementioned lexical items was explored through a concordance analysis (Sinclair, 2004).

3. Results

In this section, I will first start by providing the reader with a quantitative overview of the data (3.1) and secondly with a more qualitative one (3.2).

3.1 Quantitative Overview

As visible from Table 1 (see Methods and Materials), companies seem to dedicate more space to people, diversity and inclusion over the years. For instance, in 2022 Amtrak added a 2,441-word section devoted to social issues – which was not present in 2018. Over time, West Japan Railway company has given six times more space to the People's section while Deutsche Bahn has triplicated its space in respect to the past. Moving on to the use of vague lexical items, the ones belonging to quantity are certainly the most frequent (Table 2), followed by degree (Table 3), then stance-taking (Table 4), and time (Table 5).

Table 2 below shows the lexical items belonging to the semantic field of quantity both with their raw frequencies and normalized frequencies per 10,000 (pttw) words.

Table 2. Raw frequencies (pttw) of quantity lexical items

	2018			2022		
	Raw frequency (pttw)			Raw frequency (pttw)		
Lexical item	DB	JR-West	Amtrak	DB	JR-West	Amtrak
a number of	-	-	-	1 (1.08)	1 (2.96)	-
a proportion of	1 (3.02)	-	-	-	-	-
a range of	-	-	-	1 (1.08)	-	-
a set of	-	-	-	1 (1.08)	-	-
about	20 (60.49)	-	-	14 (15.22)	2 (5.92)	-
almost	1 (3.02)	-	-	4 (4.35)	-	-
approximately	-	-	-	1 (1.08)	-	-
around	1 (3.02)	-	-	11 (11.96)	-	2 (8.19)
at least	-	-	-	1(1.08)	-	1 (4.09)
many	1 (3.02)	-	-	6 (6.52)	1 (2.96)	1 (4.09)
more	17 (51.42)	1 (18.31)	-	20 (21.75)	1 (2.96)	11 (45.06)

much	1 (3.02)	-	-	1 (1.08)	-	-
numerous	-	-	-	1 (1.08)	1 (2.96)	-
several	1 (3.02)	-	-	3 (3.26)	-	-
some	-	-	-	1 (1.08)	2 (5.92)	1 (4.09)
some of	-	-	-	1(1.08)	-	-
TOTAL	43 (130.06)	1 (18.31)	0	66 (71.78)	8 (23.7)	17 (69.64)

As visible from Table 2, the general raw frequencies of lexical items related to quantity are quite limited; however, with normalized occurrences it is possible to get a clearer picture of the situation. DB shows the highest instances of vague items related to quantity over time, in line with the fact that it has the largest section dedicated to People (See Table 1). However, while being halved over the years (from 130.06 pttw to 71.78 pttw), in 2022 there seems to be more internal variation in terms of which items have been used. As for JR-West, there is only one instance in 2018 and in a very limited section (546 tokens – See Table 1), while there seems to be a higher use in 2022. Amtrak instead, shows few instances (23.7 pttw) of quantity lexical items in 2022.

Table 3 below shows in detail both the raw and relative frequency (pttw) of each item belonging to semantic category of degree. As we can see over the years these have increased both in terms of general use and of internal variation.

Table 3. Raw frequencies (pttw) of degree lexical items

	2018			2022		
Lexical item	DB	JR-West	Amtrak	DB	JR-West	Amtrak
additional	-	-	-	-	-	1 (4.09)
agile	4 (12.09)	-	-	3 (3.26)	-	-
appropriate	-	1 (18.31)	-	2 (2.17)	-	-
concrete	-	-	-	2 (2.17)	-	-
effective	1 (3.02)	-	-	2 (2.17)	-	-
efficient	-	-	-	2 (2.17)	-	-
good	-	-	-	1 (1.08)	-	-
high	5 (15.12)	-	-	13 (14.13)	1 (2.96)	1 (4.09)

necessary	-	1 (18.31)	-	4 (4.35)	2 (5.92)	-
relevant	-	-		4 (4.35)	1 (2.96)	1 (4.09)
significant	2 (6.04)	-	-	1 (1.08)	2 (5.92)	-
specific	-	-		8 (8.70)	4 (11.85)	1 (4.09)
suitable	1 (3.02)	-	-	1 (1.08)	-	-
TOTAL	13 (39.32)	2 (36.63)	0	42 (45.68)	10 (29.62)	4 (16.38)

Table 4 and Table 5 show both the raw and normalized frequency (pttw) of respectively softening-stance taking and time lexical items present in the two sub-corpora over time. As visible from the two tables, in both cases these lexical items are not very frequent. In general, we can see that there is a sort of increase in the use of softening stance-taking lexical items in the specific sections of DB and Amtrak, while these are very rare in the JR-West company. With regards to lexical items related to time (Table 5), among Jin's (2022) list, only *at/by the end of* and *at any time* are present and in limited cases, with a decrease in DB over the years, no occurrences in JR-West, and two in Amtrak in 2022.

Table 4. Raw frequency (pttw) of softening stance-taking lexical items

	2018			2022		
Lexical item	DB	JR-West	Amtrak	DB	JR-West	Amtrak
estimate	-	-	-	-	-	1 (4.09)
may	-	-	-	1 (1.08)	1 (1.96)	-
possible	-	1 (18.31)	-	5 (5.43)	-	-
TOTAL	0	1 (18.31)	0	6 (6.52)	1 (1.96)	1 (4.09)

Table 5. Raw frequency (pttw) of time lexical items

	2018			2022		
Lexical item	DB	JR-West	Amtrak	DB	JR-West	Amtrak
Any time	1 (3.02)	-	-	3 (3.26)	-	1 (4.09)
at/ by the end of	7 (21.17)	-	-	4 (4.35)	-	1 (4.09)
TOTAL	8 (24.2)	0	0	7 (7.61)	0	2 (8.19)

As mentioned in the Materials and Methods section this study is qualitative in focus. However, it might still be interesting to point that as the length of the sections dedicated to People has increased over the years, the number of vague lexical items has also grown and with more internal variation in their use. This might be probably due to a wider range of activities and initiatives taken up by the companies to tackle issues of inclusion, diversity and belonging, which, however, lack in detail.

3.2 Qualitative Analysis

- *Quantity*

When looking at the use of the items of quantity (Table 2) in more detail we can see that, with regards to 2018, items are used mostly in two cases. The first issue occurs when reporting imprecise data: *about, almost* and *around* are mostly followed by numbers that give an approximate idea of the company's changes or numbers (e.g., by hiring *about* 20,000 new employees per year over the coming years…). *Many* is also used as substitute for reporting numbers, whether in positive or negative situations (e.g., *many employees expect more guidance* from their management), probably as a strategy to protect the company's image while trying to appear transparent and honest with their customers. In the second case, quantity items are used to report a potential method or approach that the company intends to use to tackle a hypothetical problem, without however providing factual data:

(1) A solution for this has been developed within the My Performance Management project that **makes goals more action-oriented**, puts the focus squarely upon feedback and ensures that performance is always on the agenda. [DB_2018]

This becomes especially evident when addressing issues of diversity, or when reporting future initiatives regarding gender inclusion (See Example 2 and 3). In this case, *more*, followed by a noun or an adjective, becomes a subterfuge to cover the actual number of women and men working in the company. In both of these cases, the company expresses its intention and commitment to change. Hence, the quantity items seem to be used as a temporary solution for companies to present themselves as positive and pro-active. In the only case of JR-West, *more* is used with the same function (Example 4), namely that of reporting potential benefits deriving from the company's goals (which are still to be reached).

(2) In April 2018, **about 500 female** DB executives met at the second DB Female Managers Lounge on the subject "**More women at the top** - how we can help promote change." This initiative aims to promote networking and increase the visibility of female executives. [DB_2018]

(3) We believe that diversity is about **more than just** gender, generation, ethnic origin, religion, sexual orientation and physical or mental abilities. It's also a question of different personalities, life plans, skills and professional experience. In particular, we are committed to **increasing the proportion of women** in the workforce and encouraging intergenerational cooperation. [DB_2018]

(4) The goal of these initiatives is to create a cycle where facilitating employee growth

leads to business growth, and business growth leads to **more employees**. [JR_2018]

In 2022 *more* is the most frequent quantifier in Amtrak and DB. Here, again it functions as a strategic item and as an intensifier to report social and inclusion initiatives. In Example 5 and 6 for instance, we notice that Amtrak uses *more* as an elusive booster which does not really add detail on how they intend to tackle aspects of inclusion. In Example 6, this is further corroborated by the use of the present continuous tense, which highlights the ongoing (and unfinished) process. The use of the present continuous is also detectable in Example 7, which further emphasizes the idea of commitment that seems to go hand in hand with vagueness and lack of detail. Futurity is often intertwined with elements of vague language and, at the same time, preciseness, creating a sort of tension between opacity and transparency (Bondi & Sezzi, 2024).

(5) FY20, **we adopted a more collaborative approach, providing additional support** to agreement employees and finding new ways to work together to achieve goals. For example, we have revamped our discipline policy to **take a more educational, rather than punitive**, **approach**. [AM_2022]

(6) That's why we are investing in providing ongoing training opportunities **and creating a more inclusive environment** for all of our employees. [AM_2022]

(7) With the Smart HR transformation project, we are standardizing and simplifying our HR processes and exploiting the potential of digitalization, **ensuring more efficiency and effectiveness**, in keeping with Strong Rail. [DB_2022]

Other quantitative lexical items, such as *a number of, about, almost*, *numerous,* are again probably used to avoid reporting the actual number and data and, once more, to report an indefinite number initiatives and actions (e.g. we offer *numerous* courses; we formulated […] *drawing on a number* of international norms).

Overall, the function of vague items related to quantity has not changed over time. However, both Amtrak and Deutsche Bahn seem to adopt such items as an avoidance strategy that fail to provide further details on their initiatives.

- *Degree*

When looking closely at the few instances of degree lexical items in 2018, we notice that they are used in a strategic way to provide elusive details on methods and processes on the initiatives that the companies intend to adopt. Again, they are strongly related and linked to commitment and to future initiatives. Example 8 and 9 below show the idea of how degree expresses potentiality and boosts their strategy without providing any actual detail.

(8) The shift to agility and self-organization does not follow a generic model. It should always start from a **strategic challenge** or a problem that has been identified, for which **suitable answers** are sought from the agile method set. [DB_2018]

(9) Going forward, the Group will develop **concrete initiatives** toward achieving the measures formulated in its Health Management Plan Vision for the Future. [JR_2018]

In 2022 there is, as already said, more internal variation of these items, as well as a sharp increase in their use. These are adopted to describe potential needs, solutions to problems, or uncertain and hypothetical situations of the company (e.g., we need/we depend on *high/relevant/effective* activities/areas/staff planning/changes). Again, such items are embedded in the description of future-oriented plans, without providing much detail on how they intend to tackle the potential problem (10). In Example 11, future-oriented plans are further corroborated, once more, through the progressive form of the verb which is softened by items of vagueness.

(10) In order to ensure that DB Group is robustly positioned, **we need effective and efficient staff planning and management throughout the entire HR value chain, from differentiated planning to recruitment,** qualification and functional training, right through to considering actual performance effectiveness. [DB_2022]

(11) **To ensure sustained operation** of our railway services, **we are undertaking initiatives** based on our educational plan **so that we can train employees with the necessary level** of technical skills in an ongoing manner. [JR_2022]

Therefore, it seems that degree items soften future plans and goals, creating once more a sort of tension between opacity and transparency: such items of vagueness boost the company's image while reassuring readers and stakeholders and ensuring them positive outcomes of potential situations. Once more, Example 12 and 13 below show how companies adopt such items (e.g., *good, new, robust, significant*) to address in a more explicit way future plans and changes. These positive items, again, strategically boost the image of the company without providing detail on how they intend to tackle their plans.

(12) Part of the Group initiative "People. Make. The Future." involves systematic discussion of innovations and visions of the work of the future **with the goal of addressing important strategic issues in good time**, **exchanging knowledge and testing new ideas.** [DB_2022]

(13) Recognizing the need to hire human resources who understand and empathize with the JR-West Group's mission as an infrastructure company, **who can address change** and pursue reforms in **a robust manner**, **and provide significant value** to society going forward, the Group strives to hire a diverse range of individuals, including through mid-career hires and hires of foreign employees. [JR_2022]

Vague language is also used to report results of the companies' internal management and the description(s) of inclusion plans (Examples 14 and 15), with degree items such as *different, necessary, new, and efficient* that do not add much in terms of details of the process that the company intends to adopt while still functioning as self-promotional tools to boost their image.

(14) The DB role model combines specifications for **different career paths** (such as management, expert and project careers), duties and responsibilities and the **necessary experience, expertise and attitude** from an internal standpoint. [DB_2022]

(15) **New approaches and efficient processes** for employee retention and development **are crucial to the assumption** of greater responsibility, cooperation and performance at DB Group. [DB_2022]

Similarly, such items are also used to report internal results and actions achieved by the company. For instance, items like *significant* and *appropriate* do not really reveal details on how revisions and improvements have been made, but might certainly reassure the reader and potential customer, building trust with them while enhancing their corporate image (Example 16 and 17).

(16) We **also made significant revisions** to our internal rules following the enactment of the revised Whistleblower Protection Act in June 2022. [JR_2022]

(17) In the Group-wide "employee workshops" process, the results are evaluated across all teams and **appropriate changes and improvements are drawn up.** [DB_2022]

Overall, the qualitative analysis of degree items did not reveal any cross-cultural differences among the rail companies. However, while in 2018 such items are mostly used as intensifiers in future commitments, in 2022 there seems to be more variation in their use, functioning as boosters for the description of internal action, methods, future plans, and achievements. This might show how the increase in the number of words in the social section over time is accompanied by a higher use of intensifiers that function as 'fillers' and substitutes for actual (and accurate) detail while still enhancing and self-promoting their corporate image.

- *Softening stance-taking and Time*

In terms of qualitative analysis, softening 'stance-taking' and 'time' lists will be taken into account together, given the few occurrences. Starting by softening stance-taking lexical items, the only present case in 2018 is that of the JR-West, with diversity being mentioned as something to be achieved:

(18) Promote diversity. **Make it possible** for employees with diverse backgrounds and attributes to prosper. [JR_2018]

In 2022 there is an increase in their use, especially by the German rail company. However, there does not seem to be any significant cross-cultural difference among their function. For instance, in all cases modal verbs are used for uncertain situations, whether positive or negative, such as reporting potential benefits that can be fulfilled provided that certain premises are met or softening a hypothetical negative situation (See Example 19 and 20). This might be a strategy adopted by companies to self-protect themselves from potential critics or attacks (Jin, 2022).

(19) In addition to the provisions on compulsory and optional provision of preventive healthcare, all employees **may**, in accordance with the framework guidelines on occupational healthcare, **propose** the provision of optional healthcare at any **time if they fear a (negative) interaction between work and their health.** [DB_2022]

(20) The JR-West Group is working to reduce risks and prevent human rights violations

from occurring by ascertaining specific **human rights risks that may occur in each workplace** and then identifying potential human rights issues and evaluating and implementing countermeasures. [JR_2022]

Time lexical items are not very frequent and are used in the in the same way over the years, mainly to set deadlines for specific projects (e.g., this project will *end by/*will be roll out *by* [year]) or describe potential plans and make estimates (Example 21 and 22).

(21) **We expect more than 5%** of employees in Germany to be working in **agile structures or teams by the end of 2020**, half of these due to large transformation projects and the other half due to teams of up to 100 employees trying out agility, self-organization and distributed management. [DB_2018]

(22) DB Group is aiming to increase the proportion of women in executive roles in companies subject to the Second Act on Equal Participation of Men and Women in Management Positions (FuPoG II) to a total of 30% at the Supervisory Board, Management Board and first and second management levels **by the end of 2024.** [DB_2022]

Again, these items might be used as a strategy to probably take time while eventually reassuring the reader that progress is being made and an approximate deadline is to be met. Time lexical items are also further softened by hypothetical clauses which might function as a shield of protection for companies (23).

(23) This includes stop-work authority, which grants every employee the charge to stop an operation — **at any time — if unsafe conditions exist,** and confidential reporting of unsafe conditions without fear of retaliation through the new Amtrak Voluntary Safety Reporting System (AVSRS) that allows reporters to view documented steps for corrective actions. [AM_2022]

In general, the use of lexical items belonging to the semantic categories of time and softening stance-taking are quite limited. Nevertheless, in the few cases in which they appear, modal verbs function as a protective shield to report (potential) uncertain situations, while items belonging to the category of time are used to provide readers and stakeholders with approximate deadlines set in the future.

4. Conclusion

This paper, which is qualitative in focus, has explored the use of vague lexical items in specific dedicated sections of CSR reports of certain rail companies operating in Asia, Europe, and North America. The data itself shows an increase in the amount of space dedicated to DEI and People, proving that such aspects have certainly gained much attention in a 5-year timespan. The specific items of vagueness taken into account do not appear to be much frequent in the two sub-corpora, however, there has been a slight increase and, certainly, more variation in their use in all companies' reports over time. This goes hand in hand with the increasing number of words dedicated for the specific section under analysis: the more information, the more opacity in its disclosure.

From a qualitative perspective, results do not seem to show a particular change over time nor in terms of cross-cultural differences. However, there seems to be a more varied use of the items of degree in 2022, which are adopted to describe future goals, achievements, and internal actions. In line with Jin's (2022) results on the use of vague language in cosmetic companies, here too the same lexical items are used to hinder information, enhance persuasion (especially with regards to degree items) and self-protection. The use of vague language items might be a signal of avoidance in disclosing details on specific issues, hence hindering transparency, or to better say, covering it up with an "image-enhancement" method (Jin, 2022, p. 95) to provide readers and stakeholders with a positive image of themselves.

This paper has focused on a specific case study showing how vague language lexical items are used by companies to promote a positive self-image and as a strategy to avoid providing further detail on actual internal praxis and actions, contributing to an un-transparent and obscure type of communication. Initiatives on DEI are certainly present in the reports of the companies under analysis, but are still addressed from a self-promotional perspective, without providing specific details on how management is intended to be approached. Vague language as a substitute to clarity and accuracy (two main pillars of transparency) seems to function as smoke and mirrors for customers and stakeholders who might be deceived in grasping what is really hiding behind certain words that may appear as empty shells.

This study clearly presents some limits as it takes into account only a certain number of companies and one particular section for each of the reports under analysis. Moreover, this analysis might be further developed by examining images, tables, and graphs present in these specific reports' sections to verify whether these compensate for the lack of transparency. For a more robust analysis, the use of vague language might also be studied in reports of other rail companies operating in the three continents under analysis.

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Note

Note 1. https://www.globaldata.com/esg/companies/sustainable-railways-operators/

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