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**Theorising Language in Organisational Research:
Three Views**

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ABSTRACT

This paper advocates a proposition: that good language-based organisational research must pay attention to theorising language itself. It takes the form of a dialogue between three interpretive perspectives: Maturana's theory of the observer, foucauldian discourse analysis, and social constructionism. The paper concludes that theorising links between language and research in organisational settings can contribute both to more rigorous research and to the body of language-based research generally.

INTRODUCTION

One of the hazards of the turn to language in organisational research is that 'language' goes untheorised. In this paper we provide an entree to the notions of language that are central to interpretive genres. Our shared proposition is that a turn to language requires explicit social theories of language, and of the relationship of language to specific research questions. We do not expect these processes of theorising and explanation to fully and finally resolve the problems of interpretive research. On the contrary, we see them as necessary because these problems are not the kind that can be fixed. Rather, they present questions that must be engaged in each unique hermeneutic engagement.

We have chosen a comparative approach to bring out some of the complexity and conflict that characterise debates about 'language'. The core of the paper consists of two iterations of conversation between three voices representing positions within interpretive research: first, Maturana's 'ontology of the observer', whose origins can be traced back to biology and systems thinking; second, foucauldian discourse analysis; and third, social constructionism as developed in psychology. In the first iteration we talk about what we see as the key ideas at stake from each perspective: we put our central propositions. We found that during the dialogic process we each developed an emerging clarity about what we saw as the key distinctions between the perspectives. These are set out in the second iteration. The text as we present it below involves, in fact, many iterations as we circled around what we saw as the most important issues at stake. While there are many resonances between our perspectives, it is the distinctions we have focused on.

This piece is openly normative in the sense that we are writing to advocate a proposition: that good language-based research must pay attention to theorising language itself. We see our audience as consisting of other organisational researchers who are already familiar with some types of language-based research. Our dialogue is not so much an attempt to persuade each other - or you, the reader - that any single interpretive perspective is 'right', but rather it is a device to evoke what we see as the critical issues that need to be addressed. We acknowledge that 'descriptive grids' which systematically compare perspectives can be useful (e.g., Deetz, 1996; Martin and Frost, 1998; Putnam, 1983). However we do not assume that they can be mapped on to each other within a single larger framework (e.g., see Gioia and Pitre, 1990; Flood and Jackson, 1991; Midgely, 1997), as has been suggested in the context of the paradigm

incommensurability debate.   Neither do we try to give a full account of the perspectives we present: we focus on language, and we focus on the distinctions that emerged for us in our specific dialogue. Below we begin by briefly introducing ourselves, to ground the positions we take as 'John', Deborah' and 'Sally' in the conversation.

We encourage you to make your own comparisons and draw your own conclusions. In our final section we develop further the normative issues that we find important. What we have in common is not so much a certain view of language, but a shared commitment to what we see as adequate rigour in language-based organisational research. In concluding we talk in a more general way about what we see as important issues at stake for our discipline in turning to language for organisational research.

THE AUTHORS

John works at the intersection of organization studies and systems thinking. He is particularly interested in 'soft' and 'critical' systems thinking perspectives that seek to account for the role of the observer, language, and power relations in formulating and managing complex problem situations. He has studied Humberto Maturana's ideas for many years and believes that his 'theory of the observer' provides a highly compelling account of how human beings individually and collectively construct, explain and act upon their experiences.

Sally entered the field of organizational inquiry with a background in both science and the arts. After some months undertaking ethnographic field research, she turned to language for theorizing her work. This involved the specific strand of social constructionism she discusses here. Since then, she has worked with a broad range of language-based theories and methods, the diversity of which reinforced her views on the central arguments of this paper.

Deborah brings a background in literary studies and sociolinguistics into her work on organisational discourse analysis. She is therefore particularly sensitised to the validity or otherwise of the theoretical backstories that are given to the use of 'discourse analytic' methods in organisation studies. As a critical scholar she has found the work of Michel Foucault, as described in this paper, to be a generative resource in exploring work and organisations, along with the work of feminist and post-colonial writers who share the project of de-naturalising power relations, and seeking to interrupt and transform them.

PART ONE – CENTRAL PROPOSITIONS

<u>**John: Iteration 1 - Language from a Biological Perspective**</u>

The interpretive perspective discussed here is based upon the 'theory of the observer' developed primarily by Humberto Maturana in conjunction with Francisco Varela. The approach belongs to the so-called 'biology of cognition' paradigm, and derives from the progeny of this paradigm: 'autopoiesis' which is a comprehensive theoretical explanation of living systems. Extended into the human and social domain the so called 'theory (or 'ontology') of the observer' brings into the spotlight the biological basis of people's lived experiences, their explanations of these, and the wider behavioural ramifications.

Beginning with experimental work in neuro-physiology that emphasises the closed autonomous nature of the human nervous system, Maturana (1983), rejects the traditional 'open systems' information processing/computational model of human cognition, in favour of a perspective that equates cognition to a broader process of 'structural coupling' between living systems and their environment. On this view, for human beings cognition is not purely mentalistic; it is an embodied concept that is associated with the whole process of living.

Extending the basic idea of two or more structurally coupled living systems, Maturana and Varela (1980, 1987) seek to provide an account of the process that culminates in the ability of human beings – through the mechanism of language – to 'observe,' i.e. to explain and extract meaning out of their experiences. In developing this explanation, Maturana and Varela reject conventional accounts that portray language as a symbolic system of communication about a pre-existing world. Directly accessing an 'external' reality, they claim, presumes an operation that is physiologically impossible for the human nervous system. On that basis, they reject the idea that the brain works with symbols that directly mirror the 'outside world'. While a nervous system is clearly necessary for human language to develop; fundamentally they see language as a relational phenomenon, not an anatomical or physiological one.

On this account (and conceptualized as a process), languag*ing* (emphasis added) is associated with particular types of behaviour, or particular 'doings'. In its most basic form it can be seen to occur when one entity does something on the consequences of an initial coordination of behaviour between it and another (see Maturana 1988, 1995). In other words, there is what Maturana refers to as a *'coordination of a coordination of behaviour'*. A simple example might involve two pedestrians walking towards each other along a narrow pathway (sidewalk). First

there is visual contact (initial coordination), following which one or both individuals alter their course (the second or 'recursive' coordination), thereby avoiding a collision. Under such a circumstance an observer might conclude that there is a very basic form of languaging occurring between the two individuals. Beyond such basic behavioural coordinations, further recursions of coordination result in language becoming increasingly complex and sophisticated. Thus, in human communities such as organisations, objects 'arise' as tokens for highly specific behavioural coordinations. The designation 'taxi' for example involves a sequence of coordinated actions perhaps beginning with a gesture of the hand, and ending with payment of the fare. In organisational life many such linguistic designations, including the core concept 'organization' itself, are rooted in specific and often very complex behaviours. Witness for example, those that underpin people's judgements about what constitutes a 'good' university, or a 'bad' government.

Once objects have 'arisen' through this process, other developments are possible. We can make distinctions of distinctions and this allows for the development of abstract concept. Entities such as 'education', 'justice', or 'democracy' for example, are also anchored in concrete behaviours/operations, as are the 'ethos' or 'branding' statements that are carefully nurtured in many organisations.

On this view, language, anchored in communal practice is a concrete phenomenon of the living; it is not an abstract system for communicating about a pre-existing world. As we co-ordinate our behaviours in a multitude of different ways; as, through social discourse, we make new distinctions; and as we come up with new tokens for specific behaviours, we are continually weaving linguistic networks with other people. And, on this view, since objects are constituted through our distinctions, we actively 'bring forth' the worlds that we live.

Should an organisational researcher choose to accept these propositions, the ramifications include the following. First and foremost, there needs to be a shift of emphasis from focusing mainly on objects or entities to include much greater consideration of processes. Why? because on this account, processes are primary and objects are secondary. In simple terms one could think about this as involving a shift of focus from mainly or exclusively using nouns to one that privileges verbs. This is by no means a trivial shift, since organizational researchers have and continue to spend a great deal of time working mainly with nouns, typically by firstly describing or conceptualizing   entities, and then theorising relationships between them.

Second, since on this view, language is communal action, the researcher is interested in the daily practices that sustain people's realities as these are lived by the people concerned. In particular the researcher is interested in the structure and content of what Maturana and Varela refer to as the 'conversations' within social networks that are the context through which particular realities are brought forth, and within which people explain their experiences and form judgments about the rationality and legitimacy of actions and decisions.

Third, while the main emphasis is on languaging as a relational phenomenon and as a social dynamic, conceptualising the development of meaning in biological terms implies that we should not lose sight of the essential physicality of human actors. The biological perspective proposes that living a life thoroughly immersed in the full complexity of language is what constitutes the human being as the unique living system that it is. Yet this is not to lose sight of the fact that, first and foremost, human beings are living systems with bodies that are constructed, and thus function, in particular ways. This 'bodyhood' makes observing possible and impacts upon it.

It is axiomatic then that the researcher is interested in how bodily structures, bodily processes and predispositions such as emotion and mood effect not only language but also all the observing-related activities that language makes possible. In this sense although our distinctions, explanations and realities are not determined by bodily states, they are expressions of bodyhood. As Efran et.al (1990:155) put it " . . . *systems of logic and rhetoric are founded, first and foremost, on how we operate as physical beings.*" Moreover because the process is circular, the researcher is interested in how languaging and organisational conversations effect the bodyhood of the observer and his or her subsequent actions.

Deborah: Iteration 1 - The Politics of Discourse Analysis

To analyse a discursive formation... is to weigh the 'value' of statements, a value... which characterizes their place, their capacity for circulation and exchange, their possibility of transformation, not only in the economy of discourse, but, more generally, in the administration of scarce resources (Foucault, 1972, p. 120).

The practice of 'discourse analysis' has been appropriated for a wide range of tasks in organisation studies. Discourse analysis is too often used as an 'add and stir' method, floating free from explicit political positions, epistemologies, or theories of language and action. Michel Foucault's seminal work on discourse problematises the relationship between language and

action. I draw on Foucault's work, and on the foucauldian work that has extended it, to discuss this relationship and its implications for discourse analysis in organisational research. Foucault characterises discourse analysis as a practice which enables transformation. He makes it clear that this transformation works not only in the 'economy of discourse', in terms of regimes of truth, but also 'in the administration of scarce resources' (Foucault, 1972, p. 120). In other words, discourse analysis is a political matter, dealing with power relations and with access to material resources.

By comparison with other interpretive, semiotic or broadly social constructionist approaches to organisational analysis, Foucault specifically refuses 'analysis couched in terms of the symbolic field or the domain of signifying structures' in favour of an analytic model of war or battle: 'relations of power, not relations of meaning' (Foucault, 1980, p. 114). Foucault is interested in questions of what communication <u>does</u> rather than what it <u>means</u>. As Foucauldian scholar Mark Shapiro points out (Shapiro, 1981), Foucault's concept of discourse is inevitably strategic - that is, discourse has political effects, whether or not they are 'intended' by a given agent. The implication for organisation scholars is that an analysis of organisational discourse is inseparable from an analysis of power relations. By extension, definitions of discourse are inseparable from social theory.

In Foucault's social theory, a range of key social concepts are incorporated within the notion of discourses: they are ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledge - and the relations between them (Weedon, 1987, p. 108). These social practices include language but they go beyond the verbal or linguistic, including dimensions such as space, time and the body. Even when foucauldian 'discourse analysis' focuses on verbal texts - transcriptions or published versions of organisational discourse – language is never seen as operating in some kind of autonomous way or as representing some kind of simple index of organisational relationships. It is critical to remember that Foucault's idea of power is productive: power is always seen in terms of 'relations of power' (Foucault, 1983, pp. 217-218) rather than as a structural force separating 'powerful' and 'powerless' groups in some fundamental way.

In the context of organisational life, we can draw on discourse analysis to ask how the identities of organisational subjects – senior managers for instance – are produced and regulated by discursive practices. This approach is very different from the functionalist one in which the

rational individual 'uses' language like a tool to make things happen in organisations in a planned and controlled way.

Foucault's work troubles the boundaries between 'saying' and 'doing', or 'rhetoric' and 'reality'. Discourse can be tracked through language analysis, but that doesn't mean that discourse equals language. Foucault insists that vocabularies do not equal discourses, and that vocabularies can be 'coded' in various ways depending on their research context. Discourse analysis inevitably involves social judgments, not just formal linguistic or rhetorical analysis.

It is not simple to 'operationalise' the term 'discourse'. Shapiro argues that 'a move from the analysis of linguistic or discursive practices to the analysis of human conduct requires little more than the exercise of a perspective (Shapiro, 1981, p. 127, my emphasis). It is this 'exercise of a perspective' that I take as the key to Foucault's notion of discourse. 'Discourse' is not a phenomenon that needs to be narrowly 'defined', but as researchers we do need to discuss what is at stake in the particular notion of discourse we are working within a given project.

Sally: Iteration 1 - Emphasising the Relational

For decades, organisational research has drawn on the contribution of social psychology to qualitative research. One of the traditions in that discipline, social constructionism, appears to have come 'of age' in recent years (Bayer, 1998). But while the notion that reality is 'socially constructed' may have intuitive appeal, the extent to which the 'social' then guides research can easily be undermined. In this conversation, I highlight some of the concepts of the social constructionist tradition in social psychology (that are fundamentally different from Berger and Luckmann's seminal work, The Social Construction of Reality to which the broader constructionist concepts are often attributed). In particular I want to discuss the 'relational' emphasis that this body of work brings to organisational research.

Inherently an interdisciplinary approach, social constructionism as developed in social psychology has primarily built on Wittgenstein's later work in philosophy (e.g. Gergen, 1985; Shotter, 1996). Proponents of social constructionism have also drawn on the contribution of ethnomethodologists (e.g. Garfinkel) as well as post-structuralists (e.g. Foucault). In essence, social constructionism moves beyond the dualism inherent in debates between subjectivism and objectivism to focus on the process of social interchange. The terms by which the world is understood are regarded as social artifacts, products of historically situated interchanges among

people. This, in effect, represents a move from an experiential to a social epistemology (Gergen, 1985) and language becomes the only reality we know.

In social constructionism, the focus on the 'mind' is replaced by a focus on 'relationships' from which the meaning of language originates (Gergen, 1995a). And because the locus of explanation shifts from the mind to the processes of human interaction, social constructionist research is mainly concerned with explicating those processes by which people account for the world in which they live (Gergen, 1885, 1995a). Its emphasis is on the way we negotiate meanings of our lives, and its practices stress how language fashions psychological subjects (Bayer, 1998). In the following sections, I explore the contribution that such a relational emphasis on language offers interpretive organisational research. My discussion spans over three issues. The first discusses how social constructionism offers a communal perspective of organisation, the second examines how such a relational approach serves to guide our research and the third explores the relationship between research and practice.

In the first instance, social constructionism signals a departure from an individualist perspective of organisation to a communal one – or to draw on Gergen's (1999) terms "an alternative discourse to the discourse of the self-contained individual". Harre and Gillet (1994) discuss how the pragmatics of everyday language serve to render certain types of social relationships more salient than others – the emphasis in many Western cultures being strongly individualist. Gergen also relates this dominant individualism to traditional views of knowledge that have invited people to see themselves as the centre of their actions in a natural state of independence. Yet, rather than focus on the individual, social constructionism has advocated dialogical over monological approaches (following Bakhtin). Shotter (1993, 1997) highlights how shared understandings are developed and negotiated over time in the course of conversation. Our understanding is progressively articulated through a 'back-and-forth process' (Shotter, 1995) till we reach undistorted accommodation – or, in other words, construct a form of 'knowing'. So for example, rather than regard culture as an explanatory system in people's heads, it is seen as far more fluid "a matter of everyday activities which continually shift and change" (Wetherell & Maybin, 1996). This also has an impact on how we conceptualise the organisation's relationship with the wider society. Gergen (1995b) uses the example of globalisation to illustrate how organisations that attempt a monologic replication of themselves throughout the world become alien intruders and their effective functioning diminishes.

Secondly, it is the relational emphasis of social constructionism that guides research. Social constructionism highlights that organisational accounts themselves are rhetorically formed (Shotter, 1995) with organisational research primarily drawing from a repository of cultural beliefs in fashioning its being (Gergen 1992). Proponents of social constructionism do not propose to offer 'truth through method'. The degree to which a given form of understanding prevails across time is "not dependent on the empirical validity of the perspective in question, but on the vicissitudes of social process" (Gergen, 1985, p. 268). In other words, processes of change are primarily driven by people's changed interest (Shotter, 1993). Research methods mainly produce 'illustrations' and while this suggests that different methodologies can be employed, in the end, method does not increase the validity of the resultant construction. This does not mean that if one could tell a good story then 'anything goes' (Shotter, 1993) – and this is where the relational perspective is emphasised: Ultimately, the narrative is situated within a *community* of researchers which renders it intelligible. But while organizational researchers are primarily guided by such normative rules of shared intelligibility, they are invited to view these rules as culturally situated and thus subject to critique and alteration (Gergen & Thatchenkary, 1996).

Finally, I highlight the role of the researcher within communities of practice. My argument is that within organizational studies, the researcher's position is precarious along similar lines to those suggested by Gergen (1998b) regarding psychologists: "First with respect to his/her symbiotic relationship with the existing language communities, and second with respect to the life forms that such writing may either disturb or destroy" (p. 111). The researcher, themself, is part of the process of meaning-making in organisations since constructionists maintain that our interaction with each other and with our reality originate and are constructed in 'joint action' (Shotter, 1993, 1995). Organisational research has, over the years, significantly introduced new organisational conversations and practices and served to terminate others. In other words, not only are our research descriptions and accounts themselves constructed, but they also construct the world. This has led social constructionists to accept that our research ultimately is to be judged by its pragmatic implications (Gergen, 1985; Hacking, 1998; Potter, 1996).

In closing, I draw on Gergen (1999) in his emphasis that social constructionism does not provide a foundational ontology. The relational alternative to traditional accounts is not offered as what 'is true' but as a contribution to societal practice. Relational theorising mainly serves to generate an intelligibility that would enrich human relations (Gergen & Walter, 1998).

PART TWO – EMERGING DISTINCTIONS

John: Iteration two

It is manifestly clear to me that there are some important resonances between the three schools of thought under discussion here. They share an anti-objectivist epistemological stance; they acknowledge that all events and actions are open to multiple equally valid interpretations; they agree on the foundational nature of language in terms of explaining how people construct and explain their worlds. Finally, they acknowledge that language is not abstract but a relational phenomenon associated with the manner in which people live together in concrete settings.

Similarities aside, the distinctive feature of Maturana's work that arises in the light of what has been said about the other two perspectives is its recasting of biology into a major supporting - if not leading - role, in explaining the relationship between language and meaning. Recall that while Maturana promotes the idea that language is a relational phenomenon - a particular manner in which people live and do things together - he reminds us that everything that we do – including the how we participate as social beings – is done as the kind of living biological systems that we are.

The main consequence of this is that even when the main focus is on the social, we ought not to ignore the generative presence of biology. Thus, Maturana invites us to move beyond the tendency to assert that the process of creating meaning is <u>either</u> mainly social <u>or</u> mainly mental. Instead, he invites us to account for both the social domain where language and meaning resides, <u>and</u> the physical domain that makes these activities possible.

In explaining the interaction between the social and the physical, the idea of <u>incommensurability</u> is central. Used in this context the term asserts that phenomena belonging to one domain ought not to be explained in terms proper to the other. Thus while the physiological dynamics of the human nervous system makes behaviour and language possible, these are not determined or explainable physiologically. Walking arises out of the interaction between the human body and the ground, and talking is not just the physiological production of sounds; it is the reproduction of sounds in the dynamic of social relations.

Extending this logic, we can say that the various language-related phenomena that interpretive organisational researchers are interested in such as patterns of distinguishing, experiencing, explaining and interpreting and the conversations that sustain these, are - as social

constructionism claims - social phenomena. At the same time, our lived experience confirms that these phenomena depend upon, and are influenced by, our biological condition.

Take, for example, bodily predispositions such as emotions. Unseen, but ever present, we know that our emotional flow affects what we say and think. We behave differently, we describe and interpret things differently according to the emotion in which we do these things. Equally our lived experience confirms that what happens to us in the relational domain has implications for our biology. From moment to moment what we say and what is said to us can trigger changes in our body dynamics. Thus the structure of the nervous system is at any moment a record of previous historical interactions. This is an important source of individual change and learning.

All of which raises the question as to how, since social constructionism tends to de-emphasise the individual, can it account for the dynamic process through which language-related phenomena change over time? Surely the main source of such change has to be the real embodied people who participate in that domain.

When working within the social constructionist tradition, it is quite natural that organisational researchers will choose to focus primarily on the social and the inter-subjective processes through which meaning emerges, develops and is sustained. As a consequence these processes take on an existence that extends beyond the specific individuals involved. Such reification– while understandable - can present difficulties not least because it implies that the favoured and habitual distinctions that might characterise a particular social setting either do not change (which is contrary to our experiences), or if they do change, they change themselves.

This latter point is a difficult one to press. Research preferences notwithstanding, there comes a point where it is difficult to avoid taking into account the 'bodyhood' of real individual actors since they provide much of the impetus for social change. The process through which this happens is quite simple. The bodyhood of the individual actor is at the node of multiple intersecting conversations. Consequently, when the bodyhood changes as a result of participating in one set of conversations, it affects how the actor participates elsewhere. It is this continually changing bodyhood that becomes key to understanding how social systems change.

Let me now turn to what can be said of the biological perspective in the light of the distinctive role played by power in foucauldian discourse analysis. While Foucault's fundamental intertwining of discourse and power is not something that Maturana discusses per se, his conceptual framework does open theoretical space for such an explanation. Space limitations

preclude a full description of this, however in simple terms the link between power and meaning hinges on the proposition that conversations - and languaging more specifically - occur in networks of structural coupling. Essentially these are a dynamic form of adaptation or mutual adjustment between a living system and a medium or between two or more living systems. Now since in the human context it would be erroneous to presume that this coupling is an equal one; since languaging reflects the nature of the coupling; and since meaning is derivative of languaging, then logically it is possible to craft a link between power and meaning.

At the same time one wonders why foucauldian discourse analysis elevates power relations to the level that it does. For Maturana (see 1988), conversations involve a braiding of emotioning and languaging, which means that people's distinctions reflect emotions more generally, not predispositions to subjugate, dominate, and/or control in particular. In that sense one could claim that it is emotion that is the primary 'always-already' condition; it is not, as Foucault appears to suggest, power.

As I have already said, how human beings think, how they act, and what they do, depends on their emotional flow. Partly this reflects biological dynamics. At the same time, emotional predispositions also arise in coexistence with others as we live together. For the researcher who seeks to reveal the preferences that are embodied in organisational practices, the possibility arises that they may be grounded in emotions such as love, mutual respect, friendship, indifference, or in some other disposition. The researcher does not necessarily have to formulate the project on the premise that power is at the root of everything.

Paradoxically, the foucauldian perspective also draws attention to the essential coherence and precision of Maturana's work. Obviously some will regard these features as a strength while others will regard it as a weakness. But taking a particular explanation as valid is not just about the individual's preferences. It is also about his/her experiences. To the extent that he/she continues to have real and/or imagined experiences that confirm the propositions and the deduced propositions of the explanation in question, then we can surmise that it will remain a favoured approach. When he/she starts having contrary experiences or when his/her preferences change then we can surmise that they will look elsewhere. Any argument – in relation to the link between language and meaning – that seeks to elevate the explanatory potential of the biological perspective above others, can only be lodged in these terms.

<u>Deborah: Iteration two</u>

What is philosophy today, I mean philosophical activity, if it is not work which is critical of thought itself? And what is it if, instead of legitimising that which we already know, it does not consist in finding out how and how far it might be possible to think differently? (Foucault, 1992, pp. 8-9).

In reading and talking over what John and Deborah have to say, and in re-reading my own first piece, distinctions between our three perspectives have emerged for me in relation to two key points: the scope and quality of explanation that foucauldian discourse analysis can offer; and theories of the subject. I will cover each in turn.

Foucault's challenge was that, rather than 'legitimising that which we already know', discourse analysis can assist us in 'finding out how and how far it might be possible to think differently' (Foucault, 1992, pp. 8-9). John has described Maturana as offering 'a comprehensive theoretical explanation of living things'. This project creates a 'grand narrative': it tells a story that sets out to represent human existence within a specific totalising logic, 'regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation' (Lyotard, 1984, p. 37). This totalising impulse is a central organising principle, whether it is offered as just one possible explanatory framework or as 'the truth'.

By contrast, Foucault does not so much offer an explanation as offer a critique of existing explanations, asking how they come to be legitimised in a given discursive context – and what are the strategic effects of this legitimation. Although Foucault does use discourse analysis to offer alternative accounts of human existence, they are not intended to be the best, most complete account, but rather to disrupt the knowledges that conventional accounts are based on. The idea of specificity – attention to local contexts, the refusal to take on universal, one-size-fits-all, models – is central to Foucault's critique of knowledge and also his to his notion of analysing discourse.

As a corollary, Foucault's 'method' is not a systematic one that attempts to builds up a full explanation, but rather one which generates a series of experiments. In his own words, 'I call myself more an "experimenter" than a theorist: I don't develop deductive systems to apply uniformly in different fields of research' (Foucault, 1991, p. 27).

The second issue I want to address is the theory of the subject. I argue that a well-articulated notion of subjectivity is essential to adequate discourse analysis, and that such a notion would

articulate for the reader the relationships between subjectivity and discourse that permeate a given piece of research. For instance, from a foucauldian point of view, subjectivity and agency (the capacity to act) are constituted in discourse. The subject does not stand outside language and 'use' it. At the same time the subject can of course seek to create the 'possibility of transformation' (Foucault, 1972, p. 120) by intervening within the discursive horizons of a given situation. Foucault's critical discourse analysis is intended to help enable such strategic intervention.

It is very difficult for those of us whose identities and disciplines are enmeshed in modernism – that is, all of us – to think outside the 'the self and the terms that cluster around it – autonomy, identity, individuality, liberty, choice, fulfilment' (Rose, 1996, p. 1). Foucault's work sets out to problematise this regime of the self, to frame it as a historically specific phenomenon that is discursively constituted. Foucault's work creates problems for many readers because he re-theorises the subject as an aspect of discourse, while at the same time refusing to take an interest in the individual subject and in the traditional object of psychology - 'what goes on "inside" the individual' (Burman and Parker 1993, p. 1). Psychology is the most authoritative western discourse dealing with subjectivity, and psychologists have made various attempts to come to terms with foucauldian social theory – to 'make their project the deconstruction of psychology itself' (Parker and Shotter, 1990) as well as to fill in perceived gaps in Foucault's account of subjectivity. Deborah's work refers to some of these.

For those who want to draw on Foucault's work and yet to address the traditional topics of their disciplinary fields, this refusal of Foucault's creates a series of dilemmas. One approach is to see this refusal as a 'failure' of foucauldian theory (e.g., Newton, 1998). Another possibility is to focus on the critical discourse analysis of 'the subject' of a given disciplinary field, and of practitioner literatures and practices (e.g. Knights and Morgan, 1991; McKinlay and Starkey, 1998; Townley, 1994a). The great temptation is to try to assimilate Foucault's 'exercise of a perspective' into a modernist frame: to try to put it into the service of business-as-usual in a given academic or practitioner context. The challenge for us, as organisational researchers drawing on foucauldian discourse analysis, is to work though the implications of foucauldian critique for our own research fields and practitioner audiences. This means being prepared to 'think differently' about what our 'subject' is, and how it comes to be constituted as it does. It also means learning what we can from foucauldian scholars in related fields who are addressing similar issues of knowledge and action in organisations: policy analysts (e.g., Bennett, 1998); feminists (e.g.,

Yeatman, 1990); trade unionists (e.g., Austrin, 1994). Much foucauldian work carried out within a critical framework marginalises questions of being in action. As scholars in organisational studies we are well-placed to ask how foucauldian discourse analysis can contribute to making change in organisational sites. This does not mean being disingenuous about power relations or simplistic about language and action: 'To work is to undertake to think something other than what one has thought before' (Foucault, 1996, p. 455).

Sally: Iteration two

I owe all that I value to my relationships, and all that I find grievous subject to change only through relationship. Individual subjectivity, then, is not a mark of differentiation, but of relatedness (Gergen, 1995a p. 78-79).

Social constructionism, drawing on Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations, highlights the problems created through the reification of language – through treating language as concrete. To social constructionists, when we talk of concepts such as 'being', we do so in metaphorical terms – as a manner of speech. Yet, those metaphorical means of speech can 'entrap' us within their 'reality' (Shotter, 1996). For example, autopoiesis is a theory at the cellular level of biology. So when we talk about it as a foundational theory for research, we are in effect talking about the metaphysical in physical (or in this case biological) terms. From a social constructionist perspective, in appropriating autopoiesis for use at an organisational level, its role becomes metaphorical. Its appropriation would not be on scientific grounding but as a way of speaking – hence a way of thinking. A good example of such usage would be Morgan's utility of the concept in Images of Organization - at its metaphorical level.

The other issue I would like to highlight is that while as researchers we are all concerned with 'poiesis' – means of production and creation – the locus of our attention markedly differs. Constructionists emphasise 'social poiesis' rather than autopoiesis - creation of ways of thinking as a phenomenon of our interaction. So rather than begin with the characteristics of the person (e.g. the biological) and work outwards, social constructionism reverses this direction. Its premise is that because our physical bodies are separated from each other in space, they mislead us into taking a 'separatist' view of our psychologies as well (Wetherell & Maybin, 1996). Constructionism is mainly concerned with how culture, history and society shape the individual – in other words, how the 'self' is socially constructed through language. So rather than an

alienated individual existence, we sense ourselves as constituted by and constituting the 'other' (Gergen, 1995a). An apparent dilemma that emerges is when an individual fails to accept the socially negotiated meaning within a group, or chooses one group over another. This is mainly because each of us is 'embedded' in multiple communities (Gergen, 1997) and so we have the option of selecting a narrative that may be appropriate for one group, but not another.

This different emphasis in the locus of 'construction' has also had significant impact on the choice of research method for constructionists. For example, while claiming the acceptance of 'virtually any methodology' (Gergen & Thachenkary, 1996), several constructionists do not hesitate to decline the utility of phenomenology (e.g. Potter, 1996; Turner, 1991; Lynch, 1998). This is mainly because phenomenology emphasizes people's subjective perception and understandings rather than regards processes of construction as texts and conversation (Potter, 1996). On the other hand, they have embraced ethnomethodology (e.g. Gergen, 1985; Potter, 1996; Shotter, 1995) whose central focus is on <u>practices</u> rather than experiences. This stance of 'social poetics' has been taken into the organisational context in Shotter's (1995) discussion of the manager as a 'practical author' – one who plays a significant role in the creation of meaning within organisations through arguing persuasively for a landscape of next possible actions.

Finally, I turn to the issue of power. It is probably fair to suggest that organisational literature across varying theoretical paradigms has come to accept that power and politics are inseparable from organisation. What is significant in our current conversation is the extent to which 'relations of power' and the politics that enable such power become central to our research. Deborah emphasises that "an analysis of organisational discourse is inseparable from an analysis of power". While from a social constructionist perspective I accept that all research is ultimately political, involving political judgments, as Deborah mentions, I do not see why power should inevitably extend into the <u>focus</u> of the research. Certainly our research needs to address the power relations within – but it mainly needs to do so as a form of <u>reflexivity</u> - as a transparent acknowledgement of the role that such power relations have in our research.

While in its earlier days constructionism was primarily concerned with 'relations of meaning' over 'relations of power', certainly over the last decade, debates within the field have brought power and politics to the forefront. Social constructionism, however, still remains wary of an overemphasis on the political. Gergen, for example, suggests that there are serious limits to the rhetoric of critique in that it breeds hostility and further fragments the 'socius':

The problem, then, is not in having political positions: virtually all action is political in implication. The major problem is our inheritance of a tradition of argumentation that favours critique as its major mode of addressing 'the opposition'… Rather than focusing on political or rhetorical content, we are drawn to the forms of relationship which bring content and rhetoric to life (1998a, p. 46).

Perhaps this is where the role of 'appreciative inquiry' as a research methodology (e.g. Barrett & Cooperrider, 1990) fits into constructionism's overall purpose: it seeks to focus on the 'positive' to evoke a better future. And while the emphasis on 'relations of meaning' may have earned constructionism a critique of 'platitude' and the lack of a sharp 'bite' – to me personally, it remains the most constructive aspect of social constructionism. Critique, in this context, is not a medium for opposition, but for contextualisation – mainly a voice in dialogue with others. This is where the 'relational' aspect of research itself needs to be examined. For not only does constructionism place on us the mandate of creating a space where all perspectives find voice, but it also extends to challenge the very medium of our expression (Gergen & Walter, 1998). If we accept that there is no 'privileged' language, then this creates room for alternative means of expression to those verbal ones – any means that 'make real' the conceptions that we highlight.

CONCLUSION

We have argued that the turn to language in organisational research is hazardous. John Van Maanen describes our current situation in organisation studies as one in which 'categories collapse, borders open, disciplines intermingle, theories blend, authority disperses, voices multiply, and hodge-podge seems the order of the day' (Van Maanen, 1996, p. 375). We argue that it is possible to be interdisciplinary, to work with multiple perspectives, to challenge traditional categories in organisational research, and yet to avoid the hazards of 'hodge-podge'. This means being as clear as possible about our theoretical commitments, and about our use of terms such as 'discourse' and 'language' in our research context.

We believe that the issues we raise are important at this particular historical point in organisation studies. Over the last decade language-based research has become increasingly central in our field. However, few organisational scholars have specialised expertise in theorising and analysing language. Similarly, we often lack familiarity with the broader critical and social theories central to the literatures from which many of these techniques derive. In particular,

language-based interpretive approaches are often critical and interpretive rather than prescriptive in their agendas. This means that it is difficult, with any validity, to simply splice them on to the functionalist assumptions of much of the literature we find in management studies.

Like all interdisciplinary scholars, we risk over-simplifying or misunderstanding the key principles of an unfamiliar discipline. It is important to avoid the hazards of simply applying to organisational research 'methods' derived from scholars in fields such as linguistics (Fairclough, 1992) or social psychology (Parker, 1992). These writers have done us the favour of conveniently spelling out the methodologies they have developed to address their own research questions in their own disciplinary domains. But they also warn that these methodologies cannot just be appropriated without doing the same work in the context of our own research projects (Fairclough, 1992, p. 226; Parker, 1992, p. 122; see also Jackson, 1991).

While we have not explicitly discussed criteria for validity, the question of validity permeates our discussion. Rethinking validity is not necessarily about being doctrinaire or formulaic, but about insisting on openness about the kinds of truth claims made and the ways that researchers hope to persuade readers of their truth values. This means understanding and being able to explain the theoretical issues involved in terms of the research question. As Barbara Townley has argued, explicit 'accountability' to readers is the basis for a style of academic writing which is thereby made open to contest (Townley, 1994b). In language-based organisational research the 'account' itself should set out the links worked between theories of language, research questions and research sites. This allows us to be rigorous about truth values. It also allows us to trace and develop questions of language in ways that are distinctive to the context of organisation. In this way we can, through engagement with our particular research questions, contribute reciprocally to the body of language-based research.

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