The discourse of management and the management of discourse

Bertram C. Bruce*

Graduate School Library and Information Science,
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign,
303 LIS, 501 E. Daniel, Champaign, IL 61820, USA
E-mail: chip@illinois.edu
*Corresponding author

Jeanne M. Connell

Department of Education Policy, Organization and Leadership,
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign,
College of Education, 375 Education Building,
1310 South Sixth Street, Champaign, IL 61820, USA
E-mail: jmconnel@illinois.edu

Chris Higgins

Department of Education Policy, Organization and Leadership,
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign,
College of Education, 351 Education Building,
1310 South Sixth Street, Champaign, IL 61820, USA
E-mail: crh4@uiuc.edu

Joseph T. Mahoney

Department of Business Administration,
College of Business,
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign,
140C Wohlers Hall, 1206 South Sixth Street,
Champaign, IL 61820, USA
E-mail: josephm@illinois.edu

Abstract: Discourse is a pervasive tool of management; one might even say
that discourse is what managers do. A widespread assumption among managers
is that discourse is not only a pervasive tool, but an effective one for precise
communication of information, for making decisions, and for enlisting action,
essentially a transmission tool. This paper maintains that the transmission view
is a limited conception of language use, one which leads to a faulty conception
of what managers do. It ignores the need for an ethics of communication and
misjudges the creative aspects of language use. Management discourse is a far
more complex and fluid phenomenon, one requiring not just effective use, but
management itself. In other words consideration of the discourse of
management leads us to the need for the management of discourse.

Biographical notes: Bertram C. Bruce received his BA in Biology from Rice University and his PhD in Computer Sciences from the University of Texas. He is Professor Emeritus in Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Before moving to Illinois, he taught Computer Science at Rutgers (1971–1974) and was a Principal Scientist at Bolt Beranek and Newman (1974–1990). His recent books include *Libr@ries: Changing Information Space and Practice* (2006) and *Literacy in the Information Age: Inquiries into Meaning Making with New Technologies* (2003). He has developed computer systems to support collaboration and community action, such as *Quill*, the *Inquiry Page*, and *Community Inquiry Labs* (*iLabs*).

Jeanne M. Connell received her BA in Psychology from the University of Maine, MS in the History of Education from the University of Pennsylvania, and PhD from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in Philosophy of Education. She is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy of Education in the Department of Education, Organization and Leadership at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her research articles have appeared in *Educational Theory*, *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, *Education and Culture*, *Educational Studies*, *Educational Foundations*, and the *Peabody Journal of Education*.

Chris Higgins received his BA in Philosophy at Yale University and his PhD in Philosophy and Education at Columbia University. He is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy of Education in the Department of Education, Organization and Leadership at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His book, *The Good Life of Teaching: An Ethics of Professional Practice* (Wiley Blackwell, June 2011) offers a new, virtue-ethical approach to professional ethics and the philosophy of teaching. His articles have appeared in *Educational Theory*, *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, *The Journal of Philosophy of Education*, *Teachers College Record*, and *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik*.

Joseph T. Mahoney received his BA, MA, and PhD from the University of Pennsylvania, with a Doctorate in Business Economics from the Wharton School of Business. He joined the College of Business of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1988, and is currently the Caterpillar Chair in Business, and Director of Graduate Studies for the Department of Business Administration. He has published over 50 journal articles, which have been cited over 5,700 times in *Google Scholar* from scholars in over 65 countries. His 2005 book, *Economic Foundations of Strategy*, has been adopted by over 30 doctoral programmes.

1   Introduction

Discourse[1] is a pervasive tool of management; one might even say that discourse is what managers do. Within management, such discourse occurs in many venues including:

strategic change management (Huff, 1983; Johnson, 1987); environmental management (Hajer, 1995; Prasad and Elmes, 2005); strategic development processes (Laine and Vaara, 2007; Rouleau, 2005); recruitment processes (Bergstrom and Knights, 2006; Stevens, 1989); strategic planning meetings and workshops (Jarzabkowski and Balogun, 2009; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007); securing invested capital (Martens et al., 2007; O'Connor, 2004); stakeholder management (Barry and Elmes, 1997; Mantere, 2008); institutionalisation and legitimation processes (Phillips et al., 2004; Vaara and Tienari, 2008); as well as de-institutionalisation processes (Maguire and Hardy, 2009; Oliver, 1992).

A widespread assumption among managers is that discourse is not only a pervasive tool, but an effective one for precise communication of information, for making decisions, and for enlisting action. Thus, it is conceived as a transmission tool, one that may require practice and refinement, but is generally unproblematic. We maintain that this transmission view is a limited conception of language use, one which leads to a faulty conception of what managers do. It ignores the need for an ethics of communication and misjudges the creative aspects of language use. Management discourse is a far more complex and fluid phenomenon, one requiring not only effective use but also management itself. In other words, consideration of the discourse of management leads us to the need for the management of discourse.

Conversations produce discursive resources that create a collective identity and translate into effective collaboration (Fiol, 2002; Hardy et al., 2005). In recent years we have come to better appreciate that discourse can be a strategic resource (Eccles and Nohria, 1992; Hardy et al., 2000). Management within (and among) organisations is to a substantial degree rhetorical, involving specific vocabularies, persuasion strategies, metaphors, and story-telling (Boje, 1995; Morgan, 1980; Tsoukas, 1991).

The current paper first explores a variety of ways in which the transmission view is a limited conception of language use. We draw from research literature in sociolinguistics, sociology, philosophy, and literary criticism. The limitations so identified provide more than just a critique of a particular theoretical model. More importantly, they reveal the diverse ways that language works in discourse. In so doing, they show the creative potential for discourse. Thus, precise transmission is not only illusory; it is much less than what discourse actually accomplishes. But this raises the challenge: What can managers do if the precise control of discourse is impossible? We discuss in the section to follow the need for norms of good conversation, that is, the conditions for allowing discourse to develop in more productive ways. We submit that a better understanding of the discourse of management leads us to the need for the strategic management of discourse, and accordingly suggest ways in which that management can be enacted.

2 Going beyond the transmission model

The transmission model of discourse suggests that a careful choice of words will lead to a precise expression of meaning, and that as long as the hearer actually listens to that expression, it will lead eventually to effective communication. But studies of language use show that this model not only posits an unattainable ideal, it misses the crucial way in which speakers and hearers co-construct meaning. This co-construction of meaning

occurs through micro-level interactions involving word choice, gestures, and facial expressions. It also occurs through processes of interpretation.

2.1   Conversation failure

Considering the interactive processes of meaning making in language, we turn to the research of Ringle and Bruce (1982), which analyses the prevalence of *conversation failure*, and the essentially creative response that interlocutors apply to deal with it:

> "Speakers frequently misunderstand one another but are somehow able to detect and repair one another's errors. Conversation failure, in fact, appears to be the rule rather than the exception. The reason that dialogue is such an effective means of communication is not because the thoughts of the participants are in such perfect harmony, but rather because the lack of harmony can be discovered and addressed when it is necessary." [Ringle and Bruce, (1982), p. 203]

The *ethnomethodological approach* (Goodwin, 1981; Sacks, 1995) established this type of interaction as a key organising principle for discourse. This approach showed through a wide range of research studies that discourse is not simply a delivery of information from a speaker to a listener, but instead, a co-construction of all the participants. This co-construction implicates spoken words, but also gestures, facial expressions, co-present objects, shared knowledge of the space for discourse, and many other factors.

For example, Goodwin (2003) discusses the physical act of pointing, and analyses Babe Ruth's legendary, and supposed, pointing to centrefield during the third game of the 1932 World Series just before he hit the next pitch there for a home run. The analysis of this example, and many others, clearly shows the multifaceted nature of discourse and the varied interpretations of apparently simple discourse acts.

2.2   Language shaping actions in the world

It is often claimed that language is both a language game and an effective tool for managers (Alvesson, 1993; Astley and Zammuto, 1992; Pondy, 1978). These claims are true up to a point. There are limits, however, to management's ability to bend language to its strategic intent (Fairclough, 2005; Iedema, 2007; Seidl, 2007). Indeed, it could be said that language sometimes bends management to its purposes (Bakhtin, 1981; Gadamer, 2004; Giddens, 1979). If managerial action is constrained by thought, and thought is constrained by managerial language, then management's (strategic) actions within organisations are to some extent shaped by the purposes embedded in the discursive frames employed (Heracleous and Hendry, 2000; Lakoff, 2002; Lakoff and Johnson, 2003).

Consider, for example, managers utilising metaphors for teaching their staff. Imagine participants within a firm are using such phrases as "the staff members are not buying what the manager had to say" or "the manager delivered a good message". Here a specific frame is already in use, that of *transmission*. Indeed the first example imagines the transmission of knowledge to be like a sales transaction. With this frame in place, certain points may still be debated. However, many other questions of potential concern for strategic management, and perhaps the key questions, will appear as answered before they have even been raised.

2.3 Misunderstanding as the generator of new knowledge

In a four-year study of collaborative, interdisciplinary alliances, Kanfer et al. (2000) examined how understanding and misunderstanding function in collaborative endeavours. The study shows that in collaborative environments participants typically have only partly overlapping understandings of any topic under consideration. The very idea of 'correct understanding' turns out to be unhelpful. Instead, reinterpreting new information in light of one's own experiences is a necessary aspect of how any joint understanding happens. The study points out that misunderstanding is a necessary, and in some ways a potentially beneficial, aspect of any collaborative situation. What is a 'misunderstanding' from one standpoint, may be a 'new twist' from another standpoint, and the active resolution of this misunderstanding may enable creative 'abrasion' that leads to a new jointly created connectivity between standpoints or an understanding – new knowledge – about the problem. Thus, varying degrees of common interpretation and misunderstanding may in fact have very positive implications for knowledge processes in multidisciplinary distributed teams.

2.4 Implications of adopting the transmission view

These research studies and analyses notwithstanding, the view of communication as transmission is much richer than portrayed here. Some research has acknowledged that discourse has institutional properties that enable its transmission within and between contexts (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Latour, 1987). That said, we maintain that Jackson's (1986) distinction is useful that the key divide is between communication as transmission ('mimetic outlook') and a long-standing, rival tradition of 'transformative' rhetoric. Once the conversation about teaching staff members is framed through the metaphor of transmission, or delivery, certain functions of the management executive described by Barnard (1938) become inoperative. For example, inculcating moral responsibility and offering staff insights concerning aesthetic experience will seem automatically out of place (Dewey, 1934; Higgins, 2008; Mahoney, 2002).

Let us return to the conversation of the managers and their staffs. Within the transformative frame, the staff member is seen not as a consumer who either buys or rejects a deliverable, but as an apprentice seeking to develop new capacities. Instead of framing the discourse as one of transmission, in the apprenticeship model, managers are responsible for influencing the norms and perceptions of their staff (MacIntyre, 1990, 2007; MacIntyre and Dunne, 2002; Ouchi, 1979). An apprenticeship framing would more easily lend itself to moral and aesthetic discussion. The more general point is that metaphors are not simply devices used by management to express a pre-existing thought or action but that such metaphors are the very medium in which management's ideas about things take shape (Black, 1962; Buchanan and Dawson, 2007; Lakoff and Johnson, 1999).

2.5 Language and social relations

Turning from the cognitive-linguists Lakoff and Johnson (2003) to *ordinary language philosophy*, we see a focus is on *how to do things with words*. Austin's (1965) pioneering speech act theory also rejects the notion that language is a reliable tool at the complete

disposal of management. For though management may have a certain amount of control over the act *of* saying (locution), the act management performs in saying something (illocution) is determined by situated social conventions beyond their control, and the act management performs *by* saying something (perlocution) is co-determined by those stakeholders with whom they are in dialogue (Bruce, 1983; Musson and Duberley, 2007; Searle, 1995).

From social philosopher Jürgen Habermas, we find another important limitation of the idea that language is a tool free to be deployed as management would see fit. The first thing to note is that Habermas (1984, 1987) offers a theory of communication (speech, discourse, language in use) rather than a linguistic theory *per se*. That is, while Habermas (1984) is concerned to show the limits to the idea that language can be thought of as simply a managerial *tool*, it is fair to characterise this theory as a pragmatics of language.

In viewing language in terms of communication and communication in terms of action, Habermas (1984) is not committed to an instrumental picture of language, and makes three important distinctions. First, management speakers as actors have two basic orientations available: the instrumental (strategic) and the communicative. In the strategic stance, a managerial (speech) actor is oriented towards success; in the communicative stance a managerial (speech) actor is oriented toward reaching an understanding with interlocutors – although in practice the stance of a particular managerial speech actor may be difficult to distinguish (Endres, 2006).

The second distinction concerns the three basic types of speech acts. According to Habermas (1984, 1990) speech acts can be expressive of a subjective world (first-person), interactive in a social world (second-person), or descriptive of an objective world (third-person). Habermas (1984) emphasises in these three modes of speech that each type of managerial speech act implies its own type of normativity: sincerity, rightness, and truth respectively.

The final distinction to consider is that between 'life-world' and 'system' (e.g., a financial or political institution). By life-world, Habermas (1990, p.135) means our "storehouse of unquestioned cultural givens from which those participating in communication draw agreed-upon patterns of interpretation". It is the "cultural stock of knowledge that is 'always already' familiar" [Habermas, (1987), p.125]. As such, it is not a potential object of interpretation as the subjective, inter-subjective, and objective worlds are, but rather the medium in which managers seek to understand some aspect of those worlds that has become problematic.

To return to our theme of the ill-fated attempt by management to treat language like a tool, to manage discourse, we see now the rich vocabulary Habermas (1987) offers for critique in this area. Language is the medium of our intra-personal, inter-personal, and impersonal understanding. There are serious limits to management's ability to use language and discourse as a set of objective systems to be mastered and manipulated, and there are also limits to management's social instrumentalisation of language.

2.6   *Language and experience*

The dependence of language use on social relations was expressed by philosopher and educator, John Dewey, who goes even further. For Dewey, language cannot be considered independent of experience; history matters. Language is a relationship, a mode of interaction that implies shared, cooperative exchanges through acquired habits of speech that lead to meaning making. Dewey (1925, p.148) states that: "no individual

develops in isolation, responses grow intelligent, or gain meaning, simply because he lives and acts in a medium of accepted meanings and values". Language is not like a pipe that conducts water, but rather language has a transforming function. Dewey (1925, p.179) maintains that "at the heart of language is not expression of something antecedent, much less an expression of antecedent thought. It is communication; the establishment of cooperation in an activity in which there are partners, and in which the activity of each is modified and regulated by partnership. To fail to understand is to fail to come to agreement in action; to misunderstand is to set up action at cross purposes". Therefore, in communication, parties transact in a relationship that is generative; meanings change as a property of cooperative behaviour. Dewey (1925, p.204) notes that: "no person remains unchanged and has the same future efficiencies, who shares in situations made possible by communication".

Human beings dynamically transact with their environment, changing themselves and the environment simultaneously. A primary implication of Dewey's (1925) transactional perspective is that humans are inextricably woven into the social and natural fabric of the world. Communication experiences are full of inferences and reflection, and therefore creative moments. Dewey (1925, p.194) submits that: "all discourse, oral or written, which is more than routine unrolling of vocal habits, say things that may surprise the one who says them, often indeed more than they surprise anyone else". Moreover, effective communication depends upon shared experiences, a phenomenon very familiar to anyone who has tried to bring together groups representing different disciplines or cultures. Dewey (1938, p.68) expresses this issue concisely: "A universe of experience is a precondition of a universe of discourse".

Dewey's (1925) transactional perspective on language and experience forms a foundation for a reading theory that focuses on opportunities for meaning making (Connell, 1996). Rosenblatt (1938, 1978) locates the construction of meaning in the personal lived-through quality of the reading or listening experience, making the relationship between the text and the reader or the speaker and listener central (Connell, 2000, 2001). Rosenblatt (1978) aligns with Dewey's (1925) transactional perspective by emphasising that reading always implies both a reader and a text in a reciprocal relationship and that meaning occurs during the interplay between particular signs and a particular reader at a particular time and place (Connell, 2005, 2008). In this new paradigm "the polysemous character of language invalidates any simplistic approach to meaning" [Rosenblatt, (2005), p.22].

2.7 Dialogism: language and language

Russian literary theorist and philosopher of discourse Mikhail Bakhtin provides an interesting additional point of reference here. Cutting against Habermas' (1987) concern that language will become detached from discourse situations in which managers engage each other in communicative action, is Bakhtin's (1981/1934–5) insight into the inherent 'dialogisation' of discourse. On the common sense view, dialogue is a special kind of interaction between two or more speakers. Each speaker has discursive moves, style, and assumptions, which confront the discourse of another. Once utterances are traded back and forth, we have a dialogue.

What Bakhtin (1981) shows, however, is that dialogue and language are shaped by its social life, and bear the marks of its past uses. Thus, managerial dialogue can be

understood as being both pushed by rejoinders to past challenges and as being pulled by anticipation of likely rejoinders – including those by various stakeholders (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000).

3   Strategic management of discourse

The current paper questions the transmission view of language. The upshot from the reference points in the discourse literature is that language has its limitations as a tool of management's bidding. Management would do better to move beyond the metaphor of language as a precise tool and to recognise that the quest for certainty is misplaced (Dewey, 1929; Kaplan, 1964). We also suggest triangulation (Huff, 1981; Jick, 1979; Van de Ven, 2007) to discourse including: a *functional approach*, in which language is viewed as being used instrumentally to achieve purpose; an *interpretive approach*, in which language is viewed as communicative action; a *critical approach*, in which power and knowledge relations are linguistically articulated, historically located, and embedded in practice, and a *structural approach*, in which there is a duality of deep structures and surface communicative actions (Boje, 1991; Heracleous and Barrett, 2001; Heracleous, 2005). Our maintained approach to attenuating these managerial problems resides less in technically sharpening the tools of language, but rather focuses on the ethical norms of conversation, which we turn to next.

The current paper submits that managers abandoning a quest for certainty may have its benefits. Indeed, an authoritarian managerial tone may, paradoxically, make managers communications less believable when presented to a savvy workforce. Instead, we submit that the managerial enterprise can be expected to run reasonably well under conditions of participatory opportunity as long as the ethical norms of good conversation are maintained: do not lie; give attention; do not shout; let other people talk; do not resort to intimidation and/or collusion in aid of your ideas (Habermas, 1984; Green, 2004; Mahoney, 1993; McCloskey, 1985).

Good conversation can provide both the text and the context (i.e., the information and the meaning) for achieving reliable organisational learning and culture as well as mutually satisfying intra-firm and inter-firm transactions (Fiol, 1991; Mahoney et al., 1994). We submit that good conversation is a necessary condition for higher-order organisational learning, which occurs, "when error is detected and corrected in ways that involve the modification of an organization's underlying norms, policies, and objectives" [Argyris and Schon, (1978), p.3]. A critical dynamic for the learning organisation is a process that regularly brings participants' mental models into the open in an organisation, where they can be discussed and challenged (Mahoney and Sanchez, 2004; Van de Ven, 2007).

It should be more widely appreciated than it is within management studies that discourse analysis is central to the core of contemporary strategic management in terms of attenuating bounded rationality problems (Simon, 1947) and mitigating opportunistic behaviour[2] (Williamson, 1985). Concerning the focus on the latter problem, much of the spirit of management studies can be found in the 2009 co-recipient of the Nobel prize in Economics, Oliver E. Williamson's, comment: "that the world should not be organized to the advantage of the opportunistic against those who are more inclined to keep their promises" [quoted in Swedberg, (1990), p.126]. Organisations can be thought of as a means of mitigating opportunistic behaviours via routines and culture (Williamson,

1999). Connecting these ideas to discourse, the argument is that effective organisations depend on ethical conversations and that effective organisations can potentially do better than (even recurrent) market transactions both in terms of reduced bounded rationality via common language and coding (Arrow, 1974) and mitigation of opportunism. Williamson (1975, p.25) writes:

> "A further advantage of internal organization is that, as compared to recurrent market exchange, efficient codes are more apt to evolve and be employed with confidence by the parties. Such coding also economizes on bounded rationality. Complex events are summarized in an informal way by using what might be an idiosyncratic language. Although, in principle, the parties to recurrent market contracts could devise the same language, thereby realizing the same economies, such exchanges are more subject to the risk of opportunism – hence, are less apt to be developed fully."

Thus, the 'management of discourse' is facilitated by standardisation of language that can be seen in accounting systems, blueprints and other reporting systems (Cyert and March, 1963; Nelson and Winter, 1982). However, such efficiencies can be impaired by the risk of opportunism. Thus, the superior knowledge transfer of the firm vis-à-vis recurrent contracting is arguably because of superior coding and language that takes place within the firm because of the superior attenuation of opportunism relative to recurrent contracting (Foss, 1996; Mahoney, 2001). The upshot of why this outcome is so is that when recurrent contracting by separate entities is replaced by the firm the following changes occur: ownership changes, incentives change, and governance structures (e.g., the ability to monitor and reward) change (Mahoney, 1992; Williamson, 1996). The 'discourse of management' can achieve a convergence of expectations (Malmgren, 1961) among participants and thus better coordination and performance outcomes precisely because the 'management of discourse' has provided a governance structure to promote and facilitate ethical conversations to nurture the creative nature of communicative actions.

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Notes

1   There are many definitions of discourse in the research literature and no definition can or should claim to be definitive. Nonetheless, it is useful to propose a working definition of the concept as is it central to this paper. Discourse is considered here to be the use and process of language to social, political and cultural formations, which not only *reflects* social order but also *shapes* social order, and individuals' interaction with society (Grant et al., 1998; Jaworski and Coupland, 1999; Thomas, 2003; Van Dijk, 1997).

2   Opportunistic behaviour (or opportunism) refers to self-interest seeking with guile [Williamson, (1985), p.47]. In the agency theory literature, ex ante hidden information (e.g., adverse selection) and ex post opportunism problems (e.g., moral hazard) are primary examples of opportunistic behaviour. In transaction costs a primary example of opportunism is the economic hold-up problem and the potential appropriation of quasi-rents under conditions of asset specificity (Williamson, 1996).