THE SYNTACTICO-SEMANTIC PROPERTIES
OF "BUSINESS VERBS"

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Abstract

The verbs used in text and tabular sections of company annual reports display a notable tendency towards repetitiveness and their repertory also seems to be rather limited. However, different semantic categories as well as grammatical forms may be identified in this genre of Business English, which makes it far from being stereotypical, especially in the non-tabular sections. The paper is based on the analysis of a corpus of several company annual reports, focusing on the semantic traits of verbs used there, proportions between their occurrences in dynamic vs. stative functions, active vs. passive forms, variety of tenses, etc.

1. Annual reports as a specific genre

Company annual reports may be considered as a separate genre of the occupational variety identifiable as the language of business or, more broadly, the language of business and administration, and in the relation to the English language as Business English. They consist of several individual types of text with their own specific purposes and conventions; however, these all display the characteristic features of the variety. The main dividing line between these components of annual reports may be drawn between non-tabular sections (i.e. texts with fluent syntax, sometimes even directly addressing the readers) and tabular ones (i.e. financial statements, usually tables with nominal expressions and corresponding numerical information referring to financial sums or volumes). Also the message seems to be conceived differently in these two parts, as it is rather focused on persuading readers about the business´ benefits, making a good impression, securing their loyalty and trust, etc., whereas the tabular parts rather aim at providing objective information in a clear, accurate, explicit, and concise manner. Therefore, more vagueness, associativeness, and lexical and semantic variety occurs in non-tabular parts of annual reports, compared with explicit and stylistically austere tabular sections.

The corpus of company annual reports fo the purposes of this paper includes six company annual reports for the years 2006 and 2007, representative of a set of large multinational corporations operating in different industries. These companies and their reports are: International Power (power generation), Toyota (automobile manufacturing), Yamaha (consumer electronics), Marathon (oil and gas extraction), Kaupthing Bank (banking and financial services), and Nationale Suisse (insurance). Given the highly nominal character of financial statements (except notes commenting on them), the lexical items therefrom would not be of much use for the syntactico-semantic analysis carried out in this paper (as its main focus are verbs). This is why a similar type of text has been chosen from the non-tabular section instead, being also rather referential than persuasive, viz. the Business Review. This text will be checked against the Letter to Shareholders, a rather reader-centred and persuasive (sub)genre. These two typical subgenres within annual reports have been selected from two different annual reports so that the combination of all four extracts and verbs occurring in them gives the most objective picture of this word category in the given genre.

2. General characteristics of "business verbs"

The predication in annual reports, as it has been suggested, performs more roles as far as the communicated message is concerned. It is primarily objective reporting on the company´s activities, plans and results, its staff and products, but also conveying some interpersonal and conative functions such as persuasion, self-promotion, and assertion. The variety of functions is connected both with different functions of individual component texts within annual reports and a diverse set of potential addressees thereof (which are two mutually interconnected factors). The target users of company annuals reports are not only shareholders or other investors, but also competitors, public officials, members of the local community, competitors, the company´s own staff and executives, financial analysts, etc.; generally anyone who is some way involved and interested in or affected by the company´s operation. The economic theory uses a general term stakeholder[1] for all such user categories. These diverse foci and functions are thus certainly reflected in the semantics of verbs used in the genre, for brevity reasons referred to as "business verbs" here.

The **lexis of annual reports** is generally a subset of the vocabulary of administrative or official styles.[2] However, labels such as the language of business (Business English) and, even more specifically, the language of finance and accounting are more appropriate when referring to this specific occupational variety. The characteristic naming units of this variety (i.e. those different from the core of lexis) refer to economic and financial concepts but, in respect of the genre´s non-referential functions which have been already mentioned, some lexical items manifest an overlap with the lexis of the language of advertising.[3] Focusing only on verbs and complying also with the typical lexical categories suggested by Crystal (the last four below), the corpus of six company annual reports included the following examples (sometimes classifiable in more categories, as this classification takes into consideration both denotative and associative components of meaning):

Verbs of change of a state: *be/go down, be/go up, decrease, dilute, expand, fall, gain, grow, increase, lose, rise, strengthen*
Verbs of persistence of a state: *fix, remain, stabilise, stay*
Verbs of transfer of possession (exchange): *acquire, buy, gain, grant, lease, purchase, rent, sell*
Verbs of possession: *hold, owe, own, possess*
Verbs of reporting: *announce, disclose, recognise, report*
Verbs of thinking and stance: *believe, be proud, hope*
Positive verbs: *achieve, benefit, boost, capitalize, continue, develop, profit, raise, secure, streamline, strengthen, strive, uphold*
Unreserved verbs: *accomplish, eliminate, lose, succeed, win*
Vivid expressions (metaphors, idioms): *boom, hit, suffer*
Concrete words: *cast, drill, insure, manufacture, mold, reinject, weld*

The **grammatical properties** of verbs in annual reports (chosen to achieve the appropriate mode and tenor) are usually described as marked in the following areas:

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[1] Cf. *Oxford Dictionary of Accounting* (Oxford: OUP, 2005), 355.
[2] Cf. Dagmar Knittlová, *Funkční styly v angličtině* (Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého, 1990).
[3] David Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), 338.

- **Impersonality vs. personality**

Impersonality is the desirable type of expressing the author´s or reader´s personal involvement in the administrative and formal text, aimed at achieving maximum objectiveness. However, since the referential function is not the only consideration in this genre, personality also occurs in its specific subgenres which are either written from an individual´s perspective or address the readers.

Extract 1: *I firmly believe that by strengthening our overall quality in this way we will achieve high levels of profitability.*[4]
Extract 2: *I would like to ask our shareholders for their continued trust, support and understanding.*[5]

- **Monologic vs. dialogic format**

For the same reasons as stated above, the normally unmarked monologic format typical of the formal written style is sometimes replaced by the dialogic structure, a feature of conversational style. E.g. the President / Chairperson / CEO may be interviewed in addition to his address to shareholders. The 2007 *Toyota AR* thus includes questions asked anonymously, and Mr Watanabe´s answers are equipped with headings summarising the main ideas.[6]

- **Declarative sentences**

The declarative sentence type is the unmarked one, based on its core function of reference and information transfer. With the exception of interviews with a few occurrences of interrogatives, no other sentence types have been identified.

- **Variety of tenses**

In contrast with the theoretical sources, characterising official styles as stereotypical in terms of grammatical (syntactic) forms used[7], the corpus of annual reports has revealed that the variety of verb tenses is rather wide – the present, past, future, and present perfect are the most frequent tenses, mostly with simple aspect. Several different tenses are often combined in one or two sentences (see Extract 3); on the other hand, in some texts several consecutive paragraphs go on without varying the tenses (employing either the present or past simple tense only).

Extract 3: *The rapid growth in demand for new power capacity globally and rising raw materials prices **have contributed** to significant price increases and longer lead times for the delivery of power plant equipment. If this trend **continues**, there **is** a risk that greenfield project development timescales **will be extended** further and, in addition, the ability to secure extensive commercial protection from the original equipment manufacturers **will become** more difficult.*[8]

Generally, the distribution of verb tenses in company annual reports seems to correspond with their usual grammatically unmarked functions, i.e.:
- the present simple tense refers to current states and descriptions of the company´s policies, methods, market situation, etc.,

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[4] Toyota Motor Corporation, "An Interview with the President", *Annual Report: Year ended March 31, 2007* (Toyota City: Toyota Motor Corporation), 11.
[5] Ibid., 15.
[6] Ibid., 10-15.
[7] Cf. Dagmar Knittlová, *Funkční styly v angličtině* (Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého, 1990).
[8] International Power, *Annual Report* (London: International Power plc., 2007), 21.

- the past simple tense refers to past actions (performed in the preceding year),
- the present perfect tense refers to unfinished actions or states,
- the future simple tense reports on anticipated development and plans.

• **Active vs. passive verbal voice**

Despite the expected high frequency of occurrence of the the passive voice in formal documents[9], the active voice truly dominates, as the agentive subject of sentences is frequently *the company*, *the Group*, *the Board*, and many abstract nouns denoting economic and financial indicators and other business concepts, such as *sales*, *profit*, *portfolio*, *strategy*, *goal*, *aim*, *acquisition*, *competition*, *consolidation*, etc. The obvious expression of roles in the act of predication is preferred to impersonality normally achieved by passivisation.

• **Ellipsis**

Ellipsis is employed for the purposes of condensation. The principal type of ellipsis identifiable in the company annual reports is omission of a relative pronoun and auxiliary verb(s) in relative clauses, yielding non-finite structures with a preserved participial form of the main verb.

Omission of the whole predication leads to another type of ellipsis, with only the nominal component (a subject, object or complement originally) left. This type of ellipsis is rather characteristic of tabular sections of annual reports[10], but it is also used, similarly to other genres, in headings and subheadings, enumerations and for labelling categories in charts and diagrams.

3. Semantic classifications of verbs

This paper aims to establish the most suitable typology of verbs for description of their combined syntactic and semantic properties. A brief overview of potential approaches will be provided here, before the relevant criteria are applied in the analysis of several extracts from annual reports. However, a detailed analysis is yet to be carried out; this paper is only a partial and preliminary account of some of the properties of "business verbs".

There exist traditional, relatively rough classification criteria for verbs, such as the oppositions **stative x dynamic** (senses of Vs) (Greenbaum and Quirk 1990, 48), **concrete x abstract**, **transitive x intransitive**, **full x primary** (Ibid., 24), **transitive x intransitive**, which also refer both to the lexico-semantic and syntactic properties of verbs and propositions in which they function. Some of these criteria will be used for this initial analysis of verbs in the genre of annual reports (see Chap. 4.1). Frequency of occurrence of verb forms such as active x passive, finite x non-finite contributes to the description as well. Nevertheless, many other classifications exist apart from this one, applying more sophisticated methodologies.

Levin (1993) in her book *English Verb Classes and Alternations* manifested correlations between the semantic properties and syntactic roles of verbs on the grounds of her analysis of 3,200 English verbs (cf. Verb Semantic Classes). Her classification of various verb types is based on a set of different syntactic alternations verbs may undergo, so that each verb can be classified according to the combination of relevant alternations. Levin´s classification suggests as many as 79 alternations for English verbs, the main types being the transitivity alternations (i.e. a change in transitivity of a verb), with its subtypes such as the causative/inchoative alternations, conative

[9] Cf. David Crystal and Derek Davy, *Investigating English Style* (Harlow: Longman, 1969), 242.
[10] Cf. R. Vogel, "Lexical Hierarchies in the Scientific Terminology" (PhD diss., Masarykova univerzita, 2006), 93-108, 134-140.

alternations, etc., and inversions, there-insertion, the active/passive alternation, and so on. (Ibid.) The alternations then serve as a basis for construction of **verb semantic classes**, depending on the shared alternations contributing to the overt meaning. Examples of verb semantic classes are e.g. Verbs of Motion, Verbs of Putting,Verbs of Removing, Verbs of Throwing, Verbs of Creation and Transformation, Verbs of Perception, Verbs of Communication. Each of these classes may be further subdivided, allowing for a subtler classification of meaning. The criteria of such syntactico-semantic classification of verbs vary in different sources, bringing different results.

Nine classes of verbs are e.g. distinguished within the semantic category of **verbs of transfer of possession** (Verb Semantic Classes), which is relevant for the genre of annual reports since business transactions involving change of possession are frequently reported on there:

- *Give* verbs (e.g. *give, lease*);
- *Contribute* verbs (e.g. *distribute, donate*);
- Verbs of *providing*   - *fulfilling* verbs (e.g. *credit, provide*);
                           - *equip* verbs (e.g. *arm, invest*);
- Verbs of *obtaining*   - *get* verbs (e.g. *book, buy, call, cash, order*);
                           - *obtain* verbs (e.g. *accept, accumulate*);
- *Future having* verbs (e.g. *advance, assign*);
- *Exchange* verbs (e.g. *exchange, swap*);
- *Berry* verbs (e.g. *nest*).

It is clear that results of classification into semantic classes according to combinations of alternations is imprecise and not immediately obvious. Especially some classes contain a variety of heterogeneous verbs. "Domain descriptions (family, education, law, etc.) as well as moral judgements on the transfer (legal, illegal, robbery) are not accounted for in this classification." (Ibid.) Thus, what must be considered beyond the meaning of individual verbs is the semantics of their arguments.

In Chafe´s classification there exist four main verb types, namely **states**, **processes**, **actions** and **action processes**, the three latter of which may be grouped as **non-state verbs**. State verbs, associated with patient, "describe the state or condition of a single argument" (Verb…); processes, again used with patients, refer to "a change of condition or state in its argument" (Ibid.), actions express "something that verb argument does or performs", co-occurring with action verbs, and finally, action-processes relate both to actions and processes, their arguments being the performer (agent) and the thing affected by the process (patient). Chafe distinguishes several syntactico-semantic relations, viz. Agent, Patient, Experiencer, Beneficiary, Complement, Locative and Instrument.

Yet another classification of verb semantic classes, Cook´s case grammar matrix, is derived from Chafe in that one of its parameters distinguishes four types of verbs: **state verbs**, **process verbs**, **action verbs** anad **action processes**. This parameter combines with the other parameter with four values, either just with agent and/or a patient, or with addition of experiencer, benefactive or locative (Verb…). Chafe´s (1970) and Cook´s (1979) classification of verbs based on the assignment of thematic roles to the arguments in predication enables **semantic** classification since the thematic roles are determined by compositional and relational lexical meaning. Semantic classifications of verbs were also further elaborated by Longacre (based on Cook´s typology), Kudrnáčová (2008), focusing on motion verbs, etc.

4. A syntactico-semantic analysis of verbs in annual reports

4.1. Methodology of the analysis

For the purposes of analysis in this research two pairs of texts have been examined from company annual reports (a different annual report has been chosen as the source text for each sample). Four criteria, syntactic as well as semantic, have been applied:

- opposition of **finite x non-finite** forms of VPs,
- **verb tenses**,
- **active x passive** verb forms,
- **concrete x abstract** senses of verbs,
- **stative x dynamic** uses of verbs.

As the first step, all occurrences of verbal or derived deverbal forms were calculated (with the exception of deverbal nouns, as this would complicate the task); this identified the verbal component in the extracts. The next steps consisted in separation of verbs as a word class from deverbal adjectives, prepositions, conjunctions etc., and then separation of finite verb forms from non-finite ones. The proportion of finite and non-finite verb forms in the set of verbs proper provides information about the nominalising tendency in this formal genre; the share of non-finites used as primary predications then serves as a more accurate indicator thereof. Both forms were also tagged in terms of the active vs. passive voice, stative vs. dynamic uses and concrete vs. active senses (the two latter oppositions do not enable exact assignation in some cases, though). The finite verbs set was then analysed in terms of tense and aspect.

4.2. Properties of "business verbs" in the samples

Table 1. Lists of excerpted verbs and deverbal elements (in immediate lexical context) in the text type "Letter to Shareholders" (shortened).

To Our Shareholders (*Yamaha Annual Report* **2007, 11**)		Chairman´s statement (*International Power Annual Report* **2007, 2-3**)	
Fiscal 2007(…) **was** …		… Company **has** once again **delivered** …	
(the year *ended* March 31,2007)		… profit (…) **was up** 17% …	
… **being** the final year …		… earnings per share **increased** by …	
We also **formulated** …		… cash flow also **improved** strongly …	
In June 2007 we **appointed** …		… **was** principally **driven** by …	
I **would** first **like to report** …		… business **delivered** …	
… that Yamaha **made** under …		… the key driver (…) **was** the UK …	
Yamaha **achieved**…		… profit (…) **benefited** from …	
… operating income **rose** …		… that we **put** in place …	
net income **declined**…		… with *enhanced* capacity payments …	
we **fell short of** …		… **were** key **in driving** profit (…) up…	
… targets *set out* in ….		… we **had** a challenging year …	
which **were** net sales …		… we **expect to achieve** *improved* margins …	
we **can claim to have finalized** key decisions		… power price **recover**.	
And, **having done** so		… *contracted* plants …	
I **believe** that		… **continue to perform** well …	
We **are** now **in a position to achieve** the new targets …		We **grew** our generation portfolio …	

Tab. 2. Analysis of verbal elements in equivalent texts: To Our Shareholders (*Yamaha AR* 2007), Chairman´s Statement (*International Power AR* 2007).

	To Our Shareholders (*Yamaha AR* 2007)		Chairman´s Statement (*International Power AR* 2007)	
Verbs + *deverbal adj./prep*.	**75**	(100%)	**68**	(100%)
Verbs (Vfin + Ger/Part + Inf)	**66**	**88%**	**57**	**84%**
Finite verbs (Vfin)	**36**	55% (out of verbs)	**46**	81% (out of verbs)
Nonfinite verb forms (Ger/Part + Inf)	30	45% (out of verbs)	11	19% (out of verbs)
Nonfinites as primary predic.	11	**37%** (out of nonfin.)	4	**36%** (out of nonfin.)
Passive forms	4	**6%** (out of all verbs)	3	**5%** (out of allverbs)

Tab. 3. Analysis of grammatical properties of finite verbs in equivalent texts: To Our Shareholders (*Yamaha AR* 2007), Chairman´s Statement (*International Power AR* 2007).

Finite verb forms (tense + aspect)	To Our Shareholders (*Yamaha AR* 2007)		Chairman´s Statement (*Internat. Power AR* 2007)	
Past perfect simple (PaPS)	0	-	1	2%
Past perfect progressive (PaPPg)	0	-	0	-
Past simple (PaS)	19	**53%**	24	**52%**
Past progressive (PaPg)	0	-	0	-
Present perfect simple (PrPS)	0	-	2	4%
Present perfect progressive (PrPPg)	0	-	0	-
Present simple (PrS)	14	**39%**	16	**35%**
Present progressive (PrPg)	1	**3%**	1	**2%**
Future simple (FS)	2	**6%**	2	**4%**
Future progressive (FPg)	0	-	0	-
Total finite verbs	**36**	100%	**46**	100%

The analysis shows a high degree of homogeneity of the verbs in the subgenre, with 53% past simple forms out of all finite verbs in *Yamaha AR* 2007 and nearly as many, 52% past simple verb forms in *International Power* AR 2007, followed by 39% and 35% shares of present simple verb forms in the respective sets. The representation of other tenses is quite comparable, too, although their variety is bigger in the second mentioned source. The average proportion of nonfinites is approximately a third in the total number of verbs. The passive voice accounts for a tiny fraction only (5% and 6% of all verbs, respectively), contrary to expectations. Most verbs in both extracts are used in the dynamic sense (53% and 59%, respectively), and a substantial part of stative verbs is formed by the occurrences of the primary verb *be*. As far as the abstract or concrete denotations of verbs are concerned, an absolute majority of verbs are abstract, belonging to the benefactive and locative subtypes of all four main verb semantic classes according to Cook´s classification.

Table 4. Lists of excerpted verbs and deverbal elements (in immediate lexical context) in the text type "Review of the Year" (shortened).

Review of the year (*Nationale Suisse Annual Report* 2006, 83)		Year in review (*Kaupthing Bank Annual Report 2006*, 10-11)	
… company **has** a threefold function …		… earnings **increased** by 73% …	
It **is** the parent company …		… **amounting t**o ISK 85 b illion …	
… and **acts** in this capacity		… per share **amounted** to ISK 127 …	

… it **is active** as a direct ….		… *compared* with ISK 75 in 2005.	
… it **is** the internal reinsurer …		… on equity **was** 42% …	
Each (…) functions **influences** the …		Equity **grew** by 67% …	
… it **should be noted** that …		… 67%, *amounting* to ISK 324 …	
… accounts (…) **are prepared** in …		… equity ratio **was** 15% …	
…- *including* those parts …		… Tier 1 ratio **was** 10.5% …	
… parts which **relate** to the …		… which **is** above the Bank´s …	
… the principles (…) **apply**.		… assets **amounted** to ISK …	
As we **have reported** on …		… , *growing* by 60% during …	
… we **will limit** ourselves here to …		…, *including* Kaupthing Limited …	
^{HEADING} … market **serves** as basis …		… UK activities (…) **relocated** …	
… premiums *written* for the ….		… Bank´s activities (…) **took on** …	
… premiums (…) **came** from …		… and **commenced** operations …	
… remainder (…) *composed* of …		… **were** (…) **placed** (…) **to facilitate** …	

Tab. 5. Analysis of verbal elements in equivalent texts: Review of the year (*National Suisse AR* 2006), Year in review (*Kaupthing Bank AR* 2006).

	Review of the year (*Nationale Suisse AR* 2006)		Year in review (*Kaupthing Bank AR* 2006)	
Verbs + *deverbal adj./prep.*	**30**	(100%)	**34**	(100%)
Verbs (Vfin + Ger/Part + Inf)	**26**	**87%**	**32**	**94%**
Finite verbs (Vfin)	**24**	92% (out of verbs)	**20**	63% (out of verbs)
Nonfinite verb forms (Ger/Part + Inf)	2	8% (out of verbs)	12	37% (out of verbs)
Nonfinites as primary predic.	2	**100%** (out of nonfin.)	5	**42%** (out of nonfin.)
Passive forms	4	**15%** (out of all verbs)	5	**16%** (out of all verbs)

Tab. 6. Analysis of grammatical properties of finite verbs in equivalent texts: Review of the year (*National Suisse AR* 2006), Year in review (*Kaupthing Bank AR* 2006).

Finite verb forms (tense + aspect)	Review of the year (*Nationale Suisse AR* 2006)		Year in review (*Kaupthing Bank AR* 2006)	
Past perfect simple (PaPS)	0	-	0	-
Past perfect progressive (PaPPg)	0	-	0	-
Past simple (PaS)	10	**42%**	16	**80%**
Past progressive (PaPg)	0	-	0	-
Present perfect simple (PrPS)	1	4%	0	-
Present perfect progressive (PrPPg)	0	-	0	-
Present simple (PrS)	12	**50%**	4	**20%**
Present progressive (PrPg)	0	-	0	-
Future simple (FS)	1	**4%**	0	-
Future progressive (FPg)	0	-	0	-
Total finite verbs	**24**	100%	**20**	100%

The subgenre "Review of the year" reveals a relative internal homogeneity as well, with a similar disharmony between the two samples in terms of the ratio of finite to non-finite verb forms. The proportion of past simple forms of verbs is equally unbalanced, but the average representation, around 60%, is only slightly higher than in the previous analysis. Both types of text refer to the past period, so the past tense reference logically dominates. The following tense, present simple, amounts to a third of finite verb forms, which is virtually identical in both

subgenres. The text type "Review of the year" contains a lower proportion of nonfinites, probably due to more complex stylistic requirements in the "Letter to Shareholders" type. The passive forms are three times as frequent here than in the previous text type, possibly as a result of focusing more on objective data than on persuasion. This subgenre also differs from the previous one by a lower share of dynamic uses of verbs (46% and 50% in the two extracts, respectively). The explanation may again be more attention paid to results and achievements than to current or planned actions.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of selected grammatical and semantic properties of verbs in company annual reports has shown a considerable degree of homogeneity within this genre, and even more within its specific subgenres. The results have been drawn from relatively small samples, which may have caused some distortion. Quite comparable results have been observed in the proportion of tenses, use of simple aspect, low representation of passive forms, possible dependence of the occurrence of non-finites on the register and function of text, and the proportions of stative and dynamic uses of verbs, as well as prevalence of abstract verbs. Compared with (usually more generally oriented) theoretical sources, the established lexical as well as grammatical variety (viz. tenses) seems to be bigger than expected. The verbs used in this genre deserve a more complex syntactico-semantic analysis, going far beyond the scope of this initial research and requiring naturally elaboration of a suitable and maximally objective methodology.

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