

## Systemic Functional Linguistics in the Rhetorical Strategies of Persuasion: A Longitudinal Study of Transitivity and Ergativity in the Rhetoric of Saras' Sustainability Reports

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**Abstract :** This study explores the correlation between Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as tools for analysing the evolution of rhetoric in the communicative strategies adopted in a company's Reports on social and environmental responsibility. In more specific terms, transitivity and ergativity- concepts from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) - through the lenses of CDA, are employed as a theoretical means for the analysis of a longitudinal study in the communicative strategies employed by Saras SpA pre- and during the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. Saras is an Italian joint-stock company operating in oil refining and power generation. The qualitative and quantitative linguistic analysis carried out through the use of Sketch Engine software aims to identify and explain how rhetoric - and ideology - is constructed and presented through language use in Saras SpA Sustainability Reports. Specific focus is given to communication strategies to local and global communities and stakeholders in the years immediately before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. The rationale behind the study lies in the fact that 2020 and 2021 have been among the most difficult years since the end of World War II. Lives were abruptly turned upside down by the pandemic, which had grave negative effects on people's health and on the economy. The result has been a threefold crisis involving health, the economy and social tension, with the refining sector being one of the hardest hit, since the oil refining industry was one of the most affected industries due to the general reduction in mobility and oil consumption brought about by the virus-fighting measures. Emphasis is placed on the construction of rhetorical strategies pre- and during the pandemic crisis using the representational process of transitivity and ergativity (SFL), thus revealing the close relationship between the use language in terms of Social Actors and semantic roles of syntactic transformation on the one hand, and ideological assumptions on the other. The results show that linguistic decisions regarding transitivity and ergativity choices play a crucial role in how effective writing achieves its rhetorical objectives in terms of spreading and maintaining dominant and implicit ideologies and underlying persuasive actions, and that some ideological motivation is perpetuated - if not actually overtly or subtly strengthened - in social-environmental Reports issued in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis.

**Keywords :** systemic functional linguistics, sustainability, critical discourse analysis, transitivity, ergativity

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