Mission Statements in Chinese Enterprises from the Perspective of the Speech Act Theory

-- A Comparative Analysis of Fortune 500 and Non-Fortune 500 Enterprises

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Abstract

From the perspective of the Speech Act Theory, taking the mission statements of Fortune 500- and non-Fortune 500 Chinese enterprises as the research objects, the current paper analyzed the business speech acts that embody the ten mission statement factors proposed by Baetz. It was also illustrated how their linguistic features further promote the enterprises to achieve their goals. Next, through the statistical analysis of the Likert scales distributed to the employees of the selected enterprises, combined with the financial data, the present study revealed the differences between the two types of enterprises' perlocutionary behaviors. Moreover, the speech acts that have a significant impact on the enterprises were also identified through the data obtained. To sum up, companies can include such speech acts as “practicing the values and beliefs of the company” and “defining the criterion of success” in their mission statements to achieve more efficient development.

Keywords

Mission Statements; Speech Act Theory; Fortune 500 Companies.

1. Introduction

With the implementation of China's economic policies such as the Belt and Road Initiative, more and more Chinese enterprises are going abroad and connecting with the world. While competing with other excellent international enterprises, Chinese enterprises need to constantly reflect and improve themselves. As the soul of an enterprise, mission statement is an important part of its strategic plan and works as the first step of its growth. It clearly points out how the strategic development of an enterprise affects its current activities [1]. At present, many Chinese enterprises fail to pay enough attention to mission statement, leading to such problems as mission ambiguity, inconsistency with corporate behavior or strategy, and the lack of belief, which greatly affect the sustainable development of Chinese enterprises.

In the current study, mission statements of some Fortune 500 Chinese enterprises and non-Fortune 500 Chinese enterprises were collected to create a mission statement corpus, and the speech act theory in pragmatics was applied to analyze these mission statements. At the same time, the differences between the mission statements of the two types of enterprises were compared, and the most important factors affecting corporate financial performance were explored. Based on the above research results, we aim to give feasible suggestions to formulate effective mission statements, so as to help enterprises achieve more efficient operation and make excellent development strategies that can promote their long-term development.
2. Literature Review

2.1. The Speech Act Theory

In the late 1950s, Austin, a British philosopher, put forward the speech act theory [2]. In his book *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin points out that the use of certain grammatical forms of declarative sentences is not for true or false statements, but for performing an action. He argued that when people speak, they perform three acts simultaneously, locutionary act, illocutionary act and perlocutionary act. At the same time, he divided illocutionary behaviors into five types: verdictives, exercitives, commissives, behabitives, and expositives. Although his classification standard is somewhat unclear and has been criticized by some scholars, it successfully turns academic attention to the study of illocutionary behavior and lays a foundation for Searle to further improve the speech act theory.

Searle further refines and optimizes Austin’s theory, making it more systematic and relevant to human daily communication. He divided speech acts into representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives. The representatives express that the speaker believes that the propositional content is true; directives are when the speaker tries to get the listener to do something; commissives are used when the speaker promises to do something. Expressives are applied when the speaker expresses a certain mental state; declaratives are to make the objective reality conform to the propositional content expressed. In this case, the implementation of this kind of behavior requires the speaker to have the corresponding power and status [3]. Searle’s classification is more scientific and has been accepted by many scholars. In addition, he also put forward the indirect speech act theory and conducted detailed studies in terms of communicative intentions.

The study of speech act in China mostly involves the analysis on the relationship between communicative intentions and metaphor as well as the differences between cultures [4-9]. At present, there is still a lack of research on corporate culture by using speech act theory. In addition, Searle’s speech act classification framework has certain limitations, which makes many past studies ignore the construction way of speech act itself, and eventually become a simple statistic and ranking of the frequency of the use of various speech acts in a corpus [10]. Therefore, the current study will no longer be confined to the classificatory framework of speech acts proposed by Austin and Searle, but will start from the corpus of actual corporate mission statement to explore which speech acts can promote the development of enterprises and help them improve their competitiveness. We call these speech acts “business speech act” in the current study.

2.2. Corporate Mission Statement

Corporate mission statements aim to help enterprises establish goals, formulate strategies, and guide corporations’ planning and development. They play a guiding role in corporate behavior and directly affect the business status of enterprises. The research on corporate mission originated from Peter F. Drucker, who first proposed the concept and significance of mission statement. He argued that only when the objective and mission of an enterprise are clearly defined, the purpose of an enterprise can be clearly and realistically determined. Corporate goals and missions are the basis for determining priorities, formulating strategies, making plans, and arranging tasks [11]. They are the starting point for designing management structures. Since then, many related studies have emerged, discussing the importance of mission statement to enterprises’ performance, management, strategy and other aspects [12-14].

In the late 1980s, scholars began to study the elements of mission statement and establish an index system to evaluate the elements of mission statement. Through sampling survey and classificatory statistics based on David’s 9-factor taxonomy, nine key elements including
customers, products or services, and geographical locations are extracted from the mission statements [15]. Later, based on the 9-factor classification, Baetz’s 10-factor taxonomy applied the statistical analysis of the questionnaires distributed to enterprises [16]. In this sense, he included factors such as financial, non-financial goals in the components of mission statements and introduce stakeholders as an independent variable. In so doing, his model widened the scope of the study of stakeholder factors, improved the accuracy of the classification of mission statement elements. Bart’s 25-factor classification, a more systematic and comprehensive analysis model, was developed by integrating all the conclusions of the research on mission statement classifications prior to 1996 [17]. Based on these previous endeavors, Chinese scholar Huan proposed a quality evaluation system for corporate mission statements. This system contains 20 indicators with the data collected from 110 listed manufacturing companies in China [18].

In addition, in terms of the relationship between mission statement components and corporate behavior, most scholars focus on a single country or the comparisons between multiple countries. For example, Bartkus conducted a comparative study on 56 companies in the United States, Europe and Japan [19]; Bartkus and Glassman studied the relationship between mission statements and stakeholders from 32 Fortune 500 companies [20]; Toftoy and Chatterjee sent questionnaires to small businesses with fewer than 500 employees in the Washington area [21]. Chinese scholars such as Wang and Peng studied the relationship between corporate mission statement and corporate social responsibility behavior in Fortune’s list of “CSR Top 100 Chinese companies” [22]; Wang took the mission statements of Fortune 500 enterprises as the research objects and randomly selected the mission statements of 150 enterprises as the research samples to study the impact of mission statement quality on corporate performance [23]. However, there are still few comparative studies on enterprises at different levels of development. In this regard, based on the data from Fortune, the current paper divides the research objects into the Fortune 500 and non-Fortune 500 companies, exploring the differences between the two types of enterprises and putting forward constructive suggestions for the formulation of effective mission statements of Chinese enterprises.

3. Methods and Materials

The current paper focuses on three research questions: (1) What linguistic features are reflected in business speech acts in corporate mission statements? (2) What are the differences between Fortune 500 companies and non-Fortune 500 companies in terms of the business speech acts included in mission statements? (3) What kind of speech acts can best promote the improvement of corporate performance? In order to eliminate the influence brought by cultural differences, the research objects are determined as Fortune 500 Chinese Enterprises and non-Fortune 500 Chinese enterprises in the year of 2020. We randomly sampled the above enterprises and ensured the diversity of geographical and industrial sectors.

We first established a framework of business speech acts based on Baetz’s 10-factor model. Next, a questionnaire was devised for the collection of the data from the employees in the different types of enterprises. After getting the valid data from different companies, the mission statements of all the enterprises with valid responses were collected to form a corpus. According to Levin’s research, many managers and academics use the terms such as “mission statement,” “vision,” “business philosophy,” “values,” and “goals” interchangeably [24]. Therefore, according to Leuthesser and Kohli’s classification criteria, this study defined the concept of “mission statement” as a statement containing any factors that may appear in a corporate mission statement [25]. If two or more similar statements appear at the same time, the analysis will be carried out according to the following priority: the first priority is the statement containing the word “mission”, the second priority is the statement containing the
word “vision”, and the third priority is other statements [26]. Specific names of other expressions were annotated at the end of each example. Then, with the application of Searle’s classification principles and Baetz’s 10-factor model for mission statements, the current paper constructed the classificatory framework of business speech acts and conducted qualitative analysis of speech acts reflected in mission statements [16]. At the level of perlocutionary behavior, questionnaires were used as measurement tools and distributed through an online survey platform (Weidiaocha. URL: http://www.weidiaocha.com/c). Due to some incomplete and misleading information filled in some questionnaires, the authors conducted strict screening and finally confirmed 358 valid questionnaires (199 from Fortune 500 enterprises and 159 from non-Fortune 500 enterprises).

The questionnaire applied in the current study was defined based on a 5-level Likert scale, adopting Baetz’s 10 factors: financial goals, non-financial goals, value, faith, and philosophy, the definition of success, organizational priorities, product positioning, market positioning, the foundation for competition, and stakeholders and their numbers.

SPSS 22.0 was used for the statistical analysis of the questionnaire data. The independent sample t-test was used to draw reliable conclusions. Before the beginning of the investigation, a pilot test was conducted. The results showed that the overall reliability (Cronbach’s Alpha) of the scale used in the present study was 0.764. This result indicates that the scale has high internal consistency and can be used for large-scale data collection. At the same time, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was 0.615 > 0.6, and the Bartlett sphericity test significance was 0.000 (p < 0.05). Therefore, the scale was suitable for factor analysis.

4. Results and Discussions


Based on the ten elements of mission statement identified by existing research, we decomposed these strategies into the following indicators (as shown in Table 1) from the perspective of speech acts [16]. Next, we conducted a qualitative analysis of the business speech acts in the mission statement corpus. We focused on their linguistic characteristics and how these characteristics play a role in promoting corporate development.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Business speech acts</th>
<th>Sub-types of business speech acts</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reaching the goal of the company</td>
<td>Reaching financial goals</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Reaching non-financial goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Practicing the values and beliefs of</td>
<td>Achieving continuous innovation and development</td>
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<td>the company</td>
<td>Doing good to the society</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Pursuing a certain positive character</td>
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<td>Defining the criterion of success</td>
<td>Becoming a leading company in the industry</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Reaching worldwide/national leadership</td>
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<td>Giving the organization’s number one</td>
<td>Achieving social or industrial improvement</td>
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<td>priority</td>
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<td>Clearly positioning the company</td>
<td>Defining specific products</td>
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<td>Defining specific markets</td>
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<td>Defining the bases for competition</td>
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<tr>
<td>Serving the Stakeholders</td>
<td>Committing to bring value to related parties such as customers,</td>
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<td>shareholders, and employees</td>
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4.1.1. Reaching the Goal of the Company

The goal of a company is the overall effect that each corporate activity wants to achieve. Generally, the main goal of an enterprise is the financial one, i.e., to maximize profits or create value to shareholders and enhance their wealth. The financial goals are often spelled out in
companies’ annual reports, but some corporations also write them into mission statements to spur employees on.

**Example 1.** China Construction Bank (CCB): Provide better services to our customers, create higher value to our shareholders, build up broader career path for our associates and assume full responsibilities as a corporate citizen.

**Example 2.** Mingyang International Exhibition (Beijing) (MIE) Co., Ltd.: Create value to our customers, opportunities to our employees, profits to the enterprise and benefits to the society. (Business philosophy)

From Example 1, it can be concluded that the financial goal of CCB is to bring greater benefits to its shareholders, while MIE extends this goal to the enterprise itself, promising to improve its own interests while ensuring customer value. In addition, both of them use parallelism in the formulation of mission statements, which helps emphasize the sentence content and structure through focus repetition. Moreover, this kind of rhetoric strategy enhances the illocutionary force of the speech acts in the mission statements.

In addition to financial goals, there are many non-financial ones, such as social responsibility, the protection of intellectual property rights, the improvement of product quality, the enhancement of enterprise image. These goals are not indicators of financial statements, but they will indirectly affect the enterprise their ability to win in the fierce competition and improve business status. Therefore, non-financial goals are also an important factor in mission statements, as can be shown below.

**Example 3.** Aluminum Corporation of China (ACC): With a Midas touch, we benefit mankind.

**Example 4.** Shandong Yiqing Environmental Protection (SYEP) Co., Ltd.: Endless protection for the environment. (Enterprise spirit)

From Example 3, ACC ably incorporates the idiom “Midas touch” into their mission statement. This idiom can serve as a pun, which on the one hand manifests the enterprise’s main business – making the ore into a shimmering alumina. On the other hand, it demonstrates that ACC will constantly transform dregs into essence and work towards a higher goal. The use of pun strengthens the power of the illocutionary points embedded in the relevant constructs. Furthermore, the latter part of the sentence reflects the non-financial goal – the corporate social responsibility of ACC, showing the stakeholders that they will “magically” improve the living standards of mankind. In Example 4, SYEP uses a short sentence to clearly indicate their corporate social responsibility. Though without few rhetoric strategies, it can help the whole corporation focus on the simple idea of environmental protection.

**4.1.2. Practicing the Values and Beliefs of the Company**

Corporate values refer to the value orientation of the enterprise and its employees. They are the basic beliefs and goals promoted by the enterprise in the process of pursuing success [27]. In a sense, a company’s values are as important as its mission, and are often regarded as a yardstick to measure everything the company does. Usually, mission statements also reflect companies’ values, beliefs, and philosophies.

**Example 5.** China Hua’neng Group (CHG) Co., Ltd.: We are a “red” company serving national strategies, ensuring energy security and serving socialism with Chinese characteristics; a “green” company practicing energy revolution, contributing to ecological civilization, and providing clean energy and electricity to meet people’s needs for a better life; a “blue” company participating in global energy governance, serving the construction of the Belt and Road initiative and making positive contributions to the building of a community of human destiny.

**Example 6.** Fujian Jinjiang Heng’an Group (FJHG) Co., Ltd.: In the road of seeking health, you and I grow up together.
In Example 5, CHG creatively adds “color” to its mission statement, with “red” indicating socialism, “green” representing environmental protection, and “blue” signaling innovation and expansion to the world. These colors not only express CHG’s positive values in an interesting way, but also vividly reflects the commissive speech acts embedded in the mission statement. In Example 6, FJHG first presents its value (seeking health) directly, and then uses second person in the last half of the sentence to shorten the distance between the company and its customers. In so doing, the commitment contained in the speech act becomes more intense.

4.1.3. Defining the Criterion of Success

In the fierce market competition, enterprises will continue to pursue success. Different enterprises have differing definitions of success. Generally speaking, being the best in the industry, earning the respect of the industry, and achieving sustainable development are the three most common definitions.

Example 7. Zhejiang Geely Holding Group (ZGHG): Make the safest, most environment-friendly and most energy-saving good cars, and let Geely automobile travel all over the world.

Example 8. Zhejiang Taihua New Material (ZTNM) Co., Ltd.: Strive to innovate for the benefit of customers and to become a “bellwether” of high-grade nylon fabric at home and abroad.

From Example 7, ZGHG defines success as the promotion of its products to the world. In terms of the linguistic features in its mission statement, anthropomorphic techniques are used to allow cars to “travel” around the world, not only adding interest to the statement, but also enhancing the definition of success embodied in it. In Example 8, ZTNM creatively uses the word “bellwether”, a pun, which not only expresses that the company wants to be the leader in the industry, but also shows that its business is to process wool into fabric. At the same time, this kind of rhetoric technique enhances the speech acts of exposition and commitment.

4.1.4. Giving the Organization’s Number One Priority

In the process of enterprise development, it is necessary to determine the priority order of each task, so as to solve the problems encountered in the process of development methodically. Usually, speech acts about priorities are expressed in the form of “first”, “supreme” and so on.

Example 9. Jiangsu Shagang Group (JSG): Quality first, credit first. For the country, to the world. (Corporate purpose)

Example 10. Guizhou Anshun Deli Packaging (GADP) Co., Ltd.: Serving customers first, we can reach the peak.

Example 9 shows that JSG attaches great importance to the quality and reputation of the company. While Example 10 reflects the idea that GADP places customers above all else. Meanwhile, the image of “peak” is used in the latter part of the sentence to express the enterprise’s speech act of pursuing excellence.

4.1.5. Clearly Positioning the Company

Positioning is referred to as the process in which enterprises distinguish themselves through their own products and brands; at the same time, they employ their unique features, culture and good image to occupy a certain position in customers’ mind [28]. When positioning themselves, enterprises need to clearly understand their specific products, markets and bases for competition. In this case, mission statements usually include expository speech acts, and the language is prone to be plain, with little rhetoric.

Example 11. China National Aviation Fuel Group (CNAFG): We are dedicated to serve the global civil aviation customers and to ensure the security of national jet fuel supply.

Example 12. Yum China (YC): To build Yum China into the most successful catering enterprises in China and even the world.

Example 13. Compal Electronics (CE), Inc.: We work with you to create brand value and realize smart technology. We understand the challenges of developing new and innovative products.
Compal’s experience in working with cross-industry partners drives our continuous innovation and creation. We rely on forward thinking, rich industry experience and the 43,000 professionals worldwide to provide you with the highest level of service quality.

In Example 11, CNAFG’s positioning with regard to products and markets are indicated by describing the customers it serves and the dedication to the national fuel supply for the whole country. By contrast, Yum China directly points this out. As for CE, in the second sentence of its mission statement, many words are used to explain the competitive basis of the enterprise. Moreover, a specific figure (43,000) are creatively added, emphasizing the expositative speech acts reflected in the statement.

4.1.6. Serving the Stakeholders

According to Baetz’s study of mission statements for Canada’s Fortune 500 companies, a qualified mission statement should have at least one stakeholder, but preferably no more than three; otherwise, it is prone to result in overly large and unclear goals of the enterprise [16]. It is worth noting that stakeholders are the most important part of the mission statement, and other factors often accompany them to construct a sentence expressing the effects of multiple speech acts.

Example 14. Agricultural Bank of China (ABC): We dedicate ourselves to serving agriculture, rural areas and farmers, rewarding shareholders, and supporting employees.

Example 15. China Railway Materials Group Corporation (CRMGC): With the belief of people-oriented, we create value together with our stakeholders.

While pointing out stakeholders, ABC uses the words “agriculture, rural areas and farmers” to express the industries it is based on. This kind of statement combines the dual characteristics of exposition and commitment. In contrast, the most unique behavior of CRMGC in its mission statement is the detailed explanation of the belief to serve its stakeholders, promoting the commissive illocutionary force in its mission statement.

4.2. Analysis of Employees’ Feedback -- The Emic Perspective

A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed through Weidiaocha to the employees of the selected enterprises in Section 3. In order to facilitate the process of answering these questions, the questionnaire items were designed in the way of “mission statement factors” to avoid the influence of respondents’ little knowledge of the speech act theory. After collecting all the forms distributed, 358 valid ones were selected (the questionnaire-reclaiming efficiency is 89.5%). Among them, 199 questionnaires were collected from Fortune 500 Chinese enterprises, including Alibaba, Beijing Automotive Group, Dalian Wanda Group, etc. In comparison, 159 questionnaires were collected from non-Fortune 500 Chinese enterprises, including Foxconn, Haier Group Co., Ltd., China Taiping Life Insurance Co., Ltd., etc. The positions of the respondents ranged from employees of grass roots, department heads, project managers, senior managers and other levels.

The statistics show that the mean value of the satisfaction degree of the company’s mission statement in Fortune 500 Chinese enterprises is 4.171, and that its counterpart in non-Fortune 500 Chinese companies is 4.013. Due to that fact that the Likert scale used in the current study is a 5-level one, the respondents’ satisfaction to their corporate mission statements is rather high with that of the Fortune 500 companies is relatively higher than the non-Fortune 500 one. At the same time, in the Fortune 500 Chinese enterprises, the proportion of employees who are “very satisfied” with the enterprise’s mission statement is 36.7%, while that proportion is only 29.6% in the non-Fortune 500 ones. Moreover, the proportion of employees who are “somewhat satisfied” is also higher in the Fortune 500 enterprises. This phenomenon may reflect that the top companies generally perform better in terms of their mission statements.
For the business speech acts mentioned in the mission statements, the results of an independent sample t-test show that the speech acts mentioned in mission statements of both types of corporates are “practicing the values and beliefs of the company” ($t = -3.432, p < 0.05$) and “defining specific markets” ($t = -3.979, p < 0.05$). Moreover, there is a significant difference in the actual performance of “defining the bases for competition” ($t = -3.793, p < 0.05$). Therefore, compared with non-Fortune 500 companies, the current mission statements of Fortune 500 companies include more speech acts that are relevant to “practicing the values and beliefs of the company”, “defining specific markets”, and “defining the bases for competition”. It is thus suggested that the non-Fortune 500 enterprises should make mission statements that include these three business speech acts for better development.

For the corporate differences in terms of the perlocutionary effects of the business speech acts, the results of the independent sample t-test show that the difference of the perlocutionary effects of the two types of enterprises only lies in “practicing the values and beliefs of the company” ($t = -2.097, p < 0.05$) and “giving the organization’s number one priority” ($t = 3.608, p < 0.05$). In this regard, compared with non-Fortune 500 companies, the current mission statements of Fortune 500 companies perform better in these two kinds of business speech acts. Therefore, the non-Fortune 500 enterprises can put more efforts on practicing their values, beliefs, philosophies and accomplish their priorities to promote better and efficient development.

In order to further explore whether each business speech act has an impact on enterprises’ financial performance and how large the impact of each of these speech acts is, the current study randomly selected some of the Fortune 500 enterprises and carried out statistical analysis on the relationship between financial data and the mentioning and performing of business speech acts. The results of the independent sample t-test show that whether mission statements mention “practicing the values and beliefs of the company” has a significant effect on the revenues of the enterprises ($t = 2.810, p < 0.05$), which indicates that the companies with a mission statement that commits themselves to practicing their values may enjoy better financial performance. In addition, whether or not to mention “defining the criterion of success” has a significant influence on the revenues and profits of the companies (for revenue, $t = 2.849$; for profit, $t = 2.410, p < 0.05$). These results may indicate that companies can improve their financial performance by better practicing their values and defining their criterion of success.

5. Conclusion

From the perspective of the speech act theory, the current paper analyzes the discourse characteristics of business speech acts in the mission statements of Fortune 500 Chinese enterprises and non-Fortune 500 ones. At the same time, the present paper compared the differences between the mission statements of the two types of companies in mentioning and performing specific business speech acts.

After the case analysis of the mission statements, the diverse business speech acts help enterprises clarify their goals and development direction, and make their commitments in a powerful and vivid way, improving the public image of the enterprises. According to Baetz's ten factors of enterprise mission statement, the current paper divides business speech acts into six categories: 1) Reaching the goal of the company; 2) Practicing the values and beliefs of the company; 3) Defining the criterion of success; 4) Giving the organization’s number one priority; 5) Clearly positioning the company; 6) Serve the stakeholders.

From the linguistic features of the business speech acts, companies mission statements not only conform to the serious, formal business style, but also add some interesting elements, especially the use of puns and personification gimmick, which shortens the distance between the companies and the consumers and effectively improve the image of enterprises. In addition, in
most cases, these language features subtly link speech acts, products and the positioning of the enterprises, further improving the effectiveness and sense of inclusion of the mission statements, and make them more acceptable to stakeholders.

At the same time, the results of statistical analysis show that the nature of the enterprise (Fortune 500 Chinese companies and non-Fortune 500 ones) has correlation with the mentioning rate of business speech acts, which is embodied in the speech acts of “practicing the values and beliefs of the company”, “defining specific markets”, and “defining the bases for competition”; The nature of the enterprise is related to the perlocutionary effect of the business speech acts mentioned in their mission statements, which is significantly illustrated in “practicing the values and beliefs of the company” and “giving the organization's number one priority”. Moreover, there is a correlation between the financial performance of Fortune 500 Chinese enterprises and the mentioning rate of the business speech acts, which is embodied in “practicing the values and beliefs of the company” and “defining the criterion of success”.

To sum up, non-Fortune 500 companies can use some rhetorical skills, e.g., pun, personification, rhyme, etc., to enhance the vividness and interest of their mission statement and better highlight their commitments embedded in the mission statements. At the same time, it is suggested to improve the mentioning rate of “practicing the values and beliefs of the company”, “clearly positioning the company” and “defining the criterion of success” and enhance their perlocutionary effects of each business speech act in the mission statement, especially “practicing the values and beliefs of the company” and “giving the organization's number one priority”, so as to better develop the enterprise and improve its financial performance.

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