ECO-FRIENDLY LANGUAGE, SUSTAINABILITY CLAIMS, AND POWER RELATIONS IN GREEN ADVERTISING DISCOURSE

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Abstract – As the global quest for sustainability and environmental commitment becomes more and more urgent, many consumers are now opting for products and brands aligned with their values (Mintel 2021). Indeed, according to a survey by the European Commission, 56% of average European consumers declared that "environmental concerns influenced their purchasing decisions" (EC 2021). Consequently, companies are now revising their marketing and advertising strategies in order to focus on eco-friendly claims, thus reversing the traditional image of passive consumers manipulated by advertisers (Wilke *et al.* 2021). In this context, the present paper investigates eco-friendly discourse and sustainability claims in a dataset of Italian food and drinks television commercials. The study considers 15 commercials recently aired in Italy for a qualitative manual analysis of textual and language features, in line with traditional CDA methods (Huckin 1997); a critical evaluation of environmental claims through a framework for greenwashing detection (Carlson *et al.* 1993) is also included. While attention is placed on critical aspects such as power relations between businesses and consumers, results suggest that environmental and sustainability topics are exploited in advertising to provide evidence of companies' sustainability commitment, and to please conscious consumers asking for more responsible production.

Keywords: CDA; eco-friendly language; food and drinks advertising; green advertising; sustainability claims.

1. Introduction

In the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, the generalized feeling of social, financial, and environmental insecurity shared by Western societies has made the quest for sustainability more urgent than ever. While discussion on this topic is ongoing in private and public arenas, the very concept of *sustainability* remains quite difficult to define, as it encompasses at least three dimensions, namely the economic, the social, and the environmental (Wilke *et al.* 2021). Due to this complex nature, there is currently no agreement over "its scope, meaning, limitations, and implications, especially as there is ample potential for tension between the three dimensions of sustainability" (2021, p. 20). On the one hand, transnational governments and policymakers are working on stricter regulations on sustainability; on the other hand, global

businesses are trying to implement sustainable operations and practices among their core objectives. In addition, laypeople are increasingly opting for products and brands aligned with their values (Mintel 2021), as 56% of European consumers declared that "environmental concerns influenced their purchasing decisions" (EC 2021), thus playing a central role through their choices.

Given the multi-dimensional nature of environmental and sustainability topics, interdisciplinary research on environmental discourses – namely the product of environmental issues and environmental ideologies (Novikau 2016, p. 3) – is constantly on the rise. Research in Marketing, Business, and Communication Studies has provided useful conceptual notions, for example clarifying the meaning of 'green' in 'green marketing' or 'green advertising' – two concepts based "on the subjective perception of the producer and the consumer, not necessarily on the facts of whether such behavior would achieve the end objectives of sustainability" (Akenji 2014, p. 16). Similarly, a distinction between 'enviropreneur marketing' (Menon 1997) and 'compliance marketing' (Peattie, Crane 2005) separates ideologically committed practices from initiatives based on imposed compliance with environmental regulations.

In this context, it has been noted that both companies and institutions have become promoters of 'green consumerism', a lifestyle model that focusses on "the production, promotion, and preferential consumption of goods and services on the basis of their pro-environment claims" (Akenji 2014, p. 13) – for example by means of eco-labelling, public awareness and recycling campaigns, or environmental certifications and standards. Criticism about green consumerism centres mainly on its tendency to load consumers with the sustainability burden, as if they were the main agents in the successful transition to sustainable production – sometimes called 'scapegoatism' (Akenji 2014, p. 13). Moreover, most forms of green consumerism have been accused of encouraging consumption while making pervasive use of sustainability motifs, for instance with reference to people's health. Indeed, in the past, "green marketers believed that people worried about the environment because they felt the planet was hurting – and their communications reflected as much. […] But today's marketers increasingly realize that consumers really fear the planet is losing its ability to sustain human life; they fret about their own immediate health, and that of their children" (Ottman 2011, p. 4). Such utilitarian view of our planet – albeit linked to human health – conflicts with the environmentalist (and ecolinguistic) principle that nature has intrinsic value, and it should be protected regardless of human interests (Stibbe 2020).

Overall, it seems that contemporary green marketing and advertising strategies are responding to necessary corporate environmentalism efforts

(Sharma 2021), while also acknowledging consumers' role and influence on production processes. However, when companies – through all forms of corporate communication – declare their orientation towards certain environmental values, they also need to implement practical strategies to fulfil sustainability objectives; when these are missing, "charge[s] of 'greenwashing'" (Banerjee *et al.* 2003, p. 106) may undermine the credibility of eco-friendly claims. From a critical perspective, attempts at cunning or vague environmental claims by companies are seen as another area of discursive conflict where unequal power relations unfold. Indeed, in the words of Fairclough (2001, p. 30), "[t]here are […] certain key discourse types which embody ideologies which legitimize, more or less directly, existing societal relations", and advertising discourse is one of those. For this reason, the field of advertising is often at the center of critical discourse studies (CDS) which also try to uncover sings of greenwashing in advertising claims.

The present study explores eco-friendly discourse in a collection of green advertisements of food and drinks recently aired in Italy. In the first part, it takes into account key themes, language and claims, to see how environmental and sustainability motifs are constructed in advertising discourse. In the second part, it observes current power relations between producers/advertisers on the one hand and consumers/audiences on the other. As will be seen, while people in general are becoming more and more skilled decoding advertising messages, and the traditional idea of passive consumers manipulated by advertisers (Federici 2018; Wilke *et al.* 2021) is being dismantled, deconstructing the objectives of green advertising by describing its features remains a challenging task for discourse analysts.

2. Literature review

In the field of language and discourse studies, relevant research has dealt with environmental communication in traditional and new media, for instance investigating media representation and popular perception of environmental issues, especially climate change (Bednarek, Caple 2010; Hansen 2018; Hansen, Cox 2015; Nerlich *et al.* 2010; Olausson 2011). Framing is another central focus of communication-oriented studies (Alexander 2010; Lakoff 2010), for example in research assessing effective/ineffective corporate communication (Dai *et al.* 2022; Xue 2015), and positive vs. negative framing on consumer behaviour (Amatulli *et al.* 2019; Baek, Yoon 2017). Linguistic and corpus-based approaches (see, for example, Alexander 2017; Collins, Nerlich 2016; Grundmann, Krishnamurthy 2010; Liu, Huang 2022) have privileged detailed features of environmental discourses, including frequency and keyness of the emblematic adjective 'green'. In particular,

quantitative and corpus-based analyses have described the positive semantic prosody linked to this word (Benz 2000; Bevitori 2011; Hunston 2007; Partington 2004; Wild *et al.* 2013), or the use of environmental metaphors (de los Ríos, Negro Alousque 2022) in advertising.

Moving to discourse studies, critical and/or multimodal approaches have been adopted to analyze sustainability topics in different contexts, underlining how verbal, visual, and multiple semiotic elements combine in creative, purpose-driven ways to convey targeted messages or units of non-neutral meaning, for instance in marketing (Hansen, Machin 2008). Considering advertising, critical discourse studies have sought to unveil power relations and dominant views, as well as hidden ideologies and their impact on laypeople (Asghar 2014; Freitas 2013; Thompson 2004). As for green advertising, critical methodologies may also "strongly complement environmental political economy, ideology, and representation because all take into consideration the ongoing power struggle as well as the historical context of discourses" (Budinsky, Bryant 2013, p. 213). Critical qualitative and/or mixed methods for the analysis of eco-friendly advertising discourse have been used in specific case studies, especially, but not only, in digitally-mediated contexts (Atkinson 2014; Chen 2016; Hansen, Machin 2008; Kenalemang-Palm, Eriksson 2021; Liu 2015). Moreover, a part of the literature has dealt with cases of greenwashing in corporate advertising and communication (Budinsky, Bryant 2013; Caimotto, Molino 2011; Gräuler, Teuteberg 2014; Plec, Pettenger 2012), also in the area of food and drinks marketing, from local markets (Koch, Compton 2015) to big corporations (Boncinelli et al. 2023; Niceforo 2021).

From a theoretical and methodological standpoint, dialectical-relational, and sociocognitive approaches (Wodak, Meyer 2016) may well take into account the changeable nature of meaning in advertising discourse. Following this perspective, discourse as a social practice depends on the dialectical relations "between structure […] and events […] and, within each, between semiotic and other elements" (Fairclough 2009, p. 164). Therefore, meaning is the product of an ongoing sociocognitive mediation by each of the parties involved in communication – which resonates with the broad dialogic construction of advertisements, in which the two parties engage in a process of meaning and message negotiation.

In light of the above, linguistic research in the field of advertising opens to multiple theoretical and methodological foundations. Within language and discourse studies, the environment appears as a *trait d'union*, functioning as a discourse element and an object of communication, a marketing feature, a theme or message, and an element for ideological debate.

3. Methodology

This study examines eco-friendly language and sustainability claims in a corpus of Italian television commercials about food and drinks. Most categories of consumer goods are today advertised through green marketing techniques: cars, clothes, and household products are perfect examples of green advertising. However, the already-mentioned link between health and sustainability is especially associated to food choices: according to a 2021 survey by Deloitte, 64% of European consumers are aware of the relation between correct nutrition and health, while 79% actively look for information on healthy and sustainable lifestyle, especially after the pandemic (Deloitte 2021, p. 5). The Italian public, in particular, seems to care deeply for sustainable and healthy food products, and it would generally agree to taxing products which have a negative impact on health and the environment (Deloitte 2021, p. 19).

For the present study, extensive viewing of advertisements having environmental and sustainability topics was conducted at the beginning of data collection over a period of about two months. Green advertisements of food and drinks products constituted the large majority, although eco-friendly commercials of non-food products, such as cars, clothes, soaps and detergents, body care products, or marketplaces also abounded. At the end of this stage, 15 commercials were selected for their thematic and linguistic focus on sustainability and the environment. All commercials, aired on Italian national television channels between 2020 and 2022, advertise packaged goods such as water, coffee, frozen or canned vegetables, and fish; one advertisement is part of a campaign by Coop supermarkets. All commercials are by Italian and/or international brands operating in Italy, which may open to further studies on localization from/into Italian. A list of selected commercials is available in Annex 1.

It must be noted that all the commercials are in Italian; therefore, the analysis hereby presented takes into account linguistic markers translated from this language into English. While the author acknowledges that this could be a limitation of the study, two additional motivations add methodological strength: firstly, all verbal elements under investigation are broadly semantically related to the field of environment, regardless of cultural and/or linguistic specificities within the Italian language. Secondly, only one section focusses on linguistic elements, and more space is devoted to discursive aspects (themes) and the critical dimension (sustainability claims), typically less affected by language-specific concerns.

Given the qualitative nature and the critical purpose of the study, manual analysis of all relevant features was performed. Software analysis, however, could be preferable for larger corpus-based studies of the same

type, ideally to observe word frequency, keywords, collocation patterns, and other elements. The linguistic analysis draws from traditional models for CDA such as that given by Huckin (1997), to comment on nouns, adjectives, adverbs, verbs and verbal patterns, as well as pronouns and markers of agency and stance. In particular, Huckin's model proposes a clear progression for analysis, looking at linguistic elements at the level of:

(a) Text as a whole: strategies of Framing, Foregrounding/Backgrounding, Omission, and Presupposition;

(b) Individual clauses: Topicalisation, Foregrounding, Deletion or Omission, Presupposition, and Insinuation;

(c) Words and phrases: Connotation, Register, and Modality.

Table 1 provides a list of the advertisements' features considered in this paper, with correspondent discursive strategies and analytical categories:

ADVERTISEMENTS FEATURES	DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES
Main Focus or Theme	a. Framing, Topicalisation
Implied Knowledge	b. Presupposition, Backgrounding, Omission
Claim or Explicit Message	c. Insinuation, Foregrounding, Connotation
Mood	d. Modality
Stance	e. Agency, Deletion/Omission, Register

Table 1
Advertisements' features and discursive strategies (adapted from Huckin 1997).

As for Claim or Explicit Message Evaluation, the analytical categories of Insinuation (how explicitly claims/messages are suggested), Foregrounding (how prominently claims/messages are presented), and Connotation (how positively/negatively claims/messages are constructed) are paired with the Content Analysis Model for environmental advertising claims by Carlson *et al.* (1993). This model is especially valuable when looking for signs of greenwashing, thanks to the double classification of eco-friendly claims based on:

(a) Type: product-oriented, process-oriented, image-oriented, providing environmental facts, and combining different elements; and on

(b) Misleading or deceptive eco-friendly information: vague/ambiguous, omitting factual information, false/outright lie, or a diverse combination of such strategies.

Claim Evaluation allows for a better understanding of power relations configurations in the selected examples; to this purpose, insight into overall narrative structures is provided in the last section of the analysis. While a multimodal analysis of visual elements would have further completed the investigation, this was not performed nor included in the paper due to space

constraints.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Advertisements' features: theme, implied knowledge, and claim

As previously anticipated, the 15 advertisements under investigation share similar features, not only because they belong to the same textual/discourse genre, but also due to the observed correlation among food, health, and sustainability. Results emerging from close manual reading at the textual and sentence levels indicate that all three topics are presented as the main thematic frames in the dataset; in particular, while health appears to be at the center of fewer commercials, the combination health *and* sustainability constitutes the central theme in most advertisements; the remaining commercials stress the concern for sustainability in a more generic way, by targeting implied knowledge on the subject. With this in mind, it is possible to further group the commercials into three broad sub-themes:

People's Health;

Sustainable Practices (fishing, farming, cultivating);

Packaging Design and Disposal, and Recycling.

The following examples are also listed in Annex 1 (with numbers identifying brands, and letters identifying categories of analysis, as per Table 1, section 3). Concerning the first group, *Coop*'s commercial highlights that some food or shopping choices are positive for people's health (1e). The claim *"Good shopping can change the world"* (1b) makes implicit reference to sustainability and the fact that farming has negative impacts on the environment; the main assumption, however, is that antibiotics and pesticides are not good for people's health, and that only by changing our shopping habits (viz. by buying *Coop* products) will it be possible to put *"health [...] at the center of everything"*. In this sense, health is foregrounded, while sustainability is omitted or rather taken as a presupposition. Similarly, the commercial by *Garden Gourmet* assumes that plant-based diets are healthier (and more sustainable) by placing the focus on individual eating choices: *"Whether you're vege-tarian, flexi-tarian, gourmet-tarian, or messy-tarian. In short, whatever -tarian you are"* (8e).

The relationship between health and sustainability is more evidently framed in those commercials which stress sustainable fishing, farming, or cultivation practices. *As do Mar*, for example, claims that its tuna is *"good for the sea"* – thus acknowledging that tuna fishing has a negative impact on sustainability (implicit knowledge) –, but also for the people ("It's good for

you"), as summarized in the slogan *"As do Mar, quality and respect"* (2e). The same positive framing linking people and the planet can be found in the *Findus Pisellini Primavera* commercial, where the explanation – *"because by respecting the environment, they also respect you"* – gives topical prominence to both health and sustainability (6c). Other brands thematize this relationship more clearly. Among them, *Frosta* assumes that additives are unsafe and unhealthy, as the commercial reads: *"We catch and process fish sustainably. Do we really want to put additives in it?"*; and *"Only fish from sustainable fisheries, delicious, and no additives"* (3e). *Oro Saiwa* frames both themes through quality and authoritativeness. Respectively: *"It's made with the best grains, it doesn't waste water and it protects the bees"*; *"That's why [grandma] chose it, she did it for me and for the Earth"* (9e). *Bonduelle* and *Mulino Bianco* also mention bees with reference to pesticides (5e) and sustainable agriculture, as in *"Respectful of the environment and bees are happy or 3% of the fields are planted with flowers to help the bees"* (10e) – but health reasons are omitted.

Another group of advertisements alludes more generically to sustainability: while *Garden Gourmet*'s commercial seems to focus mainly on health, it also addresses people who do not follow a vegan/vegetarian diet (e.g. flexitarians, that is people who eat mainly vegetarian food but also meat occasionally), thus implying that plant-based diets are generally more sustainable than omnivore ones (8e). *Findus Green Cuisine*'s commercial implicitly suggests that meat is not sustainable (7e), and the claim tries to reverse, through discursive insinuation, the popular idea that vegetable burgers are not tasty: *"Green Cuisine burgers are sustainable, meatless, and taste amazing"*. In *Lavazza*'s commercial, sustainability is associated to forests' management, climate change, and workers' protection, three issues usually linked to coffee farming: *"We support reforestation in the Amazon. We support the training of young people in Africa. We respond to climate change"* (11e). Another coffee brand, *Nespresso*, uses similar claims to highlight sustainable farming, in *"we protect what is most precious and guarantee exceptional and sustainable quality, and careful practices, in we carefully cultivate one of the world's best coffees, or we guard a carefully cultivated passion"* (12e).

The last group of advertisements stresses topics such as packaging design, disposal, and recycling. Two brands of bottled water, *Ferrarelle* and *San Benedetto*, frame sustainability through corporate recycling in (14e) – *"[our] recycling plant removes 20,000 tonnes of plastic from the environment every year"* – and recycled packaging in (15e) – *"the new [...] 100% carbon-neutral and 100% recycled plastic bottles"*. In the two commercials, the idea that plastic packaging is bad for the environment is backgrounded, while it is underlined that the two companies are leading

laypeople with good recycling practices. *La Valle degli Orti* makes the paradox of plastic packaging explicit: *"We grow and process our vegetables sustainably. And then we put them in plastic. Is there another way?"* (4e). Lastly, *Caffè Borbone*'s commercial insists on correct packaging disposal as a proof of sustainability (*"the coffee is 100% eco-friendly, because you can throw the pod in the compostable bin […] and the bag goes in the paper"*) and connotes individual recycling in a positive way (13e).

4.2. Linguistic features

In all the advertising texts considered, the majority of Italian words fall within the semantic areas of environment and sustainability. While the study concentrates on Italian commercials, this constitutes the first step towards broader research investigating possible lingua-cultural differences across Italian and UK commercials of products, services in the same sectors and segments, as well as with similar social intents. For what concerns nouns (double underlining in Annex 1), the words *world, planet* and *Earth* offer a clear, recognizable linguistic object and ideological target for conscious consumers (*"we will manage […] to build a world"* (1b); *"she did it […] for the Earth"* (9b)). The words 'environment' and 'nature' are used similarly in key phrases, especially in collocations with derivates of 'respect*', as in *"respect for the environment"* (5b), the adjective phrase *"respectful of the environment"* (5b), or the verb construction *"respecting the environment"* (6b). Rhetorical use of nouns is made in metaphorical expressions (*"friend of nature"* (13b), *"endless possibilities"* (12b)), euphemisms and positive claims (*"a world with more nature"* (10b); *"a commitment to nature"* (14b)), and other catchphrases (*"when there's love, there's more taste"* (6b)). Among the nouns in the area of food sustainability, *impact*, *'deforestation'*, *commitment, climate change*, and of course *'sustainability'* stand out, as well as *plastic*, *paper*, *quality*, or *health* with reference to food production, processing, and packaging. The noun *choice(s)*, as it will be shown, plays an important role in targeting the advertisements' receivers – as in the expressions *"the right choice for a better world"* (13b), and *"the choices we make can change the planet"* (11b).

   Moving to verbs (single underlining in Annex 1), *change* is found in combination with the modal *can* in *"good shopping can change the world"* (1b) and *"the choices we make can change the planet"* (11b), with the declarative mood signaling possibility and deontic modality. The action verbs *protect, choose, convince, try* and *help* also hint at individual agency, usually to push consumers to commit to sustainable living. For the same reason, the strategic verbs *recycle* and *respect* can be seen as markers of a prevailing, albeit indirect, imperative mood; similar verbs in this sense include the optimistic *make* and *build*. Speaking of connotation at the word level, the

usually negative verbs *limit* and *reduce* are here positively connoted to describe corporate efforts to cut polluting emissions, use of pesticides, antibiotics, and additives. Other verbs describing production processes include *grow*, *fish* and *farm*.

While certain lexical choices seem rather necessary to build the advertising discourse on environmental sustainability, adjectives and adverbs are selected and positively connoted in each advertisement for promotional purposes. Regarding adjectives, *recyclable* and *recycled* are used to reassure consumers that a product is sustainable (*"delicious vegetables in recyclable paper-based bags"* (4b)), and to show evidence of corporate commitment to sustainability issues (*"100% recycled plastic bottles"* (15b)). All derivates of the stem *sustainab**, including the adjective *sustainable*, the adverb *sustainably*, or the noun *sustainability*, are less semantically specific; as a matter of fact, the evoked claims (*"Findus Green Cuisine burgers are sustainable"* (7b); *"Spring Peas are [...] sustainable"* (6b)), practices (*"fish from sustainable fisheries"* (3b); *"flour from sustainable agriculture"* (10b)), and objectives (*"takes another step towards full sustainability"* (15b)) have different implied meanings and concepts, already discussed in the previous section. The adjective 'compostable' (*"compostable bin"* (13b)) has the same communicative purpose as its *de facto* synonyms *recyclable* and *sustainable*. Finally, the gradable *good* alludes to food taste (*"Spring Pees are good"* (6b); *"[veggie burgers] taste amazing"* (7b); *"friend of nature and good"* (13b)), but also, metaphorically, to quality (*"the best nature of coffee"* (11b); *"one of the world's best coffees"* (12b)), and environmentally sustainable products (*"it's good and simple, because it's made with the best grains"* (9b)). Other expressions have a more general positive meaning (*"good shopping can change the world"* (example 1b); *"every day, a good day"* (9b); *"a better world"* (13b)).

4.3. Power relations: mood and stance

The thematic and lexical analysis conducted so far has focused on all three levels of analysis envisioned in the Methodology section, namely text as a whole, sentence by sentence, and words and phrases. At a higher level, a contextualized interpretation (Huckin 1997, p. 99) can yield insight into more critical aspects, such as the advertisements' narrative strategies and configuration of power relations among the participants. For the sake of critical interpretation, it is maintained that some imbalance in the relation between advertisers and target audience is implied in advertising discourse in general, at least because the latter "firmly embeds the mass of the population within the capitalist system by assigning them the legitimate and even desirable role of 'consumers'" (Fairclough 2001, p. 30). In this and the next section, mood and stance, as well as (environmental) claim evaluation, are

seen as natural expressions of register at all discursive levels.

Regarding mood, all advertisements are structured in the form of statements or commands, either separately (8 statements) or in combination (6 statements + commands); in one case, a question, or rather an invitation to the target audience is included (1 statement + question). Statements present information as factual, reliable, and trustworthy, and try to persuade potential buyers by means of authoritativeness and stance. In order to achieve this communicative effect and further justify the claims, some clauses are introduced by the adverb 'because' (*"because it's made with the best grains"* (9b); *"and that's why"* (10b); *"because the choices we make can change the planet"* (11b); *"because you can throw the pod in the compostable bin"* (13b)). In some instances, however, the logic links between clauses are unclear and show signs of vagueness (*"because by respecting the environment, they also respect you"* (6b); *"because a world with more nature is a happier world"* (10b); *"because with every cup we guard a carefully cultivated passion"* (12b)). In terms of participant relations and tenor, the target audience seems to be guided by means of logic, rather than manipulation; this is also confirmed by the presence of experts or familiar characters introduced as 'friendly authority' (*"The Findus agronomist knows"* (6b); *"Grandma says it's good and simple"* (9b)). The lack of direct imperative mood and modal verbs expressing obligation, together with the general predominance of personal constructions in the active voice, account for informality and equality among participants.

On the other hand, commercials combining statements and commands are more direct and persuasive. Not surprisingly, all advertisements abound in imperative constructions (*"Choose Bonduelle salads"* (5b); *"Discover Garden Gourmet"* (8b); *"Try Garden Gourmet now"* (8b); *"Protect nature with us"* (15b)) typically used in this genre, for example to signal urgency (Barnard 2017). One particular case is the imperative *let*: since it is usually found in combination with the inclusive first person plural pronoun *us* (*"Let's all recycle"* (14b); *"Let's be honest"* (3b)), the resulting command is perceived as less direct, and agency is mitigated. The modals *will* (*"we will manage"* (1b)) and *can* (*"we can protect"* (15b)), are also used to avoid direct expression of imperative mood. Conditional and correlative constructions, in particular, mark veiled commands by linking individual agency to positive outcomes, as in the examples: *"If all together we continue to choose [Coop] products [...] we will manage to [...] build a world"* (1b), and *"the more people we convince to recycle, the more plastic will be removed from the environment"* (14b). In this latter case, the passive construction *will be removed* is also an instance of agency omission. In the *Findus Green Cuisine* advertisement for vegetarian burgers, the causative statement *we'll change your mind* is accompanied by the question/invitation

"Want to join us?" (7b), which challenges the target audience to try vegetable products, and mitigates the previous manipulative statement.

Together with mood, stance creates recognisable addresser/addressee relationships through linguistic elements such as personal and possessive pronouns, and other markers of agency (highlighted in bold in Annex 1). Stance and agency features respond to the general storytelling need to build and reinforce the advertisement's message through clear, coherent narration; in this sense, three different stances can be identified in the dataset:

1. *we vs you*;

2. *we*;

3. *we and you*.

In the first group of commercials (*we vs you*), the juxtaposition of the pronouns *we/us* and *you/your* (*"It's good for us [...]. It's good for you"* (2b); *"whatever -tarian you are, we have many irresistible vegetable products for you"* (8b); *"With every cup we [...] give taste to your coffee moment"* (12b)) shows relational imbalance in which the consumer entrusts their decisional power to the company as a sort of convenience compromise.

A similar perspective is created in those advertisements where a detached *we* guides the narration: these commercials are characterized by lists of positive actions which are meant to give proof of companies' commitment to sustainability and quality (*"We support reforestation [...]. We support the training of young people [...]. We respond to climate change"* (11b)). When passive constructions substitute the explicit subject *we* (*"Mulino Bianco cookies are made with [...]"; "3% of the fields are planted with flowers"* (10b)), the resulting agentless claims are more likely to be perceived as vague or ambiguous.

The last group of advertisements adopts a cooperative *we and you* perspective by including companies among the actors of positive change together with consumers. This approach manages to create a fairer communicative environment in which the message is not imposed from above on the audience (*you*), but the pronoun 'we' indicates a plurality of equally responsible agents (*"If all together we"* (1b); *"that's the salad we like"* (5b); *"along with us stands San Benedetto"* (15b)). At the same time, however, the subject *we* defines a broader, less specific group of agents, as in the ambiguous *"Let's be honest"* (4b), where it is unclear whether *Frosta* and *La Valle degli Orti* include themselves in the group identified by 'us'.

4.3.1. Power relations: claim evaluation

In line with Carlson *et al.* (1993), claims of environmental sustainability in the dataset can be assessed critically, for instance to look for signs of greenwashing. Close reading of the advertisements shows that the majority of

claims are product-oriented (focusing on "environmentally friendly attributes that a product possesses" (Carlson *et al.* 1993, p. 31)) in which they try to present the advertised products as eco-friendly, usually with reference to sustainability. In some cases, eco-friendly attributes are rather arbitrary, as no explanations or detailed figures are presented (*"this [...] tuna is good for the sea"* (2b); *"grown with respect for the environment"* (5b)): for this reason, these claims suffer from vagueness or ambiguity. Conversely, process-oriented claims (dealing with "an organization's internal technology, production technique and/or disposal method that yields environmental benefits" (Carlson *et al.* 1993, p. 31)) appear to be more reliable when numbers and quantifiable data are given as a proof of transparency (*"3% of the fields are planted with flowers"* (10b); *"[Ferrarelle] removes 20,000 tonnes of plastic from the environment every year"* (14b); *"100% carbon-neutral and 100% recycled plastic bottles"* (15b)).

Omissions and vagueness are detected in the majority of process-oriented claims (*"no additives"* (3b); *"farms that reduce the use of antibiotics and cultivation methods that increasingly limit the use of pesticides"* (1b); *"bags with reduced emissions"* (4b); *"it doesn't waste water and it protects the bees"* (9b); *"much more [plastic] than what it uses to produce bottles with recycled plastic"* (14b); and others). In some cases, generic figures included in slogans to impress the audience offer no factual information on sustainability (*"-1 impact"* (15b); *"100% the natural choice"* (3b, 4b); *"100% eco-friendly"* (15b)). The same can be said for the use of Anglicisms (*"You got the power"* (7b); *"eco-friendly"* (13b); *"carbon neutral"* (15b) and the English adjective *green*, which provides a generic semantic link to the environment, as in: *Findus Green Cuisine* and *San Benedetto Eco-green 100 eco*. Indeed, the presence and use of English words in Italian promotional texts has been recognized as a sign of greenwashing, or "an attempt at catching the attention of recipients and impressing them" (Caimotto, Molino, 2011, p. 8).

Environment-oriented claims – involving "independent statement that is ostensibly factual in nature from an organization about the environment at large, or its condition" (Carlson *et al.* 1993, p.31) – make use of shared knowledge on environmental issues to gain consumers' support. It should be said that certain daily use products are more frequently addressed in popular discussion compared to others: coffee and bottled water, for instance, are widely linked to direct environmental damage, in particular to deforestation and plastic pollution. Therefore, the related advertisements make explicit mention of environmental problems, as in the case of *Lavazza* (*reforestation, climate change* (11b)), *Ferrarelle* (*"removes [...] plastic from the environment"* (14b)), and *San Benedetto* (*"recycled plastic bottles"* (15b)). Similar image-oriented claims (claims associating an organization "with an

*L*ingue e *L*inguaggi

environmental cause or activity for which there is broad-based public support" (Carlson *et al.* 1993, p. 31)) stress corporate commitment to environmental issues (*"we grow and process our vegetables sustainably. And then we put them in plastic"* (4b); *"Lavazza Tierra shows the Lavazza Foundation's commitment"* (11b); *"With every cup we protect what is most precious"* (12b)), thus creating more credible narrations for the target audience. A different type of image-orientation appears in the advertising claims of plant-based products. Because of the still widespread skepticism towards novel or alternative foods (*"we'll change your mind about veggie burgers"* (7b)), the claims by *Findus Green Cuisine* and *Garden Gourmet* use humour and linguistic creativity to address all kinds of consumers (*"Whether you're vege-tarian, flexi-tarian, gourmet-tarian, or messy-tarian"*, (8b)), thus creating a positive feeling of trust.

5. Conclusions

The present study has sought to deconstruct eco-friendly discourse in a dataset of 15 food and drinks advertisements in Italian. Despite the limitations previously illustrated, results from the qualitative critical analysis show that environmental and sustainability themes are exploited in all commercials at the textual and linguistic levels. In some cases, sustainability is framed using health motifs, whereas explicit references to environmental sustainability tend to be less specific. With reference to nature's intrinsic value (Stibbe 2020), it seems that environment-related narrations are rather used for specific marketing purposes to provide evidence of sustainability commitment by companies, also in line with Corporate Social Responsibility requirements. On the one hand, the need for eco-friendly advertising appears to be pushed by conscious consumers urging businesses to opt for more responsible production (Mintel 2021); on the other hand, it is part of green marketing strategies promoting green consumerism models (Akenji 2014).

From a critical standpoint, the traditional imbalance between passive consumers and aggressive marketers is now more openly questioned, as people become more aware of their power to drive markets with their purchasing choices. The risk of greenwashing as a way of pleasing conscious consumers remains, but reported cases are being dealt with by the Italian Court under the European Commission guidelines on Unfair Commercial Practices (see Piovano, Andolina 2022). Future research may explore power relations in green advertising more systematically, for example through enhanced frameworks for the assessments of environmental claims, or by comparing Italian and English advertisements of multinational/international brands to evidence possible lingua-cultural differences.

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Annex 1 – Commercials

Notation:
Bold = pronouns and markers of agency and stance
<u>Single underlining</u> = verbs and verb phrases
<u>Double underlining</u> = nouns, adjectives, and adverbs

1. COOP – COOPERATIVE/SUPERMARKETS
TEXT (A) – Se tutti insieme continuiamo a scegliere prodotti come quelli a marchio Coop, che provengono da allevamenti che riducono l'utilizzo di antibiotici e da metodi di coltivazione che limitano sempre più l'uso di pesticidi, riusciremo pezzo dopo pezzo a costruire un mondo in cui la salute è al centro di tutto. Coop, una buona spesa può cambiare il mondo.
(B) 'If **all together we** <u>continue to choose</u> Coop-branded products, which come from farms that <u>reduce</u> the use of antibiotics and <u>cultivation</u> methods that increasingly <u>limit</u> the use of pesticides, **we** <u>will manage</u>, piece by piece, to <u>build</u> a <u>world</u> where <u>health</u> is at the center of everything. Coop, <u>good</u> shopping <u>can change</u> the <u>world</u>.' [translation, MN]
MAIN FOCUS OR THEME (C) – Health.
IMPLIED KNOWLEDGE (D) – Farming has negative impacts on the environment; antibiotics and pesticides are not good for people's health.
CLAIM OR EXPLICIT MESSAGE (E) – Coop products can change the world and improve people's health; Product and Process Orientation.
MOOD AND STANCE (F) – Statement and (veiled) command; WE *and* YOU.
2. AS DO MAR – CANNED TUNA
TEXT (A) – Questo tonno As do Mar è buono per il mare. È buono per noi, perché è lavorato in Italia. È buono per te. As do Mar, la qualità e il rispetto.
(B) 'This As do Mar tuna is <u>good</u> for the <u>sea</u>. It's good for **us** because it is processed in Italy. It's good for **you**. As do Mar, <u>quality</u> and <u>respect</u>.' [translation, MN]
MAIN FOCUS OR THEME (C) – Health; Sustainability.
IMPLIED KNOWLEDGE (D) – Tuna fishing has a negative impact on sustainability.
CLAIM OR EXPLICIT MESSAGE (E) – As do Mar tuna is positive for both people and the planet; Product orientation.
MOOD AND STANCE (F) – Statement; WE vs YOU.
3. FROSTA – FROZEN FISH AND FISH PRODUCTS
TEXT (A) – Siamo onesti: peschiamo e lavoriamo il pesce in modo sostenibile. Davvero ci vogliamo mettere gli additivi? C'è un altro modo? Prova i prodotti Frosta! Solo pesce da pesca sostenibile, buonissimo, e senza additivi. Frosta, 100% la scelta naturale.
(B) '<u>Let's</u> be <u>honest</u>: **we** catch and process fish <u>sustainably</u>. Do **we** really want to put additives in it? Is there another way? <u>Try</u> Frosta products! Only fish from <u>sustainable</u> fisheries, delicious, and no additives. Frosta, 100% the <u>natural choice</u>.' [translation, MN]
MAIN FOCUS OR THEME (C) – Health; Sustainability.
IMPLIED KNOWLEDGE (D) – Additives are not good for people's health.
CLAIM OR EXPLICIT MESSAGE (E) – Competitors' products have additives; Frosta products are healthier and sustainable; Product, Process and Image Orientation.
MOOD AND STANCE (F) – Statement and command; WE vs YOU.
4. LA VALLE DEGLI ORTI – FROZEN VEGETABLES
TEXT (A) – Siamo onesti: coltiviamo e lavoriamo le nostre verdure in modo sostenibile. E poi le mettiamo nella plastica. C'è un altro modo? La Valle degli Orti, verdure buonissime, in buste riciclabili a base di carta e con emissioni ridotte. La Valle degli Orti, 100% la scelta naturale.
(B) '<u>Let's</u> be <u>honest</u>: **we** grow and process our vegetables sustainably. And then **we** put them in plastic. Is there another way? La Valle degli Orti, delicious vegetables in <u>recyclable paper-based</u> bags with <u>reduced</u>

<u>emissions</u>. La Valle degli Orti, 100% the <u>natural choice</u>.' [translation, MN]
MAIN FOCUS OR THEME (C) – Sustainability.
IMPLIED KNOWLEDGE (D) – Plastic packaging is not good for the environment.
CLAIM OR EXPLICIT MESSAGE (E) – Competitors' products have plastic packaging; La Valle degli Orti products have sustainable packaging; Product, Process, and Image orientation.
MOOD AND STANCE (F) – Statement; WE vs YOU.

5. BONDUELLE – VEGETABLE PRODUCTS
TEXT (A) – Insalate, già lavate sono fresche e prelibate. Rispettose dell'ambiente e le api son contente. Sulle tavole, in famiglia, trova il gusto che ti piglia. Così semplice e vivace è l'insalata che ci piace. Scegli le insalate Bonduelle, coltivate nel rispetto dell'ambiente. Bonduelle. Il mondo che ci piace.
(B) 'Salads, already washed, fresh and delicious. <u>Respectful</u> of the <u>environment</u> and <u>bees</u> are <u>happy</u>. On the table, with the family, find the taste that captures you. So simple and lively, that's the salad **we** like. <u>Choose</u> Bonduelle salads, <u>grown</u> with <u>respect</u> for the <u>environment</u>. Bonduelle. The <u>world</u> **we** like.' [translation, MN]
MAIN FOCUS OR THEME (C) – Sustainability.
IMPLIED KNOWLEDGE (D) – Farming has negative impacts on the environment and on bees.
CLAIM OR EXPLICIT MESSAGE (E) – Bonduelle salads respect the environment; Product Orientation.
MOOD AND STANCE (F) – Statement and command; WE and YOU.

6. FINDUS PISELLINI PRIMAVERA – VEGETABLE PRODUCTS
TEXT (A) – L'agronomo Findus lo sa: i Pisellini Primavera sono *una bontà*, teneri, *dolci, piccoli, sostenibili*, perché rispettando l'ambiente, rispettano anche te. Findus, quando c'è amore, c'è più gusto.
(B) 'The Findus agronomist knows: Spring Peas are good, tender, sweet, small, <u>*sustainable*</u>, because by <u>respecting</u> the <u>environment</u>, they also <u>respect</u> **you**. Findus, when there's love, there's more taste.' [translation, MN]
MAIN FOCUS OR THEME (C) – Health; Sustainability.
IMPLIED KNOWLEDGE (D) – Farming has negative impacts on the environment.
CLAIM OR EXPLICIT MESSAGE (E) – Findus products respect the environment and therefore they respect people; Product Orientation.
MOOD AND STANCE (F) – Statement; WE vs YOU.

7. FINDUS GREEN CUISINE – VEGETABLE AND PLANT-BASED PRODUCTS
TEXT (A) – Sotto questa bandiera vi faremo cambiare idea sui burger vegetali. I burger Green Cuisine Findus sono sostenibili, senza carne, e con un gusto sorprendente. La rivoluzione è iniziata. Vuoi essere dei nostri? Findus Green Cuisine, you got the power!
(B) 'Under this flag, **we**'<u>ll</u> <u>change</u> **your** mind about veggie burgers. Findus Green Cuisine burgers are <u>sustainable</u>, meatless, and taste amazing. The <u>revolution</u> has begun. <u>Want to join **us**</u>? Findus Green Cuisine, **you** <u>got</u> the <u>power</u>!' [translation, MN]
MAIN FOCUS OR THEME (C) – Sustainability.
IMPLIED KNOWLEDGE (D) – Meat is not sustainable; people think vegetable burgers are not tasty.
CLAIM OR EXPLICIT MESSAGE (E) – If people buy these burgers, they will be part of a sustainability revolution; Product and Image Orientation.
MOOD AND STANCE (F) – Statement and question; WE vs YOU.

8. GARDEN GOURMET – VEGETABLE AND PLANT-BASED PRODUCTS
TEXT (A) – Scopri Garden Gourmet. Che tu sia vege-tariano, flexi-tariano, gourmet-tariano, pasticcia-tariano. Insomma, qualunque –tariano tu sia, per te abbiamo tanti prodotti vegetali irresistibili. Prova subito Garden Gourmet.
(B) '<u>Discover</u> Garden Gourmet. Whether **you**'re <u>vege-tarian, flexi-tarian, gourmet-tarian,</u> or <u>messy-tarian</u>. In short, whatever -tarian **you** are, **we** have many irresistible vegetable products for **you**. <u>Try</u> Garden Gourmet now.' [translation, MN]
MAIN FOCUS OR THEME (C) – Health.
IMPLIED KNOWLEDGE (D) – Plant-based diets are healthier and more sustainable.

CLAIM OR EXPLICIT MESSAGE (E) – There is a Garden Gourmet product for every type of diet; Product and Image Orientation.

MOOD AND STANCE (F) – Statement and command; WE vs YOU.

9. ORO SAIWA – BISCUITS

TEXT (A) – Da quando ero piccolo, a colazione c'è Oro Saiwa. Nonna dice che è buono e semplice, perché è fatto con i chicchi migliori, non spreca l'acqua e protegge le api. Per questo l'ha scelto, l'ha fatto per me e per la Terra. Oro Saiwa, ogni giorno, un giorno buono.

(B) 'Ever since **I** was little, **I**'ve had Oro Saiwa for breakfast. **Grandma** <u>says</u> it's good and simple, because it's made with the <u>best</u> grains, it doesn't <u>waste</u> water and it <u>protects</u> the <u>bees</u>. That's why **she** chose it, **she** did it for **me** and for <u>the Earth</u>. Oro Saiwa, every day, a good day.' [translation, MN]

MAIN FOCUS OR THEME (C) – Health; Sustainability.

IMPLIED KNOWLEDGE (D) – Farming has negative impacts on water consumption and bees.

CLAIM OR EXPLICIT MESSAGE (E) – Oro Saiwa biscuits are good for both people and the planet; Product and Process Orientation.

MOOD AND STANCE (F) – Statement; WE.

10. MULINO BIANCO – BISCUITS

TEXT (A) – I biscotti Mulino Bianco sono fatti con farina da agricoltura sostenibile. E per questo il 3% dei campi è coltivato a fiori per aiutare le api. Perché un mondo con più natura è un mondo più felice.

(B) 'Mulino Bianco cookies <u>are made</u> with flour from <u>sustainable</u> agriculture. And that's why 3% of the fields <u>are planted</u> with flowers to <u>help</u> the <u>bees</u>. Because a <u>world</u> with more <u>nature</u> is a <u>happier world</u>.' [translation, MN]

MAIN FOCUS OR THEME (C) – Sustainability.

IMPLIED KNOWLEDGE (D) – Farming has negative impacts on bees.

CLAIM OR EXPLICIT MESSAGE (E) – Mulino Bianco cookies are sustainable; Product and Process Orientation.

MOOD AND STANCE (F) – Statement; WE.

11. LAVAZZA – COFFEE

TEXT (A) – Supportiamo la riforestazione in Amazzonia. Sosteniamo la formazione dei giovani in Africa. Rispondiamo al cambiamento climatico. Lavazza Tierra testimonia l'impegno della fondazione Lavazza, perché le scelte che facciamo possono cambiare il pianeta. Lavazza Tierra, la migliore natura del caffè.

(B) '**We** <u>support</u> <u>reforestation</u> in the Amazon. **We** <u>support</u> the training of young people in Africa. **We** <u>respond to</u> <u>climate change</u>. Lavazza Tierra <u>shows</u> the Lavazza Foundation's <u>commitment</u>, because the <u>choices</u> **we** <u>make</u> <u>can change</u> <u>the planet</u>. Lavazza Tierra, the best nature of coffee.' [translation, MN]

MAIN FOCUS OR THEME (C) – Sustainability.

IMPLIED KNOWLEDGE (D) – Coffee farming has negative impacts on forests, climate change, and workers' protection.

CLAIM OR EXPLICIT MESSAGE (E) – Lavazza Tierra is committed to saving the planet; Image and Environment orientation.

MOOD AND STANCE (F) – Statement; WE.

12. NESPRESSO – COFFEE

TEXT (A) – Con ogni tazza coltiviamo con cura uno dei migliori caffè al mondo e diamo gusto al tuo momento del caffè. Con ogni tazza proteggiamo ciò che è più prezioso e garantiamo una qualità eccezionale e sostenibile. Perché con ogni tazza custodiamo una passione coltivata con cura. Nespresso, What else!
E grazie al progetto 'Da chicco a chicco', quando ricicli contribuisci a trasformare capsule e caffè in infinite possibilità.

(B) 'With every cup **we** <u>carefully</u> <u>cultivate</u> one of the world's best coffees and give taste to **your** coffee moment. With every cup **we** <u>protect</u> what is most precious and <u>guarantee</u> exceptional and <u>sustainable</u> quality. Because with every cup **we** <u>guard</u> a <u>carefully</u> cultivated passion. Nespresso, What else!' [translation, MN]
And thanks to the project 'From grain to grain', when **you** <u>recycle</u> **you** <u>help</u> <u>transform</u> capsules and coffee into <u>endless</u> <u>possibilities</u>.

MAIN FOCUS OR THEME (C) – Sustainability.

IMPLIED KNOWLEDGE (D) – Coffee farming has negative impacts on the environment.
CLAIM OR EXPLICIT MESSAGE (E) – Nespresso products are sustainable; Image Orientation.
MOOD AND STANCE (F) – Statement; WE *vs* YOU.

13. CAFFÈ BORBONE – COFFEE

TEXT (A) – Ragazzi, caffè? – *Sì* grazie*, dopo mangiato ci vuole proprio.* Nuova macchinetta Borbone, così il caffè è 100% eco-friendly, perché la cialda la butti nell'umido – *compostabile* – e la busta va nella carta – *continua il ciclo della carta!* – la scatola invece… *Uagliu', ma stu' ccafè l'amma riciclà o ce l'amma bere?* Caffè Borbone, amico della natura *e buono! Anche perché se non era buono…* Borbone, la scelta giusta per un mondo migliore.

(B) 'Guys, coffee? - *Yes, thank you, after eating we really need it.* New Borbone coffee machine, so the coffee is 100% eco-friendly, because **you** can throw the pod in the compostable bin – *compostable!* – and the bag goes in the paper – *the paper cycle continues!* – the box instead... *Guys, are we recycling this coffee or are we drinking it?* Caffè Borbone, friend of nature *and good*! *Also because if it wasn't good...* Borbone, the right choice for a better world.' [translation, MN]

MAIN FOCUS OR THEME (C) – Sustainability.

IMPLIED KNOWLEDGE (D) – Recycling is good for the environment.

CLAIM OR EXPLICIT MESSAGE (E) – Borbone products are eco-friendly; each person can protect the environment through correct packaging disposal; Product and Process Orientation.

MOOD AND STANCE (F) – Statement; WE *vs* YOU.

14. FERRARELLE – BOTTLED WATER

TEXT (A) – Alleluya, Ferrarelle mi ha convinto e io sono riuscito a convincere Mattia. E io Sofia. Perché più persone convinciamo a riciclare, più plastica verrà tolta dall'ambiente. Proprio come fa Ferrarelle, l'unica che con il suo impianto di riciclo toglie ogni anno 20.000 tonnellate di plastica dall'ambiente, molte di più di quante ne utilizza per produrre bottiglie con plastica riciclata. Ricicliamo tutti per realizzare questa filosofia: un mondo a impatto -1. Ferrarelle, un impegno per la natura.

(B) '*Alleluya,* **Ferrarelle** convinced **me** and **I** managed to convince *Mattia. And* **I** convinced *Sofia. Because the more people* **we** convince to recycle, *the more* plastic *will be* removed *from the* environment*.* Just like Ferrarelle does, **the only one** whose recycling plant removes 20,000 tonnes of plastic from the environment every year, much more than what **it** uses to produce bottles with recycled plastic. **Let's all** recycle to achieve this philosophy: a world with -1 impact. Ferrarelle, a commitment to nature.' [translation, MN]

MAIN FOCUS OR THEME (C) – Sustainability.

IMPLIED KNOWLEDGE (D) – Recycling is good for the environment; plastic packaging is not good for the environment.

CLAIM OR EXPLICIT MESSAGE (E) – Ferrarelle gives a good example; each person can protect the environment through recycling; Process, Image, and Environment Orientation.

MOOD AND STANCE (F) – Statement and (veiled) command; WE *vs* YOU.

15. SAN BENEDETTO
BOTTLED WATER

TEXT (A) – Che spettacolo, eh? Ma noi non siamo solo spettatori, con le nostre scelte possiamo proteggere l'ambiente e mantenere pura e incontaminata l'acqua, anche per le generazioni future. Insieme a noi c'è San Benedetto, che fa un altro passo avanti verso la piena sostenibilità con la nuova eco-green 100 eco. 100% carbon-neutral e bottiglie 100% plastica riciclata. Per me nessuna è come lei. San Benedetto eco-green: proteggi la natura con noi.

(B) 'What a view, huh? But **we'**re not just spectators, with **our** choices **we** can protect the environment and keep water pure and uncontaminated, even for future generations. Along with **us** stands San Benedetto, which takes another step towards full sustainability with the new Eco-green 100 eco. 100% carbon-neutral and 100% recycled plastic bottles. For **me**, none is like it. San Benedetto Eco-green: protect nature with **us**.' [translation, MN]

MAIN FOCUS OR THEME (C) – Sustainability.

IMPLIED KNOWLEDGE (D) – Plastic packaging is not good for the environment; recycled packaging is sustainable.

CLAIM OR EXPLICIT MESSAGE (E) – San Benedetto gives a good example; each person can protect the environment by buying San Benedetto's products; Process, Image, and Environment Orientation.

MOOD AND STANCE (F) – Statement and command; WE *and* YOU.