Climate change from a corporate perspective: a case study of the linguistic representation of the energy transition by the fossil fuel companies Total and Equinor

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/praxematique/5959>

DOI: 10.4000/praxematique.5959

ISSN: 2111-5044

Publisher

Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée

Electronic reference

Trine Dahl and Kjersti Fløttum, "Climate change from a corporate perspective: a case study of the linguistic representation of the energy transition by the fossil fuel companies Total and Equinor", *Cahiers de praxématique* [Online], 73 | 2019, Online since 27 April 2020, connection on 05 December 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/praxematique/5959> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/praxematique.5959>

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Introduction

- 1 In a broad sense, the present paper deals with how the consequences of climate change are reflected in corporate communication. Today climate change impacts all areas of society, not least the business sector. Companies now recognise the need to be prepared for climate risk, both physical risk related to property and operations, and so-called transition risk, for example policy decisions, market conditions and reputation (Ahmad, 2017). This affects how they carry out their activities, with increasing attention being paid to sustainable production. In this paper, we focus on the notion of the energy transition and investigate how it is communicated in a business area that is very much exposed to climate risk, namely the fossil fuel industry. Through a linguistic study of sustainability disclosure by two companies with a heavy carbon footprint, we aim to provide new insight into how micro level linguistic features contribute to expressing key aspects of the required transition to a low-carbon society.
- 2 To our knowledge, there are few studies with a point of departure in linguistics that have looked at how the substantial efforts needed to carry out this transition are

communicated to external stakeholders. Relevant exceptions which touch on the issue are Jaworska (2018), a study of the construction of climate change in corporate social responsibility (CSR) and environmental disclosure in the oil sector from 2000 to 2013, Kapranov (2018), a diachronic framing study of sustainability reports (2001-2015) by oil and gas company Statoil (interestingly, renamed Equinor in 2018¹), and our own study of how three energy majors have incorporated climate considerations into their corporate strategy (Dahl & Fløttum, 2019). There are also some discourse-based investigations involving climate change, CSR and the oil industry that are of relevance to our topic, e.g., studies undertaken by media scientist Øyvind Ihlen (Ihlen, 2008; Ihlen & Roper, 2014). From a different discourse perspective, some studies have been carried out on the energy transition and national debates, notably in Germany (Leipprand *et al.*, 2017) and the Netherlands (Bosman *et al.*, 2014).

- 3 Our case study is based on recent sustainability disclosure by the energy majors Total and Equinor. These two companies have been selected to represent the fossil fuel industry, as they are found at the top end of many league tables ranking such companies according to their commitment to and reporting practices on sustainability and climate change (Investor Climate Compass, 2017; Fletcher *et al.*, 2018). Thus, we assume them to communicate well-reflected views on the issues we investigate and consequently that their disclosure practices are likely to serve as ‘role models’ for companies currently found further down the list in such rankings.
- 4 More specifically, taking a mainly lexico-semantic approach, we study what linguistic resources the companies make use of to present and argue for their perception of the energy transition when they interact with their stakeholders. For instance, is the transition presented as a revolutionary shift from current practices or as something less dramatic? What aspects are stressed when the transition is discussed? And, importantly, what timeframe is envisaged for this change? Some studies (Fløttum & Drange, 2017; Jaworska, 2018) have found that the climate discourse of legislators and the business community does not always reflect the urgency to act stressed by climate scientists (IPCC 2018²).
- 5 The paper continues with a brief contextualization of the two energy majors, before we present the concept of sustainability in a corporate context. Next, we formulate our specific research questions and describe our material and method. We then present our findings, before we discuss them and offer some concluding remarks.

1. Total and Equinor in a sociopolitical and business context

- 6 Total S.A. is headquartered in Paris and Equinor ASA in Stavanger, Norway. France and Norway are both committed to the Paris Climate Agreement of 2015, and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and total energy consumption are high on the political agenda in both countries. In terms of the current energy mix, however, the two countries are different, notably when it comes to electricity production. In France, nearly 75% of the electricity is generated by means of nuclear power, while in Norway hydropower is the most important source (98%). In 2016, France passed the Energy Transition for Green Growth Act,³ which intends to reduce the share of nuclear by 50% from 2017 to 2025. The same year, the Norwegian parliament approved a proposal of

accelerated emissions cuts and carbon offsetting to achieve the goal of being climate neutral in 2030.⁴

- 7 Along with other fossil fuel companies, Total and Equinor in recent years have experienced increased pressure from investors to pay more attention to climate issues and the transition to a low-carbon future. To change the company's energy mix away from just oil and gas, Equinor for some time has worked on projects within the field of wind energy. More recently, they have also invested in solar energy. On the traditional energy side, the company completed its acquisition of the UK Rosebank project (oil and gas fields) in 2019. As for Total, recent years' acquisitions comprise solar panel producer Sunpower, gas and renewable energy supplier Lampiris and battery maker Saft. Like Equinor, Total in addition continues to be an active buyer in the fossil fuel market, e.g., with the acquisition of Danish Maersk Oil in 2017.
- 8 Like most of the corporate sector, Total and Equinor for some time have expressed a general commitment to sustainable development. Exactly what that commitment entails for their activities and overall strategy is not always clear, not least because the concept of sustainability is difficult to pin down in a precise definition (Bansal, 2005; Ihlen & Roper, 2014). The next section provides a brief overview of some of the issues and aspects involved when sustainability is dealt with in a corporate context.

2. The concept of sustainability

- 9 Most discussions of sustainability refer to the definition in the Brundtland report *Our Common Future*: "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987: 43). Sustainability and sustainable development thus extend the traditional concept of corporate social responsibility to include economic concerns (Allen & Craig, 2016).
- 10 In order for a business to be acceptable as a social actor and attractive to its stakeholders, disclosure of information related to climate change is now considered vital (Abitbol *et al.*, 2019). Climate change and the environment typically are dealt with in tandem (Comfort and Park, 2018; Pollach, 2018). The business writer and corporate sustainability authority John Elkington (1999) has suggested dealing with sustainability by means of a three-dimensional framework, conceptualised as the so-called triple bottom line. The three dimensions – profit (economic), people (social) and planet (environmental) – are posited as interconnected. However, the balance between the three is not clear-cut and given (Dyllick & Hockerts, 2002). Specific actors tend to assign most weight and attention to the dimension closest to their core and then accommodate their attention to the other two accordingly. Thus, while environmental organisations take their point of departure in the environment/climate change, the focus of the corporate sector tends to be the economic dimension (Ihlen & Roper, 2014).
- 11 In September 2015, the 193 member states of the United Nations (UN) adopted a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs),⁵ as part of 'Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development'. The SDGs constitute a global plan of action for social inclusion, environmental sustainability and economic development. A report mapping the opportunities and challenges the 17 sustainability goals represent for the oil and gas industry concludes that the sector actually has the potential to contribute to

all 17 goals.⁶ Unlike many other companies in the oil and gas industry, Total and Equinor have explicitly committed to contributing towards these goals (Blasco *et al.*, 2018). In terms of company mission, Total establishes that its “vocation is to produce the energy that the world needs, and will need in the future, and to make it accessible to the greatest number of people”, while Equinor’s expressed purpose is to “turn natural resources into energy for people and progress for society”, their vision being to “become the responsible energy provider” (Total) and “shaping the future of energy” (Equinor).

3. Case study: research questions, material and method

- 12 As indicated in the Introduction, our focus in this paper is on exploring how the transition to a low-carbon future is linguistically represented in corporate disclosure. We have chosen to investigate this through a case study of two key players from an industry whose main products by default make them key polluters and emitters, i.e., the fossil fuel companies Total and Equinor. The two companies are considered ‘best in class’ when it comes to being prepared for the transition. Both now promote themselves as broad energy companies, but despite recent years’ investments in renewables, the lion’s share of their production still involves fossil fuels.
- 13 We now outline our research questions (3.1), before describing our material (3.2) and how we intend to analyse it (3.3).

3.1. Research questions

- 14 As we would like to investigate several linguistic aspects of the energy transition, three research questions (RQs) are posited:
- RQ 1 What words/expressions are used to denote the transition?
 - RQ 2 To what extent are the three sustainability dimensions (profit, people, planet) linguistically reflected in statements referring to the transition?
 - RQ 3 What words/expressions are used to indicate the timeframe for the transition?

3.2. Material

- 15 Our material consists of sustainability-related disclosure in the form of two reports. For Total, we analyse the 2018 version of their report series ‘Integrating Climate into Our Strategy’. Total does not publish sustainability reports as such. However, as their climate strategy reports are located under the Sustainability heading on the company’s website,⁷ it can be assumed that they cover much of the same ground as sustainability reports. For Equinor, we use the 2018 version of their Sustainability Report.⁸ Both reports were converted to Word files and then ‘cleaned’, in the sense that tables, graphs and interviews with external sources were excluded, so that only running text and the company’s own ‘voice’ were kept. This left us with two quite similar texts in terms of size, a Total text of 11,406 words and an Equinor text of 12,606 words.

3.3. Method

- 16 As the material for the case study is relatively modest in size, this makes it well-suited for a qualitative methodological approach. However, our mainly lexico-semantic analyses take their point of departure in quantitative analyses in the shape of frequency-based lists of individual content words and n-grams (patterns of co-occurring words) identified by means of the software program *AntConc* (Anthony, 2005). The *AntConc*-generated output (see 4.1) served as a point of departure for identifying specific search items deemed to be relevant to address our research questions. For RQ 1 (nature of the transition), we worked from the assumption that the notion of ‘transition’ may be referred to not only by (*energy*) *transition*, but also by means of semantically related words, e.g., *change* or *switch*. For RQ 2 (motivation for the transition), we identified words referring to each of the three sustainability dimensions: ‘profit’ (indicated by vocabulary from the business domain; e.g., *price*, *risk*, *regulations*), ‘people’ (vocabulary from the social domain, e.g., *human*, *people*, *society*) and ‘planet’ (vocabulary from the environmental/climate domain, e.g., *carbon*, *emissions*, *sustainable*). For RQ 3 (timeframe for the transition), we identified forward-pointing temporal expressions (*by 20xx*, *future*, *urgent*).

4. Results

4.1. Quantitative findings

- 17 As shown in Table 1, the lists of the ten most frequently used content words⁹ in the reports are not identical, but quite similar, with *energy*, *gas*, *carbon*, *emissions*, *climate*, *oil* and *development* as shared items.

Table 1: The 10 most frequent content words (no. of occurrences; shared items in bold)

TOTAL	EQUINOR
Energy (158)	Energy (80)
Gas (135)	Gas (57)
Carbon (114)	Carbon (56)
Emissions (96)	Climate (56)
Natural (62)	Risk (52)
Oil (40)	Oil (49)
Climate (38)	Development (43)
Fuel (37)	Emissions (37)
Efficiency (35)	Sustainability (35)

Development (29)	Human (34)
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- 18 Table 2 presents the ten most frequent n-grams comprising at least two content words.
¹⁰ There is less overlap between the two lists here than for the most frequent words. In the Total list, two words occur as part of several combinations, viz. *gas* (5) and *emissions* (4). The Equinor list displays more variation, but *climate* and *gas* each occurs twice in combination with other words.

Table 2: The 10 most frequent n-grams (no. of occurrences; shared items in bold)

TOTAL	EQUINOR
Natural gas (60)	Human rights (33)
Energy efficiency (30)	Oil and gas (33)
Power generation (23)	Low carbon (24)
Low carbon (22)	Climate related (18)
Greenhouse gas (21)	Energy transition (12)
Carbon emissions (20)	Offshore wind (12)
Oil and gas (19)	Climate change (11)
Gas emissions (18)	Risk management (11)
Greenhouse gas emissions (18)	Sustainable development (10)
Methane emissions (18)	Natural gas (9)

4.2 Qualitative findings

- 19 In this section, extracts in the form of one or a few successive sentences from the reports will demonstrate our findings from the qualitative analyses. A few of the extracts appear in more than one sub-section, as they reflect more than one of the issues discussed.

4.2.1 Words/expressions denoting the energy transition

- 20 As concerns our focus notion, ‘energy transition’, the *AntConc*-generated word and n-gram lists show that in the Equinor report the word *transition* is used a total of 14 times, with 12 occurrences of the bigram *energy transition* (see Table 2) and twice as just *transition*. The word (combination) often occurs in the company of inherently positive attitudinal words (Martin & White, 2005), as in examples [1] (*thrive, leader, efficient, solutions*) and [2] (*competence, leveraged, opportunities*).

[1] To thrive in the energy transition, we aim to maintain our position as an industry leader in carbon efficient oil and gas production and grow in new energy solutions. (E, p. 9)

[2] Scaling up investments Equinor believes that our oil and gas competence can be leveraged to create business opportunities in the energy transition. (E, p. 22)

- 21 In the Total report, on the other hand, the word *transition* is used a mere five times, with two instances of *transition* alone and three as part of the bigram *energy transition*. All the occurrences are found in co-texts mentioning or even promoting the use of gas. In example [3], the word appears in a somewhat negative co-text, evoked by the negative attitudinal expression *confronted with*:

[3] Confronted with a fast-growing and increasingly digital and distributed market, we created a new business segment — Gas, Renewables & Power (GRP) — tasked with managing the resources that will drive the energy transition. (T, p. 35)

- 22 As indicated in section 3.3, reference to the notion of ‘energy transition’ may take place through other words than *transition*. We therefore also manually scrutinised the word frequency lists for potential candidates that might be semantically linked to ‘transition’. Table 3 provides an overview of the words that were found to be relevant in the present material and the number of relevant occurrences¹¹ for each.

Table 3: Additional ‘energy transition’ words

Search item	TOTAL	EQUINOR
Chang* ¹²	5	6
Develop*	25	21
Disrupt*	0	4
Expan*	18	1
Grow*	13	9
Shap*	3	2
Step*	4	1
Switch*	5	1
Transform*	1	0
Total no. of occurrences	79	59

- 23 Table 3 reveals that both companies primarily talk about the transition as a process, a continuation of something already going on, through words that in themselves are not attitudinal (notably *develop*, *expand* and *grow*). There are fewer occurrences of words

denoting a more pronounced change, such as *change*, *disrupt*, *switch* and *transform*. Example [4] shows the only use of transform* (*transformation*), while example [5] demonstrates one of the four instances of the innovation-related negative *disrupt*:

[4] Energy is at the heart of the challenges we face to keep the global average temperature rise below 2°C. What mechanisms can be put in place and what conditions favor success? We are helping to effect this transformation and are actively involved, both within our industry and in the broader international community, in shaping tomorrow's energy. (T, p. 10)

[5] These [risks] include potential stricter climate regulations, changing demand for oil and gas, technologies that could disrupt our market, as well as physical effects of climate change. (E, p. 17)

- 24 A noticeable feature in both reports is the clustering of these 'transition' words in the same or immediately successive sentence, as already seen in [5] (*changing*, *disrupt*) and in the next two examples:

[6] From solar panel manufacturing to marketing green power, Total is pursuing a strategy of expanding into renewable energy to further our ambition of becoming the responsible energy major. We are developing new businesses and new and more effective technology designed to reduce the carbon intensity of our own energy mix and that of our customers. (T, p. 37)

[7] There are many uncertainties in the energy transition, including the scale and pace of the transition. Game-changing technologies, stricter climate policies and new entrants may disrupt the energy industry. (E, p. 16)

4.2.2. Words/expressions reflecting sustainability dimension

- 25 To investigate the companies' motivation for addressing the energy transition, we took our point of departure in the already identified text extracts containing 'transition' words (cf. 4.2.1). We then considered the words occurring in these extracts in terms of the three dimensions 'profit' (business domain vocabulary), 'people' (societal domain vocabulary) and 'planet' (environmental/climate domain vocabulary). This analysis revealed that while all three dimensions were reflected in the two reports, the profit dimension was the most prominent one by far, notably in the Equinor report. Even words associated with the other two dimensions – and the planet dimension in particular – often co-occurred with profit dimension words, leading to a framing of the planet perspective as challenging (see example [4] above).

26 Profit dimension

- 27 It is perhaps not very surprising that business-related aspects of the transition turned to be the most common in the sustainability reports. For reasons of space, we here just provide a small selection of examples, with business vocabulary in bold and transition words underlined. In [8] – an extract from the Equinor report and already presented in part in [5] above – the transition is negatively framed (*stricter...regulations*, *disrupt our market*, *physical effects*), leaving no doubt that climate change is perceived a major challenge for the company rather than a major concern for society or the planet:

[8] Our business needs to be resilient to the multiple **risks** – both upside and downside – posed by climate change. These include potential stricter climate **regulations**, changing demand for oil and gas, technologies that could disrupt our market, as well as physical effects of climate change. (E, p. 17)

- 28 In the next example (identical to [2] above), however, the report points to potential positive effects (*business opportunities*) of the transition:

[9] Scaling up investments Equinor believes that our oil and gas competence can be leveraged to create **business opportunities** in the energy transition. (E, p. 22)

- 29 One such opportunity presents itself within the renewables market:

[10] We expect our offshore wind **portfolio** to continue to expand. (E, p. 22)

- 30 As for similar examples from the Total report, two of the following three again set up a favourable context for gas:

[11] Another [acquisition] was a 25% **stake** in Clean Energy, the leading distributor of natural gas fuel for heavy-duty trucks in the United States, reflecting our determination to advance the development of new natural gas applications. (T, p. 6)

[12] Putting a **price** on carbon is the most efficient **financial** mechanism to change the rules of the game quickly and hasten the switch to natural gas and renewables for low-carbon power generation. (T, p. 8)

[13] Carbon **pricing** is a **financial** tool that provides the incentive for large-scale transition to a low-carbon **economy**. (T, p. 14)

31 People dimension

- 32 Our investigation of the co-text of the identified ‘transition’ instances (see 4.2.1) revealed that few references were made to societal aspects. The fact that *human* is part of the high-frequency word list (Table 1) and n-gram list (Table 2) in the Equinor report might have been taken to indicate a particularly strong focus on the people dimension in the energy transition. However, the word’s companion element *rights* in the n-gram list reveals that its high frequency is due to the practice of reporting on human rights in connection with labour conditions in sustainability reports.

- 33 As regards other linguistic traces of the people dimension, the Equinor report contains three instances of the phrase *energy for people and progress for society*, as exemplified in example [14] below. This example is particularly interesting from a textual interaction perspective (Hyland, 2005; Fløttum *et al.*, 2006), as it sets up a complex interplay between inclusive and exclusive *we*, referring to groupings that not are clearly defined by the co-text in all cases:

[14] The Paris Agreement created much-needed momentum to act on climate change, but as a **society** and **collectively**, we are not doing enough. At Equinor we will continue to turn natural resources into energy for **people** and progress for **society**. Providing energy to a growing **population** in a responsible way guides us as we work together towards a common future where energy is affordable and sustainable for all. (E, p. 2)

- 34 However, neither in this example nor in the co-text of the few other instances of society-related vocabulary in the Equinor report do we find any of the posited transition words (Table 3). The next example does on the other hand contain the verb *reduce*, which may be said to at least imply a change:

[15] We engage with business partners, suppliers, customers and **society** to find solutions for the low-carbon future, including innovative and

commercially viable ways to reduce emissions across the oil and gas value chain. (E, p. 25)

- 35 The Total report contains two people-related statements showing how the company is fulfilling its obligations in relation to the Paris Agreement and the SDGs, but again there are no transition words in the co-text:

[16] This trajectory constitutes Total's responsible contribution on the road to the objectives set out in the Paris Agreement, while also allowing us to fulfill our mission of supplying affordable, reliable and clean energy to as many **people** as possible. (T, p. 5)

[17] Total is actively advancing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals on access to energy. Since 2010, we have led a unique and far-reaching campaign to help provide as many **people** as possible with access to clean, reliable and affordable energy. (T, p. 44a)

36 Planet dimension

- 37 As noted in section 2 and seen in examples [15] – [17] above, both Total and Equinor have committed to contributing to the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement. However, few references to environmental sustainability occur in direct connection with our 'transition' words. In the Total report, the relevant instances tend to reflect support for gas as an energy source, as seen in example [19] below (*linchpin energy source*).

[18] Our R&D teams have been preparing the future for more than a decade by developing technology to expand the range of resources that can be **sustainably** and competitively processed. (T, p. 9)

[19] In liquefied form, natural gas — the linchpin energy source for successful delivery of the IEA's **Sustainable** Development Scenario — also provides a solution for the shipping industry as it confronts the energy transition in the medium term. (T, p. 34)

[20] From buses, trucks and passenger cars to aircraft and ships, Total is taking concrete steps to develop and market a range of transportation solutions in keeping with the **climate** and **environmental** challenges the world faces. (T, p. 45)

- 38 As regards the Equinor report, the extract rendered as example [21] below contains the words *responsible* and *sustainable*. None of the posited transition words are found, but the statement may perhaps be said to allude to a change through the phrase *as we work together towards*:

[21] Providing energy to a growing population in a **responsible** way guides us as we work together towards a common future where energy is affordable and **sustainable** for all. (E, p. 2)

4.2.3. Words/expressions indicating timeframe for the transition

- 39 In our investigation of the two companies' attitude to the temporal dimension of the energy transition, we broadened our scope to include future-related expressions regarding climate/environmental issues in the entire report, and not just those found in the co-text of words posited as denoting the transition as such (cf. 4.2.2). Table 4 provides an overview of the temporal search items in question and the number of occurrences in each report.

Table 4: Expressions indicating timeframe for the energy transition

Search item	TOTAL	EQUINOR
By 20*	9	6 ¹³
Decade*	1	0
Future	12	11
Period*	5	0
Pressing	1	0
Urgent*	0	1
Total no. of occurrences	28	18

- 40 As Table 4 shows, the word *future* was the most common of these temporal expressions. Example [22] (already cited as [21] above) and example [23] are typical instances. This word denotes an unspecific future timeframe. As for reflections of the urgency stressed by climate scientists, the temporal expressions found in example [12] from the Total report (*quickly, hasten*) might be interpreted as a recognition that things need to change fast. However, only one instance was found in each of the two reports of the words *urgent* and *pressing*, respectively. Interestingly, none of these occurrences reflects the companies' climate concerns. Rather, example [24] reveals that it is the IPCC rather than Equinor that stresses the urgency, while example [25] shows that Total's pressing matter is business-related (carbon pricing).

[22] Providing energy to a growing population in a responsible way guides us as we work together towards a common future where energy is affordable and sustainable for all. (E, p. 2)

[23] Natural Gas, the Key Ingredient in the Future Energy Mix (T, p. 28)

[24] The urgent need for climate action has been highlighted by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C, launched in 2018. (E, p. 15)

[25] Currently, the most pressing issue is simply to promote the idea of carbon pricing in any form (T, p. 14)

5. Discussion

- 41 Our case study of how the two fossil fuel companies Total and Equinor communicate their views on the energy transition to their stakeholders in general and their investors in particular, was based on recent sustainability-related disclosure. We first looked at how the transition as such was represented linguistically. Then we considered which sustainability dimension(s) the companies emphasised in the transition, and finally what timeframe they envisaged for this change. Our findings can be summed up as follows. The reports primarily use words that present the energy transition as a gradual *change* or *development* of current business practices rather than a more abrupt and

dramatic *transformation*. This linguistic practice may indicate two things: either, that the perception of a necessary revolution within energy has been growing over the last couple of decades and the initial ‘shock’ has passed and become part of regular business; or, that the transition has always been and still is perceived as a gradual process, with the main focus being on cutting carbon emissions from the traditional fossil fuel sources. The latter interpretation finds some support in the use of the journey metaphor of the Equinor CEO’s foreword, where he invites stakeholders to share the burden: “We will continue our journey from a focused oil and gas company to a broader energy company, and we hope you will support us in this journey” (p. 2; see also Kapranov, 2018).

- 42 As regards the three sustainability dimensions of profit, people and planet, both reports state that their company’s mission is to provide the world with energy (see Section 2), which would seem to indicate a people dimension focus. However, our linguistic analysis has revealed that the words and expressions occurring in co-texts referring specifically to the transition tend to be business-related and hence allude to the profit dimension of sustainability. The two companies both point to gas as a key element in fulfilling their mission. The Total examples in particular reveal that the company considers this energy source a vital part of the “solution”, a position also reflected in the fact that *gas* is the second most frequent content word and *natural gas* the most frequent n-gram in their report. The future role of oil is less focused on, but the n-gram *oil and gas* turned out to be the second most frequent one in the Equinor report. At a meeting for investors and analysts in January 2019, CEO Sætre also gave his company an enthusiastic slap on the back concerning their oil and gas production: “I am very proud of the fact that we produce oil and gas in a decent/proper way (Norwegian: *på en skikkelig måte*). The world is increasing its consumption of oil and gas, and then it is better that the production takes place in a decent/proper way”¹⁴ (our translation).
- 43 Finally, in terms of the temporal aspect, the urgency stressed by climate scientists is not observed in the language used in the reports. Even though measures are sometimes given specific timelines though expressions such as *by 20xx*, the most prevalent time expression is the vague *future*.

Conclusion

- 44 Climate change represents a major challenge for the energy sector. Fossil fuel companies are now required, often through shareholder resolutions (van Halderen *et al.*, 2016), to report on how they will contribute to a low-carbon future. The present mainly lexico-semantic study of instances of corporate communication involving two players considered to represent best practice in the sector has revealed that they see gas as a key element in this process. However, such promotion of gas is not universally acknowledged to be compatible with looking after the planet dimension of sustainability, neither by environmental organisations nor institutions such as the European Investment Bank, who in November 2019 decided to stop funding fossil fuel projects after 2021.¹⁵
- 45 So, what our linguistic approach has been able to show is that business considerations – to some extent supported by references to social aspects (notably the issue of making energy accessible to everybody) – feature prominently in the companies’ presentation

of planned and already undertaken actions, while climate/environmental considerations are present to a much more modest degree. It seems fair to claim that the reports reflect a primarily strategic rather than moral perspective of climate change and the energy transition (see Elkington, 1999). That the profit dimension takes front position is perhaps not surprising, as the main audiences for such documents are current shareholders and potential investors. However, companies also need to pay attention to a broader stakeholder group, including future employees and investors. In order to stay relevant to the younger, climate-conscious generations, disclosure – and actions – by fossil fuel companies must reflect a broad commitment to the energy transition, clearly recognising the global and all-encompassing ramifications of climate change.

- 46 It is not possible to generalise about the fossil fuel industry's attitudes to the energy transition from a case study of two actors. However, our analysis may serve as a useful reference point for future discourse-based studies of the transition in a corporate context, in order to see whether the people and planet dimensions become more prominent as climate change turns even more serious.

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NOTES

1. According to CEO Eldar Sætre, the change was undertaken in order to better reflect its current status as a broad energy company; <https://www.equinor.com/en/about-us/about-our-name-change.html> (accessed 4 December 2019).
2. <https://www.ipcc.ch/2018/10/08/summary-for-policymakers-of-ipcc-special-report-on-global-warming-of-1-5c-approved-by-governments/> (accessed 5 December 2019).
3. <https://www.gouvernement.fr/en/energy-transition> (accessed 11 December 2019).
4. <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/meld.-st.-41-20162017/id2557401/> (accessed 11 December 2019).
5. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300> (accessed 11 December 2019).
6. http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/Sustainable%20Development/Extractives/Mapping_OG_to_SDG_Atlas_Executive_Summary_2017.pdf (accessed 11 December 2019).
7. <https://www.sustainable-performance.total.com/en/reporting/our-csr-reports> (accessed 11 December 2019).
8. <https://www.equinor.com/en/how-and-why/sustainability.html> (accessed 11 December 2019).
9. Company names and high-frequency words related to general business matters (e.g., *management*, *value*) are not included.
10. High-frequency n-grams referring to general business matters (e.g., *value chain*, *executive committee*) are not included.
11. As some of these words (e.g., *change* and *develop*) may be used about many things, all instances of the identified items were checked in their co-text to decide whether they were relevant in the present context.
12. The asterisk indicates that all grammatical forms are included in the registered number of occurrences. *Chang**, for example, includes the verb forms *change*, *changes*, *changed*, *changing*, and the noun forms *change* and *changes*.
13. It turned out that in the Equinor report specific dates (e.g., *by 20xx*) were not always included in running text, but rather in tables and figures, which were not part of our analysis (see section 3.2).
14. <https://sysla.no/offshore/stolt-eldar-saetre-lover-enda-mer-olje-etter-rekordar-og-mener-det-er-bra-klimaet/> (accessed 11 December 2019).
15. <https://www.euronews.com/2019/11/14/phasing-out-fossil-fuel-europe-to-discuss-ending-investments-in-coal-oil-and-gas> (accessed 5 December 2019).

ABSTRACTS

This paper deals with how the energy transition, required to address climate change, is linguistically represented in a corporate sector with a heavy carbon footprint. So far, little research with a point of departure in linguistics has been undertaken on how companies perceive the changes in business practices required to achieve a sustainable future. We investigate this issue through a quantitative/qualitative case study of recent sustainability disclosure by two large fossil fuel companies, Total and Equinor. Our aim is to show, through a mainly lexico-semantic analysis, how micro level linguistic features contribute to expressing the companies' perspectives on the transition, including the nature of the transition, their motivation for implementing it and the timeframe they envisage for this process. We find that the energy

transition is linguistically represented as an ongoing process rather than a dramatic transformation, that this process is not primarily motivated by climate concerns, but rather by business-related considerations, and, importantly, that the transition to a low-carbon society will take time.

Cet article explore comment la transition énergétique, exigée pour adresser le changement climatique, est représentée linguistiquement dans le secteur ayant une empreinte carbone élevée. Jusqu'ici, peu de recherches linguistiques se sont intéressées à la manière dont les compagnies de ce secteur perçoivent les efforts à entreprendre afin d'atteindre un avenir durable. Nous examinons cette question de manière quantitative et qualitative à travers une étude de cas des communications récentes faites par deux grandes compagnies pétrolières, Total et Equinor. Notre but est de montrer comment des traits micro-linguistiques, principalement de nature lexicale, contribuent à exprimer leurs perspectives sur la transition énergétique, incluant la nature de la transition, leur motivation de la réaliser et la période de temps envisagée pour ce processus. Nos résultats montrent que les compagnies représentent linguistiquement la transition énergétique comme un développement en cours plutôt que comme une transformation dramatique, que ce processus n'est pas principalement motivé par des préoccupations climatiques, mais plutôt par des considérations économiques, et, notamment, que la transition vers une société à faibles émissions prendra du temps.

INDEX

Mots-clés: analyse linguistique, communication d'entreprise, développement durable, transition énergétique, secteur de l'énergie fossile

Keywords: linguistic analysis, corporate communication, sustainability, energy transition, fossil fuel companies

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