



a debate
on discourse

Discourse Analysis as Organizational Analysis

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The question of discourse, and the manner in which it shapes our epistemology and understanding of organization, are central to an expanded realm of organizational analysis. It is one which recognizes that the modern world we live in and the social artefacts we rely upon to successfully negotiate our way through life, are always already institutionalized *effects* of primary organizational impulses. Social objects and phenomena such as ‘the organization’, ‘the economy’, ‘the market’ or even ‘stakeholders’ or ‘the weather’, do not have a straightforward and unproblematic existence independent of our discursively-shaped understandings. Instead, they have to be forcibly carved out of the undifferentiated flux of raw experience and conceptually fixed and labelled so that they can become the common currency for communicational exchanges. Modern social reality, with its all-too-familiar features, has to be continually constructed and sustained through such aggregative discursive acts of reality-construction. The idea that reality, as we know it, is socially constructed, has become an accepted truth. What is less commonly understood is *how* this reality gets constructed in the first place and what sustains it. For the philosopher William James, our social reality is always already an abstraction. Our lifeworld is an undifferentiated flux of fleeting sense-impressions and it is out of this brute aboriginal flux of lived experience that attention carves out and conception names:

... in the sky ‘constellations’, on earth ‘beach’, ‘sea’, ‘cliff’, ‘bushes’, ‘grass’. Out of time we cut ‘days’ and ‘nights’, ‘summers’ and ‘winters’. We say *what* each part of the sensible continuum is, and all these abstract *whats* are concepts. (James, 1948: 50, emphasis original)

It is through this process of differentiating, fixing, naming, labelling, classifying and relating—all intrinsic processes of discursive organization—that social reality is systematically constructed.

Discourse, as multitudinal and heterogeneous forms of material *inscriptions* or verbal *utterances* occurring in space–time, is what aggregatively produces a particular version of social reality to the exclusion of



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other possible worlds. It is therefore inappropriate to think of 'organizational discourse', for instance, as discourse *about* some pre-existing, thing-like social object called 'the organization'. To do so is to commit what the mathematician-turned-philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1926/1985) called the 'Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness' (p. 64) whereby our socially constructed *conceptions* of reality are unreflexively mistaken for reality itself. It is this fallacy which has led to either the rejection of the study of discourse as being inappropriate to organizational analysis, or the more popular formulation of 'Organizational Discourse' as discourse *about* organizations or about what goes on *within* organizations. Both claims miss the true significance of discourse analysis as a central feature of organizational analysis. Such formulations miss the essential point that discourse acts at a far more constitutive level to form social objects such as 'organizations' by circumscribing selected parts of the flux of phenomenal experiences and fixing their identity so that it becomes possible to talk about them as if they were naturally existing social entities. This 'entitative' form of thinking, which is widespread in organizational theorizing, conveniently forgets the fact that organizational action is first and foremost an *ontological* activity. Viewed from this perspective, the apparent solidity of social phenomena such as 'the organization' derives from the stabilizing *effects* of generic discursive processes rather than from the presence of independently existing concrete entities. In other words, phrases such as 'the organization' do not refer to an extra-linguistic reality. Instead they are conceptualized abstractions to which it has become habitual for us to refer as independently existing 'things'. 'Organizational Discourse', therefore, must be understood, not in the narrow sense previously discussed, but in its wider ontological sense as the bringing into existence of an 'organized' or stabilized state. Discourse works to create some sense of stability, order and predictability and to thereby produce a sustainable, functioning and liveable world from what would otherwise be an amorphous, fluxing and undifferentiated reality indifferent to our causes. This it does through the material inscriptions and utterances that form the basis of language and representation. Through the regularizing and routinization of social exchanges, the formation and institutionalization of codes of behaviour, rules, procedures and practices and so on, the organizational world that we have come to inhabit acquires its apparent externality, objectivity and structure.

The study of organizational discourse, and the way it shapes our habits of thought, by legitimizing particular objects of knowledge and influencing our epistemological preferences, is crucial for a deeper appreciation of the underlying motivational forces shaping the decisional priorities of both organizational theorists and practitioners alike. For, by organizing our preferred modes of thought, organizational discourse works as a relatively unconscious force to restrict vision and to thereby inhibit the exploration of genuinely alternative modes of conception and action. But



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since language itself, as a form of discourse, is quintessentially a modern method for organizing thought, we can only begin to fully appreciate the fundamental character of organization by first examining the workings of language itself. Thus, the formation of discursive modalities, the legitimating of objects of knowledge and the shaping of meanings and their attachment to social objects all form part of that wider organizational concern which we call 'discourse analysis', and which we argue here is a legitimate form of organizational analysis in the wider sense defined earlier. Since language is that prevailing means for codifying and hence rendering 'articulable' that realm of sense-experience which actively resists codification and representation, it must logically be our first port of call in our search for a deeper understanding of the meaning and effect of discourse as organization. But this poses a problem since we can only use language to express our understanding of the organizational character of language itself. As such, the study of discourse *as* organization needs to be approached elliptically rather than in the traditional direct and assertive manner. We need to begin by referral to that 'pristine experience, unwarped by the sophistication of theory' (Whitehead, 1929: 240) in order to rediscover the meaning and effect of organizational action. This, in turn, demands that we start off with a strategy of analysis which acknowledges the primacy of vagueness or undifferentiatedness as the aboriginal 'stuff' of reality. The long-held Aristotelian belief that language in general and linguistic categories in particular are fully adequate to the task of describing reality as it is in itself must be set aside if we are to begin to fully appreciate the workings of discourse as organization.

By way of a kind of metaphorical explanation, Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Ambassadors*, which was painted in 1533, provides a convenient leitmotif for the kind of oblique strategy required for approaching this ontological issue of organizational discourse. The painting depicts two finely clad gentlemen in traditional ambassadorial attire standing on either side of a display shelf containing books, scrolls, the globe, geometrical instruments, musical instruments and so forth. The two figures appear frozen, stiffened in their magnificent adornment. In front, cutting diagonally across the painting, as if put there as an afterthought, is a strange, oblique and unidentifiable object which interrupts and distracts our attention from the main contents of the painting. This painting has aroused endless controversies regarding its meaning and significance. One explanation which has been offered (Lacan, 1979: 92) and which suits our illustrative purpose here is that the 'ambassadors' are not ambassadors in the ordinary sense. Instead, the artefacts displayed suggests that the artist intended them to represent the triumph and vanity of formal, scientific knowledge. These are ambassadors of the Enlightenment. There is, however, the odd-shaped figure in the front which interrupts our visual field. The interesting thing about this particular unidentifiable object is that it can only be seen obliquely by positioning oneself at an angle of about twenty seven degrees from the surface of



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the painting. At this position, the object becomes immediately recognizable as a human skull. It is what, in art, is called an anamorphic figure. It cannot be seen frontally, but only from a side glance. The significance of the anamorphic skull cutting across the triumphal achievements of order, rationality and progress is a reminder that beneath all these achievements lie the murky depths of the unknown, the uncertain and the unpredictable. There is an intrinsic and essential vagueness which haunts our every achievement and which refuses to go away. This is the undifferentiated flux of our pre-linguistic experience. And it is out of this undifferentiated potentiality that discourse acts to produce the pattern of regularities that constitutes what we call organization. The claim that discourse is essentially performative is indisputable. We need discourse to order our world and to make it more predictable and hence more liveable. Yet, beneath this appearance of organizational orderliness lie material resistances which we have to constantly find ways of temporarily overcoming. These are areas of our pure experiences which language and discourse are not able to reach. It is this vague awareness which circumscribes our every attempt at organization.

This awareness of the limitations and incompetence of discourse or utterance as the defining mode of being have been common tenets in philosophical thought and in the works of artists, poets and mystics in the West as well as 'throughout Indian Brahminism, Chinese Taoism and Japanese Shinto' (Nishitani, 1982: 31). Bergson (1903/1955: 22–4) for one insists that all intellectual analysis reduces the phenomenon apprehended into pre-established symbols which necessarily place us 'outside' the phenomenon itself. Analysis thus leaves us with a *relative* kind of knowledge. On the other hand, absolute knowledge can only be given in an *intuition* which is necessarily 'inexpressible' in symbolic terms because of the uniqueness of that experience. Likewise, in the East, there is a long history of scepticism regarding the adequacy of language and discourse. Chuang Tzu, for instance, urges us to grasp that which lies beyond words when he says:

Symbols are to express ideas. When ideas have been understood, symbols should be forgotten. Words are to interpret thought. When thoughts have been absorbed, words stop . . . Only those who can take the fish and forget the net are worthy to seek the truth. (Chuang Tzu, in Chang, 1963: 43)

Whitehead (1933) also recognized the inadequacies of language in communicating deeper truths. He writes:

Language delivers its evidence in three chapters, one on the meanings of words, another on the meanings enshrined in grammatical form, and the third on the meanings beyond individual words and beyond grammatical form, meanings miraculously revealed in great literature. (Whitehead, 1933: 263)

In consequence the more intuitively and aesthetically minded have opted to privilege as more fundamental and profound that which lies beyond



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the ordinary grasp of language and logic and which they deemed to be only approachable through a complex, spiralling form of oblique utterances which merely point to or allude to an ultimate reality beyond the realms of intellection. There is a general antipathy to overly direct and assertive language in everyday discourse and in place of the insistence on straight-line clarity and distinctiveness in logical argumentation, there is a preference for circumnavigating an issue, tossing out subtle hints that permit only a careful listener or observer to surmise where the hidden or unspoken core of the question lies. Communication of thought is often indirect, suggestive, and symbolic rather than descriptive and precise. This cautious indirectness, as a deliberate intellectual strategy of communication, is exemplified by Holbein's 'ambassadors'. Yet, despite the basic inadequacies of discourse to communicate deeper truths, there is little doubt that it serves a purposeful role in our lives by transforming a difficult and infrangible reality into a resource at our disposal. Through its strategy of differentiation and simple-location, identification and classification, regularizing and routinization, discursive action works to translate the difficult and the intransigent, the remote or resistant, the intractable or obdurate into a form that is more amenable to functional deployment. This is the fundamental role of discourse *as* organization.

Discourse is what constitutes our social world. The etymological meaning of the term 'discourse' is 'to run, to enter, to and fro'. In other words, to discourse is to run to and fro and in that process create a path, a *course*, a pattern of regularities out of which human existence can be made more fixed, secure and workable. So discourse is first and fundamentally the organizing of social reality. From this perspective, the idea of a discourse *about* organizations is an oxymoron. Discourse itself is a form of organization and, therefore, organizational analysis is intrinsically discourse analysis. Organization should not be thought of as something performed by pre-existing 'agents'. Instead the agents themselves, as legitimized objects of knowledge, must be understood as *effects* in themselves. The identity of the individual agent is constructed in the very act of organizing. The tendency to construe individuals as somehow prior to or free from organizational forces overlooks the ontological role of acts of organizing. From the point of view emphasized by this paper, we ourselves are organized as we engage in acts of organizing. My identity is established in the very act of differentiating and detaching myself (i.e. the process of individuation) from my surroundings through material inscriptions and verbal utterances. If we begin to think in these terms rather than the conventional preoccupations of organizational analysis, then instead of thinking about a *theory of organizations*, it might be more meaningful, with this post-representational understanding, to think about a social theory of organizing which would be actually practically useful and relevant to practising managers. It would help practitioners understand better how they have come to develop deeply entrenched habits of thought which unnecessarily circumscribed the



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possibilities for action. If discourse analysis helps us understand how societies construct their social worlds, how the flux and flow of the world is arrested and regularized and then translated into pragmatic use, how societal/global trends shift and so on, isn't that eminently, instrumentally usable?

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