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Discourses, Methods and Practices of Diversity, Equity,  
Inclusion and Belonging: Towards a Global Shared Framework

Discorsi, metodi e pratiche di diversità, equità, inclusione  
e senso di appartenenza: verso un quadro condiviso globale

*Edited by  
Fadia Nordtveit and Paola Catenaccio*

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# The Construction of Equality vs. Equity and Its (Un)Transparent Communication

## A Corpus-Based Analysis of ESG Communication in the Car Transportation Sector

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### ABSTRACT

Studies across various disciplines have shown that, although they sound similar, there is significant difference in the meanings of the words *equality* and *equity*. However, no research has been conducted on the linguistic and discursive construction of these two concepts, especially in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) disclosures, which are increasingly used by companies to show their commitment to these issues. In light of this, the primary objective of this study is to assess the usage of *equity* and *equality* in ESG communication, comparing it with their usage in a general English corpus. Additionally, the study aims to evaluate the transparency of companies' communication regarding their commitment and approach to *equality* and/or *equity*. Through a synchronic corpus-based analysis of a pilot corpus of ESG reports from companies operating in the sectors of car rental and ride sharing, followed by a comparison with the *enTenTen21 Corpus*, this paper provides insights into the linguistic profiles of the two words and the communication strategies in both contexts. The findings attempt at contributing to an updated linguistic definition of the distinction between *equity* and *equality* that is still lacking in the literature.

*Keywords:* corpus-based discourse analysis; equality vs. equity; ESG communication; generic English; transparency vs. vagueness.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The notions of *equality* and *equity* have increasingly become of relevance, together with those of *diversity*, *inclusion*, and *belonging*, for the promotion and the achievement of social sustainability goals. Although they may sound similar, *equality* and *equity* differ significantly in their meanings (Bronfenbrenner 1973, 9), as suggested by studies from different non-linguistic disciplines, including law, politics, and economics.

On one hand, *equality*, mostly discussed in terms of equality of opportunity, means that “all individuals should have the same chances and opportunities” (Neugebauer 2021, 293). However, it was pointed out that this notion does not account for individuals’ conditions, nor do equality discourses challenge any existing disparities (Lanfranconi *et al.* 2020, 883-884; Minow 2021, 180). Equality has also been conceptualised as “a mathematical concept”, or even “an impossible, idealistic, or suspicious goal, often associated with communism/socialism” that is insufficient for removing any existing social inequalities (Klasen 2006, 70).

On the other hand, an *equity*-based approach acknowledges the root causes of any disparities and consists in diversifying the allocation of different resources or opportunities according to the different backgrounds or needs (Minow 2021, 180) to *create* equal opportunities<sup>1</sup>. The importance of such an approach was also stressed, in 2005, by the Council of Europe, which forcefully claimed that the commitment to equity contributes, above all, to social cohesion (Battaini-Dragoni 2006). In order to reach these goals, equitable approaches should be adopted in different areas, including income, employment, health, housing, gender, culture, ethnicity, age, income, education, participation in political life, and citizenship (COE 2005, in Battaini-Dragoni 2006, 48-49). In addition, it is noteworthy that in dictionaries of contemporary English the word *equity*, compared to *equality*, is mostly associated with *justice* and *fairness*<sup>2</sup>.

Following these considerations, the distinction between *equality* and *equity* remains subtle, and their conceptualisation is often ‘fluid’ (Lanfranconi *et al.* 2020, 885), although *equity* appears to be generally preferred by people covering power positions: in other words, there is a tendency to promote equity (rather than equality), and complain

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://onlinepublichealth.gwu.edu/resources/equity-vs-equality/> [14/01/2024].

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, the definitions provided by the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/equity>), and *Oxford English Dictionary* (<https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=equity>) [14/01/2024].

about inequalities (Klassen 2006, 70). The terminological confusion surrounding the two words has resulted in them being commonly used interchangeably. However, to the best of my knowledge, the equivalence between *equality* and *equity* has not been demonstrated either conceptually or on the basis of their use in discourse.

This is especially relevant in light of the fact that these concepts play a key role in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) communication, particularly in disclosing information about corporate commitment to social sustainability. CSR communication emerged in the 20th century, reflecting the increasing concern of companies to demonstrate that their actions are ethically responsible and socially beneficial. This has resulted in the annual publication of CSR reports that include policies and activities showing their ethical social commitment. These documents are addressed to a diverse range of stakeholders, including investors, employees, and customers. As explained by Breeze (2012, 165), companies have gradually expanded their CSR reports to include policies and practices related to social issues such as labour standards in developing countries, human rights, bioethical issues, corporate accountability and transparency, diversity, and inclusion.

In recent years, there has been a change in the nomenclature of CSR reports, with many companies now entitling these documents ESG reports. The concept of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) is an evolution of CSR. While CSR has often been considered a philosophical and philanthropic concept of responsibility in management (Carrol 1979; 2016), ESG entails quantifiable sustainability practices and metrics that allow the assessment of a company's or organization's sustainability level. Despite this terminological difference, both CSR and ESG represent approaches to sustainability, resulting in many similarities between CSR and ESG reports in terms of structure and thematic choices, including the focus on social issues. In light of this analogy and the conceptual relationship between human sustainability, equality, and equity, investigating how *equality* and *equity* are conceptualized and communicated by companies in their CSR or ESG disclosures to their stakeholders can offer useful insights into their conceptual differences, if any, thus helping clarify their respective meanings in a nuanced manner.

In the field of management, scholars have published contributions that focus on the practices promoting diversity, equality/equity, and inclusion (e.g., Mazzei and Ravazzani 2012; Oswick and Noon 2014). With specific reference to *equality* and *equity*, Utting's (2007) study has

identified four crucial aspects that are covered in CSR, namely *social protection, rights, empowerment, and redistribution*. The first term is also referred to as the welfare and well-being of companies' internal and external stakeholders, and it includes any initiatives aimed at improving working conditions and providing support and assistance to "communities where company operations are located" (*ibid.*, 699). The second aspect acknowledges that creating equal opportunities requires the recognition and full realisation of the rights of workers, women, children, and any minority groups being historically or currently oppressed, exploited or marginalised (*ibid.*, 701). Focusing on the first two issues undoubtedly contributes to the inclusion of the different corporate communities and, thus, to their empowerment: in particular, employees feel that their diversity makes them unique and, hence, work proactively for the success of a company. Finally, the last aspect accounts for the allocation of money and resources that is aimed at reducing any existing gaps, especially those of an economic nature.

Communicating a socially responsible behaviour on these issues in CSR and ESG disclosures boosts stakeholders' trust and enhances corporate reputation. However, merely releasing information about companies' commitments is not sufficient to fully achieve this goal. Such content must also be transmitted transparently. Not only is transparency the open sharing of information, but it has also been characterized in terms of information amount (Winkler 2000), completeness (Vaccaro and Madsen 2006), accuracy and clarity (Schnackenberg and Tomlinson 2016), availability, accessibility, and understandability (Turilli and Floridi 2009). However, the transparency of a message depends not only on the writer's intention but also on the recipients' perception, making it difficult to identify specific and conventionalised linguistic choices that convey transparency. Conversely, linguistic vagueness can be a give-away for the identification of non-transparent linguistic and communicative choices. In the field of CSR and ESG communication, Jin (2022) conducted linguistic research on CSR reports from the cosmetics sector, in which she identified and classified vague expressions into four categories: quantity, time, degree, and softeners. Vague expressions of quantity (e.g., *many, several*) and time (e.g., *often, usually*) avoid exact quantifications and time information. Vague degree expressions (e.g., *important, significant*) do not specify to what extent an action or problem is important or significant. Softeners (e.g., the adverb *probably*, and the modal verb *may*) are employed strategically to avoid giving certainty about specific information, practices, and results. In addition, vague linguistic choices

can also be terms used with generic meaning (for instance, words such as *thing* and *stuff*), as shown by Zhang (2018), although her study focus was the language reproduced by L1 and L2 speakers in educational settings and not CSR communication.

Recent linguistic studies devoted to the analysis of the strategies through which DEI is discursively constructed and communicated are remarkably few (e.g., Malavasi 2023; Nocella 2023; Turnbull 2023). Even among them, there appears to be a dearth of research analysing the conceptualisations of *equality* and *equity* in corporate discourse, and exploring the linguistic resources used to communicate about them. Furthermore, there is a lack of linguistic studies focusing on companies' transparent or non-transparent approach to these issues.

Drawing on this background, this study attempts to address the following research questions (RQs):

- RQ 1: Which term, *equality* or *equity*, is more popular respectively in ESG communication and general English usage?
- RQ 2: How are *equality* and *equity* discursively constructed in ESG communication and general English usage?
- RQ 3: Which lexico-phraseological patterns are employed in ESG disclosures to communicate *equality* and *equity*? Are the same patterns found in general English usage?
- RQ 4: Do the linguistic patterns identified around the terms *equality* and *equity* in ESG disclosures convey transparency or vagueness in the communication of these concepts?

The following sections are related to the study conducted to answer these RQs: section 2 illustrates the data selected and the methodology adopted for the analysis; section 3 presents the main results; section 4 discusses the results and summarises the previous sections, answers the RQs of this study, and highlights limitations and suggestions for further research.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

### 2.1. *The CAR R&S and the enTenTen21 corpora*

This first part of the study is based on a corpus-informed analysis of the *Car Ride & Sharing Corpus* (henceforth *CAR\_R&S Corpus*). This is a small pilot corpus (70,831 tokens) of 2022 ESG reports issued by

American international companies operating in two transport sub-sectors that have gained popularity in recent times: car rental and ride sharing. Car rental represents a “significant segment of the tourism economy” (Nhamo *et al.* 2020, 160), due to the increasing popularity of car rental services as a potentially eco-friendlier choice in tourist destinations. Ride sharing, on the other hand, is being adopted by more and more passengers because of its flexibility and affordable costs (Rabbitt and Ghosh 2013). In light of these factors, most companies operating in the car transportation sector have established themselves globally, opening stations and locating riders worldwide. This has led to the involvement and interconnection of diverse communities of customers and employees.

Since the aim of this research was also to investigate data from general English usage, the second part of the study considered a larger reference corpus of English, namely the *enTenTen21 Corpus*. This corpus, comprising 52,268,286,493 tokens, is included in the *Sketch Engine* platform (Kilgariff *et al.* 2014) and contains texts from the web collected between October-December 2021 and January 2022. This corpus was deemed a suitable term of comparison with the *CAR\_R&S Corpus* because both contain texts created for web access. Additionally, the timeframe covered by *enTenTen21* influenced the decision to collect 2022 ESG reports for the *CAR\_R&S Corpus*, as these reports were published in the first half of 2022 and relate to the results achieved by companies in the fiscal year 2021. This decision was made to facilitate a synchronic analysis of the linguistic profiles of equality and equity in the two corpora.

Moving back to the creation of the *CAR\_R&S Corpus*, and considering the aspects discussed above, this pilot corpus was organised in two sub-corpora containing texts issued by car rental and ride sharing operators, respectively. Criteria followed to select the companies and the documents for each sub-corpus included the availability of texts within the selected timeframe, a certain homogeneity between the two sub-corpora in relation to the number of documents and tokens, and the size of the companies in terms of their annual revenues and number of branches worldwide. For the car rental sub-corpus, *Avis Budget Group* and *Enterprise Mobility* were selected as they are among the largest car rental companies in the United States. In 2023, *Avis Budget Group* had an annual revenue exceeding \$10 billion<sup>3</sup>, while *Enterprise Mobility* had

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<sup>3</sup> See: <https://ir.avisbudgetgroup.com/news-releases/news-release-details/avis-budget-group-reports-fourth-quarter-and-full-year-results> [01/06/2024].



around \$35 billion<sup>4</sup>. Both companies operate in approximately 10,000 branches worldwide<sup>5</sup>. In the ride sharing sector, *Uber* and *Lyft* were chosen. *Uber*, with an annual revenue exceeding \$30 billion in 2023<sup>6</sup> and operations in over 90 countries<sup>7</sup>, is a leader in the field. Although *Lyft* has a lower annual revenue (approximately \$4 billion in 2023<sup>8</sup>) and is less international in terms of service coverage, it is considered *Uber*'s main competitor. Together, these two companies are the largest American operators in the ride sharing sector.

All texts were manually downloaded in .pdf format, saved as .txt files, and cleaned and formatted for whitespace, characters, HTML, links, duplicates, and others. Due to a more analytic focus on the linguistic features of texts, visual and other multimodal resources were disregarded during the phase of data collection and cleaning. The following table (*Tab. 1*) provides a breakdown of the corpus.

*Table 1. – The CAR\_R&S Corpus – Composition.*

SUB-SECTOR	COMPANY	DOCUMENT	NUMBER OF TOKENS
Car rental	<i>Avis Budget Group</i>	2022 ESG report	13,803
	<i>Enterprise Mobility</i>	2022 ESG report	14,353
Ride sharing	<i>Lyft</i>	2022 ESG report	17,964
	<i>Uber</i>	2022 ESG report	24,711

## 2.2. Methodology

Methodologically, in this study, a corpus-based approach (Tognini-Bonelli 2001; Baker 2006) was adopted. More specifically, the research consisted in two main sub-analyses, conducted respectively with the pilot corpus illustrated above and a larger reference corpus.

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<sup>4</sup> See: <https://www.enterprisemobility.com/en/about/financial-information.html> [01/06/2024].

<sup>5</sup> See: <https://www.nerdwallet.com/article/travel/what-is-the-best-car-rental-company> [01/06/2024].

<sup>6</sup> See: <https://investor.uber.com/news-events/news/press-release-details/2024/Uber-Announces-Results-for-Fourth-Quarter-and-Full-Year-2023/default.aspx> [01/06/2024].

<sup>7</sup> See: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/top-10ride-hailing-market-companies-world-gogpf/> [01/06/2024].

<sup>8</sup> See: <https://investor.lyft.com/news-and-events/news/news-details/2024/Lyft-Announces-Fourth-Quarter-and-Full-Year-2023-Results/default.aspx> [01/06/2024].

For the analysis of the *CAR\_R&S Corpus*, the first step consisted in calculating the normalised frequencies – expressed per ten thousand words – of the words *equal\** and *equit\** to determine which term was preferred. This procedure was immediately followed by the calculation of the lexical collocations of the two search words. This phase was conducted through the corpus software *AntConc 4.2.0* (Anthony 2022a), which was also employed to calculate the number of occurrences of the two search words prior to their normalisation. These collocates were calculated considering a 5L-5R span of co-text and setting the minimum frequency at two items. The final stage of the corpus analysis consisted in the observation of the lexical collocations in their context by scrutinizing their extended concordance lines to identify and explore the main collocational and lexico-phraseological patterns of the words (Sinclair 2003; 2004). The analysis of collocations enabled the detection of the main discursive associations of the two terms, since they provide an insight of “the most salient and obvious lexical patterns surrounding a subject, from which a number of discourses can be obtained” (Baker 2006, 112).

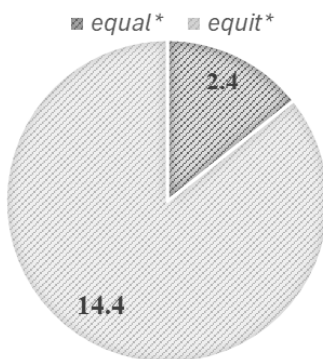
Similar procedures were adopted for the analysis of the linguistic profiles of *equality* and *equity* in the *enTenTen21 Corpus*. Unlike the analysis of the *CAR\_R&S Corpus*, this inquiry did not look at the occurrences of the all the word forms of *equality*. This choice was taken to discard all the numerous instances with co-occurring lexical items in the field of mathematics that the software displayed when typing *equal* or *equally* as search words. To make the analysis homogeneous, the same choice was adopted with *equity*. In this case, the analysis was carried out through the platform *Sketch Engine*, albeit some different facilities could be exploited, especially for the calculation of the lexical collocations. More specifically, the tool *Word Sketch* was used. This is a facility that allows to generate the collocates of any search word and displays them distributed across different grammatical categories – these include, for instance, modifiers and nouns modified by the search word, verbs with the same word as subject or object, and nouns linked with the search word by the conjunctions *and/or*. Given the high number of tokens in the corpus, the minimum frequency of each word’s collocate was set at 10,000, to narrow the focus on the strongest co-occurring lexical items. However, even with this restriction, it would not have been feasible to explore a large number of instances. Therefore, three randomized sets (Hunston 2010) of 100 concordance lines for each collocate was extracted and scrutinized to identify the most frequent lexico-phraseological patterns shown in its context.

For the analysis of the words *equality* and *equity* in their context of use, collocational patterns, and phraseology, a 10L-10R span of co-text was selected. However, when this span was insufficient to identify a specific discourse pattern or strategy, access to the entire text or a wider word-span was used to overcome this limitation. In summary, the quantitative analysis conducted with corpus linguistics tools was integrated with a qualitative approach to better identify and explore the discursive and linguistic strategies for constructing and disclosing *equality* and *equity* (RQs 1 and 2). This approach also helped to determine whether the information about the companies' commitment to equality and/or equity was transparent or vague (RQ 3). Particular attention was paid to any linguistic items that achieve accuracy and understandability of the information (Schnackenberg and Tomlinson 2016), as well as those that convey vagueness – such as vague lexical items associated with quantity, degree, and time (Jin 2022).

### 3. RESULTS

#### 3.1. *The CAR\_R&S Corpus*

From a quantitative perspective, as shown in the following pie chart (Fig. 1), the frequency analysis revealed that in the *CAR\_R&S Corpus*, the normalised frequency of *equal\** is seven times lower than that of *equit\**, suggesting a clear preference for the latter term in the companies' disclosures.



*Figure 1. – Normalised frequencies of equal\* and equit\* in the CAR\_R&S Corpus (expressed per 10,000 words).*

Considering that the normalized frequencies of both *equal\** and *equit\** are significantly low compared to the number of tokens in the corpus, it can be inferred that despite the increasing importance of these issues in ESG communication, they played a very marginal role in the companies' ESG strategies within the selected timeframe.

Moving on to the quantitative analysis of the collocations, the table below (Tab. 2) shows the strongest collocates of the words *equality* and *equity* in the *CAR\_R&S Corpus*, together with their likelihood value.

Table 2. – Lexical collocations of *equal\** and *equit\** in the *CAR\_R&S Corpus*.

WORD	COLLOCATIONS (LIKELIHOOD)
<i>equal*</i>	<i>gender</i> (23.437); <i>opportunities</i> (17.713)
<i>equit*</i>	<i>racial</i> (114.622); <i>pay</i> (110.200) <i>inclusion</i> (81.376); <i>diversity</i> (74.513); <i>gender</i> (41.672); <i>belonging</i> (37.784); <i>inclusive</i> (37.617); <i>maintain</i> (28.487); <i>sustaining</i> (19.840); <i>workplace</i> (18.232); <i>social</i> (17.117); <i>qualifying</i> (16.191); <i>cultivating</i> (16.191)

As data shows, only two collocates of *equal\** could be calculated due to the low frequency of the word itself. In contrast, several collocations of the word *equit\** were found in the corpus. The following paragraphs discuss the findings from the qualitative analysis, examining how these collocates linguistically behave in their context. This analysis aims to identify linguistic and discursive constructions and strategies that are not apparent from the sole statistical calculation of lexical collocations.

Both the words *equal\** and *equit\** share *gender* as a strong collocate. The likelihood value of *gender* as a collocate of *equal\** is nearly double that of its likelihood value in the context of *equit\**. However, this pattern is due to the different normalized frequencies of *equal\** and *equit\** observed earlier and does not indicate a tendency for *gender* to co-occur more frequently with one word over the other.

The inspection of the extended concordance lines for this word revealed a significant use of commissive statements (Bondi 2016) by the companies to express their proactive engagement with the issue of gender parity. These statements are realized through the expression of goals and values (e.g., the list of Sustainable Development Goals in example 1, the expression *is an integral part* in example 2, and the word

*targets* in example 4), the use of the verb *commit* (example 2), commissive future forms (e.g., *will* in example 4), and words expressing continuity (e.g., *maintain* in example 4).

- (1) Uber proudly contributes to many of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Due to the nature of our business and operations, we primarily contribute to 9: Good Health and Well-Being; **Gender Equality**; Affordable and Clean Energy; Decent Work and Economic Growth; Reduced Inequalities; Sustainable Cities and Communities; Climate Action; Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions; and Partnerships for the Goals. (Uber 2022 ESG report)
- (2) In late 2021, Avis Budget Group signed the UN Women’s Empowerment Principles (WEP) to solidify our *commitment* to making a difference for *gender equality* and women’s empowerment in the workplace, marketplace, and community. (Avis Budget Group 2022 ESG report)
- (3) *Gender pay equity* is an integral part of our DE&I strategy because it helps us attract and retain the best talent and foster an inclusive workplace. (Avis Budget Group 2022 ESG report)
- (4) Now, we have established 2030 *targets* that will see us maintain 50% diversity, *maintain* 100% *gender pay equity* at all levels of the organization, and invest at least \$10B in diverse suppliers. (Avis Budget Group 2022 ESG report)

These examples also show a different linguistic use of the words *equality* and *equity* in the context of *gender*. On one hand, the former collectively co-occurs with other socially relevant issues and goals, as observed in example (1), and is used to refer to gender parity between all stakeholders, as suggested by the words *workplace*, *marketplace*, and *community* used with generic meaning in example (2). On the other hand, the latter frequently co-occurs with the word *pay*. This finding reflects the strong collocation of *equity* with *pay* observed in *Table 2* and implies that the term *equity* is primarily used to technically refer to the practice of resource allocation by companies to reduce the salary gap between men and women or any other disparities between them in the workplace.

Commissive statements were also observed through the analysis of the concordance lines of *equity* in the context of *racial* and *social*. Similarly, the scrutiny of the concordance lines revealed instances where these words are used as pre-modifiers of *equity*, accompanied by the verb *commit* or the noun *commitment* (example 5). Another strategy found in the corpus is the use of the progressive form, which suggests the same idea of continuity observed in example (4) above.

- (5) For this reason, through both our operations and the Enterprise Mobility Foundation we *are giving* our time and support to causes that are advancing *social* and *racial equity* addressing food insecurity, protecting and restoring natural ecosystems, supporting veterans, and providing aid and relief for natural disasters. (Enterprise Mobility 2022 ESG report)

Moreover, evidence from these instances also showed the use of words expressing effort, which may be understood as a strategy employed by the companies to persuade their stakeholders about their commitment to racial equity. Example (6) below is a case in point.

- (6) [...] we *work hard* to ensure that our racial justice and *racial equity* programming supports our driver community. (Lyft 2022 ESG report)

This persuasive goal is also conveyed through lexical items expressing care, suggested by the collocational strength of *sustaining* in example (7) below.

- (7) We're committed to *sustaining equity* and belonging for all. (Uber 2022 ESG report)

*Diversity* and *inclusion* are two other strong collocates of *equity* in the corpus. The scrutiny of the concordance lines revealed that these three words tend to co-occur together (example 8), suggesting that the concept of *equity* is strictly intertwined with the inclusion and the support of diverse employees. This idea is also reinforced by the collocate *belonging*. Example (9) illustrates this point.

- (8) Plus, in 2021 the Board of Directors Compensation Committee amended its charter to explicitly oversee employee engagement and employee *diversity*, *equity*, and *inclusion* efforts. (Uber 2022 ESG report)
- (9) [...] we're focused on 6 differentiated employee needs: pride, *belonging* and *equity*, growth, compensation, well-being, and trust. (Uber 2022 ESG report)

Inclusion is also linguistically and discursively constructed as a key value of the companies, suggested by the co-occurrence of the verb *believe* in example (10), and verbs expressing commitment and continuity (see the verbs *engage* and the verb *continue* in example 11)

- (10) We believe an *inclusive* and *equitable* workplace culture unlocks Lyft's innovative potential. (Lyft 2022 ESG report)

- (11) This human capital strategy ensures that we consider the needs of our diverse workforce and continue to create an engaging, **equitable**, and inclusive experience in each of these critical areas. (Uber 2022 ESG report)

Given the abundance of commissive statements, it can be inferred that the *CAR\_R&S Corpus* is permeated by statements of goals and commitment. However, a closer examination of the extended concordance lines of *equity* revealed several instances of strategies, methods and practices (Yu and Bondi 2017). For instance, example (12) below illustrates specific training to face racial discriminations, aimed at improving approaches to this issue with both employees and customers.

- (12) Uber partnered with diversity, **equity**, and inclusion experts to develop training based on Uber incident reports to help address racism and create more positive, inclusive experiences every day on the platform. (Uber 2022 ESG report)

Most of the linguistic-communicative choices examined in this section suggest a large use of vague language regarding the companies' approach to equality and equity. The prevalence of commissive statements itself suggests that companies are more transparent about their future engagement rather than on the current practices enacted or on the results achieved.

Another aspect contributing to linguistic vagueness in the *CAR\_R&S Corpus* is the extensive use of lexical items with generic meaning. An example of such usage can be observed with the words *programs* and *policies* in the following instance, where no details are provided about what these programs or policies consist of.

- (13) We have global compensation *programs* and *policies* to drive pay **equity** through standardized reward programs across all countries. (Avis Budget Group 2020 ESG report)

Another type of linguistic resource that conveyed this level of vagueness is the use of quality assessment adjective or verbs. The verb *advance* in examples (14), for instance, which mostly co-occurs with *equit\**, does not really quantify the success of an initiative.

- (14) Investments in public transportation help *advance equity* and ensure that everyone has the same opportunities to succeed. (Avis Budget Group 2022 ESG report)

### 3.2. *The enTenTen21 Corpus*

The pie chart below (Fig. 2) shows the normalised frequencies of the words *equality* and *equity* in the *enTenTen21 Corpus*.

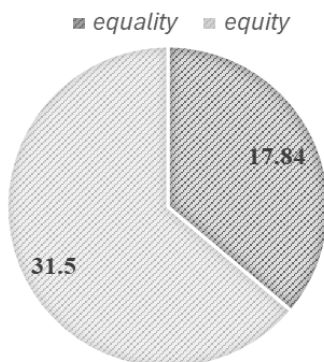


Figure 2. – Normalised frequencies of *equality* and *equity* in the *enTenTen21 Corpus* (expressed per million words).

Data shows that these correspond respectively to 17.84 and 31.5 occurrences per million tokens. Although the difference between the frequencies of the two words does not equal the one registered in the *CAR\_R&S Corpus*, this finding apparently suggests that also in general English the term *equity* is more preferred than *equality*.

As far as the quantitative analysis of the lexical collocations is concerned, the table below (Tab. 3) shows the strongest collocates of the words *equality* and *equity* in the *enTenTen21 Corpus*, calculated through the *Word Sketch* tool. Collocates are shown together with the normalised number of occurrences (expressed per million words). Due to space reasons, the table does not illustrate the scores for each single collocate.

What is immediately striking from these results, in the “nouns modified” category, is a significant number of words typical of financial and business communication. Given that the focus of this sub-analysis is the frequency and the context of use of *equity* in general English usage, I deemed it appropriate to recalculate the collocations of *equity* without setting any minimum frequency. This was done to identify and exclude a large part of the normalized frequencies of words typically used in specialized language from the normalized frequency of *equity*. Figure 3 below illustrates the results obtained from this additional procedure.



Table 3. – Lexical collocations of equality and equity in the enTenTen21 Corpus.

GRAMMATICAL CATEGORY	EQUALITY	EQUITY
Nouns modifiers	<i>gender</i> (2.21); <i>marriage</i> (0.46); <i>racial</i> (0.36); <i>social</i> (0.19)	<i>private</i> (0.74); <i>diversity</i> (0.48); <i>health</i> (0.38); <i>gender</i> (0.34); <i>racial</i> (0.28); <i>brand</i> (0.2); <i>home</i> (0.19); <i>social</i> (0.19)
Nouns modified	<i>act</i> (0.23)	<i>market</i> (0.95); <i>firm</i> (0.6); <i>investment</i> (0.46); <i>fund</i> (0.6); <i>investor</i> (0.23); <i>loan</i> (0.31); <i>capital</i> (0.21); <i>interest</i> (0.21); <i>share</i> (0.2); <i>security</i> (0.17); <i>stake</i> (0.19)
Verbs	<i>promote</i> (0.39); <i>achieve</i> (0.25)	<i>promote</i> (0.19)
Equality/equity and/or	<i>justice</i> (0.51); <i>diversity</i> (0.38); <i>freedom</i> (0.32); <i>right</i> (0.32); <i>liberty</i> (0.17)	<i>diversity</i> (0.72); <i>inclusion</i> (0.59); <i>justice</i> (0.4); <i>debt</i> (0.21)

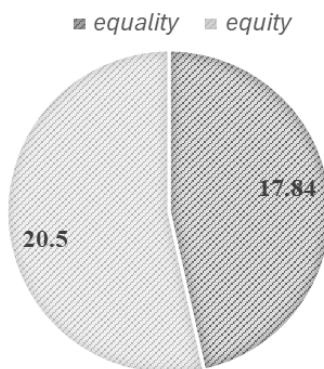


Figure 3. – Normalised frequencies of equality and equity (without specialised words) in the enTenTen21 Corpus (expressed per million words).

In this case, the evidence shows that, contrary to the results shown in the previous graph, the discrepancy between the normalized frequencies of the two words has narrowed, suggesting that *equity*, in general English usage, is slightly more prevalent than *equality*.

Moving on to the qualitative analysis of the collocates, which has discarded those belonging to financial and business language, both *equality* and *equity* share the words *gender* and *racial* among their strongest

collocations. This pattern suggests their interchangeable use to refer to the issues of gender parity and racial discrimination. However, the scrutiny of the extended concordance lines in the context of these two collocates revealed two different patterns in terms of prevalent semantic preferences.

In some instances, the word *equity*, in the context of the collocate *gender*, tends to co-occur with lexical items belonging to the semantic field of education, as shown in the example below.

- (15) I am delighted to congratulate the five latest UCD Schools on this success and their work on encouraging greater progression of *gender equity*.

The analysis of the extended concordance lines of *gender* and *racial* in the context of *equity* also revealed an exclusive co-occurrence of the words with lexical items referring to corporate or public policies enacted to guarantee the same opportunities to women and different ethnical communities, as shown in examples (16) and (17) below.

- (16) Only a vigorous politics for *gender equity* can challenge our male dominated electoral politics.
- (17) The Biden Administration has made a public commitment to advancing *racial equity*, and Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg has spoken of past harms in his public appearances.

Regarding the linguistic behaviour of *equality* in the context of *racial*, it was found that most of its instances refer to past events or initiatives aimed at addressing racial discrimination, which are suggested by the frequent co-occurrence of dates, as observed in the examples below.

- (18) In 1995, UNESCO published a Declaration of Principles on Tolerance to add to its dialogue about *racial equality* with recommendations for tolerant treatment of persons with varied racial and cultural backgrounds.
- (19) Disillusioned with her homeland's lack of any serious attempt at *racial equality*, she took out French citizenship in 1937 before marrying a French industrialist named Jean Lion.

In addition, when analysing *equality* in the context of *gender*, it was not possible to identify any typical lexico-phraseological patterns, since the word co-occurs with various lexical items. Such a variety may also explain the significantly higher normalised frequency of *gender* as a collocation of *equality* (2.21), compared its frequency in the context of *equity* (0.34).

Broadly speaking, in most of these instances, *equality* is constructed as one among the key social issues, suggested by its co-occurrence with other socially relevant problems, as shown in the following examples.

- (20) The program provides students with experience *working directly* with organizations and community members to address key issues in our community, such as homelessness, poverty, health and wellness, *gender equality*, and more.
- (21) It is *actively engaged* in promoting the democracy, *gender equality* and the advancement of women, human rights, clearing landmines, expanding food production, governance, international health, economic and social development and many more.
- (22) They represent the *struggle* for freedom, social- and *gender equality*, democracy, pluralism and progress.
- (23) Over the past 30 years, Bruce Poulin has *pushed* for *gender equality*, youth development and communal well-being by volunteering with organizations like the Knights of Columbus, St. John Ambulance and Scouts Canada.

It is also interesting to note that in these examples the centrality and the relevance of gender equality and other issues, as well as the active commitment to them, are conveyed through words suggesting proactive engagement, such as the expressions *working directly* and *actively engaged* in examples (20) and (21), and lexical items expressing effort (see the words *struggle* and the verb *push* in examples 22 and 23).

Another significant trend identified through the corpus analysis is the tendency of both *equality* and *equity* to collocate with the word *diversity*, and the more specific co-occurrence of the latter with *inclusion*. A closer inspection of the extended concordance lines revealed that in both cases these words were used in the field of education, as well as the tendency of *equity* to collectively co-occur with *diversity* and *inclusion*. This linguistic trend is shown in the examples reported below.

- (24) Whether you are a school leaver, a mature student, progressing from further education or joining us from another country, or work in the academic research or professional support areas of the university, I want you to be reassured also that UL will continue to promote *equality* and *diversity* across our community as we continue to be inclusive for all.
- (25) The Seminary's Board of Trustees is looking for an experienced, mission-oriented leader in *higher education* who is visionary in outlook,

collaborative in approach and an advocate for *diversity*, **equity** and *inclusion*.

- (26) In 2017, we, along with other Canadian *universities*, committed to implementing seven inclusive excellence principles to advance **equity**, *diversity*, and *inclusion*.

Most of the lexico-phraseological patterns previously discussed have shown that in the *enTenTen21 Corpus* *equality* and *equity* are mostly employed in the field of education. However, the exploration of the extended concordance lines in the context of the other collocates also revealed an interchangeable use of the two words in the fields of politics and law. More precisely, this linguistic trend was observed for both words in the context of *justice* (examples 27 and 28), and for *equality* in the context of the verb *achieve* (example 29) and the nouns *freedom* and *right* (examples 30 and 31).

- (27) Obviously, such struggles also concern all categories of workers and people because what is at stake is the challenge to reach food sovereignty and to build our societies at the local, national and global levels, on the principles of social *justice*, **equality** and real democracy.
- (28) Although the POSH Act was not applicable in 2011, when the company's ICC heard the case, the High Court of Delhi ought to have paid heed to the concepts set out under the current law, given that they are based on principles of **equity** and *justice*.
- (29) They emerge like clockwork: Each time political minorities advocate for and *achieve* greater **equality**, conservatives rebel, trying to force a reinstatement of the status quo.
- (30) For them, words like liberty, *freedom* and **equality** are not stale, textbook platitudes but real values to be lived.
- (31) We note that the existence of such groups is an indication of the failure of Government to lead our country on the path of progress, justice, **equality** and *right* and is a stark reminder that there are many underlying problems in Nigerian society today.

#### 4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper has examined how *equality* and *equity* are constructed in both ESG texts created by companies operating in the car transportation sector and in general English usage. It has also explored the linguistic

strategies – whether transparent or vague – employed by these companies to communicate information about equality and equity. These research aims have been addressed through a synchronic corpus-based analysis of a pilot corpus of 2022 ESG reports of American car rental and ride sharing operators – the *CAR\_R&S Corpus* – and a larger reference corpus of texts published on the web and collected in the same period (between 2021 and 2022) – the *enTenTen21 Corpus*.

In relation to RQ 1, the analysis shows a preference for the term *equity* over *equality*, though the degree of this preference differs between the two corpora. In the *CAR\_R&S Corpus*, *equity* is notably more prevalent than *equality*, indicating a stronger focus on addressing specific disparities and implementing targeted policies. In contrast, the *enTenTen21 Corpus* also shows a preference for *equity*, but the difference is much subtler. This suggests that while there is a slight inclination toward using *equity* in general discourse, it is not as pronounced as in ESG disclosures. This nuanced difference in general English usage may reflect a more balanced use of both terms, depending on the context.

In addressing RQs 2 and 3, the analysis of the *CAR\_R&S Corpus* and the *enTenTen21 Corpus* reveals distinct discursive constructions of *equality* and *equity*. In the ESG reports, *equity* is prominently associated with specific actions and policies, such as racial equity and pay equity, indicating a focus on addressing disparities through tailored interventions. The term frequently co-occurs with language related to commitment and effort. Conversely, *equality* appears less frequently and is often employed in more abstract terms and not with reference to practical measures. This broader application is also seen in the *enTenTen21 Corpus*, where *equality* is used across a variety of social issues without a clear emphasis on actionable measures. In addition, *equity*, in the *enTenTen21 Corpus*, is also used in educational and policy contexts with reference to approaches addressing structural inequalities.

The findings from this corpus also suggest that both terms are used to discuss fairness and justice. Last, but not least, as discussed in the methodology and results sections, a systematic study of the linguistic behaviour of *equitable* and *equitably* in the *enTenTen21 Corpus* was not conducted. However, a quick reading of some random concordance lines of these words revealed similar findings to those observed for *equity*. In sum, *equity* tends to imply a more pragmatic and policy-oriented approach in both corpora, whereas *equality* maintains a broader, more idealistic connotation. The preference for *equity* in ESG reports over *equality* reflects a shift towards recognizing and addressing specific

disparities, though this is often communicated with varying degrees of specificity and clarity.

With more specific reference to RQ 4, the abundance of commissive statements and the presence of expressions conveying vagueness – including quality assessment adjective and verbs, and, above all, the collective co-occurrence of nouns with generic meaning – suggests a lack of linguistic transparency in the ESG reports analysed with respect to the more concrete initiatives through which they will show their commitment to these values. This lack of accuracy, particularly in the linguistic content of the reports, is of particular significance, considering that the ESG report, as explained in section 1, constitutes a genre of corporate communication where companies are expected to prioritize the quantified and detailed reporting of their sustainability performance.

This research is not without limits. Suggestions for future research regarding the research object in the field of ESG communication might be: (a) the inclusion of ESG reports and other genres of CSR communication from companies operating in different sectors; (b) broadening the focus to other geographical areas, including non-western countries; (c) a more diachronic approach to explore whether linguistic patterns around *equality* and *equity* have changed in time; (d) the integration of the tools of multimodal analysis (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001) to understand if multimodal resources contribute to meaning making observed at the linguistic level. As for the assessment of linguistic and communicative transparency in the *enTenTen21 Corpus*, this was not feasible, since such a level of analysis would require a certain degree of specialised knowledge of the multiple fields in which the texts were produced, as well as an in depth reading of the texts collected in a corpus of great dimensions.

Despite these limitations, the evidence discussed so far allows to understand the more prevalent semantic associations and contextual uses of *equality* and *equity*. However, while there are some discernible trends in how each term is applied, especially in specific contexts like corporate ESG communication, it remains challenging to draw strict boundaries between them. The findings still suggest an impossibility to put meaning boundaries between these two words in industry use of them in their reports. Nevertheless, in ESG communication, their co-occurrence with generic and inaccurate language expressions suggests a vague use of the two words themselves.

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