The Role of Discourse, Text and Practice in the Construction of Organizational Reality

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Abstract

Functional approaches and practices can be seen as *loci* of knowledge production and preservation. The present paper provides a comprehensive reflection on the former by discussing in detail the concept of discourse and discourse analysis applied to organisational contexts. Indeed, language and discourse are the principal means by which institutions and organisations create their own social reality. With the aim to clarifying how the social world is constructed and construed through actions of intersubjective meaning-making processes and to avoid the emphasis placed only on micro-linguistic elements, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was introduced to raise the attention on the macro-social aspects of discourse within organisations.

1.   Introduction

This contribution deals with the relationship between discursive practices and how these ones are produced and reproduced within the social context (Donnellon, Gray and Bougon, 1986). The methodological assumptions to carry this out are based on the approach of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which investigates how the production of discourse can support researchers in observing and inquiring the social reality (Hardy and Phillips, 1999). Conceptual reflection around discourse, practices and text constitute the theoretical base for Critical discourse analysts, who approach the analysis of discourse from various perspectives. Indeed, since the discipline is quite new and both contributions to theory and practice come from different fields, there is no agreement yet on the boundaries and on the possibility to consider CDA as a standing discipline (Bloor and Bloor, 2007).

Institutions and organisations have considerable control over the organising of the routine experiences of the world and the way reality is classified. Therefore, they also have the power to foster particular kinds of identities to suit institutions' and organisations' own purposes because they are primary sites for "reality construction" (Mayr, 2008: 1). Language and discourse are the principal means by which institutions and organisations create their own social reality. Indeed, as Mumby and Clair (1997: 181) argue, "[o]rganizations exist only in so far as their members create them through discourse. This is not to claim that organizations are

'nothing but discourse', but rather that discourse is the principal means by which organizational members create a coherent social reality that frames their sense of who they are". This, however, does not mean that individuals are entirely constrained by the organisational discourse that is laid upon them: people can and do resist and subvert dominant organisational discourses and practices by drawing on oppositional knowledge or tailoring dominant understandings to their personal circumstances. In this way, imposed identities can and are constantly negotiated, contested, and resisted.

The article introduces different perspectives on CDA, looking at different conceptual characteristics related to the construction of discourse in observing reality. Thus the paper is structured as follows: in Section 2, an analysis of the word 'discourse' and the instrumental use of texts is introduced. In Section 3, some aspects of discourse analysis as a methodology are analysed. Before introducing the functional approach (Section 5), practices (Section 4), seen as a *locus* of knowledge preservation and knowledge-production will be envisaged.

2.   Defining 'discourse'

The word 'discourse' has come to be used in several senses. Generally speaking, discourse refers to the symbolic interaction that people have in a communicative event (Hymes, 1964, 1972) and may take place in several ways (usually, written, spoken, and visual communication). A further and narrower understanding of the broad sense of the word 'discourse' sees it as linked to specific institutional contexts. In this way, it is common to hear about 'legal discourse', 'academic discourse', 'political discourse', and so on. This latter conception is less useful in analysing individual communicative events, although it becomes more helpful in interpreting and understanding academic discourse, for instance, due to the abundance of different instantiations of this specific discourse, such as research reports, papers, books, and so forth. On the other hand, the term 'discourse' can be solely used to indicate spoken interactions, even though nowadays this use is relatively rare because of the possibility to analyse many written interactions (Phillips and Brown, 1993). Accordingly, discourse is also meant either as a treatise or as a discourse concerning specific topics, such as the economy, migration, specific communities, etc. Finally, multimodal discourse refers to those discourses that rely on more than one mode of communication. Modern technology enables us to access visual information. For instance, a magazine might make use of written texts but also pictures and other forms of communication; a scientific monograph might incorporate written texts with diagrams; a film uses images, words and music. Thus, discourse, in this latter sense, includes language and other forms of semiosis such as visual and body language. Texts (as discoursal elements and understood from a multimodal perspective) often combine different semiotic systems (e.g., the texts found in a television context characteristically combine language and visual images). Thus, the word 'discourse' can be meant as a *symbolic human interaction*: it includes the spoken language but even pictures, films or music (Bloor and Bloor, 2007). The scope of discourse analysis, on the basis of the previous observations, is not merely the analysis of discourse *per se*, but the investigation of the relations between discourse and non-discoursal elements of the social reality in order to reach a better understanding of these complex relationships (including how changes in discourse can cause changes in other

elements; Fairclough, 2005). However, if we are to analyse relations *between* discourse and non-discoursal elements, we must naturally see them as different elements of social reality, as ontologically distinct.

2.1. Text

Text is a product of discourse, and discourse is usually constructed in/through texts. It is typically used as a proof of a communicative event, and it may be both written and spoken (or a mix of the two in the case of texts written-to-be-spoken and texts spoken-to-be-written). The term 'text' is used here in a generalised sense as the discoursal element of social practices. In this way, texts should not be understood as elements that are produced in isolation, but as establishing a relation to other aspects of social events, and as entailing a link to social practices that is internal to texts themselves, in the sense that they necessarily draw on specific orders of discourse (i.e., social practices in their discoursal aspects), and on the discourses, genres, and styles associated with them.

However, it must be promptly underlined that "texts are elements of tension between two forces: social practices and, through their mediation, social structures; and the agency of the social actors who speak, write, compose, read, listen to, interpret them" (Fairclough, 2005: 925). The social resource of discourses, genres, and styles are subject to social agencies, so that texts actively rewrite discourses, genres, and styles, articulating them together in potentially novel ways. The interdiscursive analysis of texts in CDA (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999) displays how texts articulate different discourses, genres, and styles drawing from diverse orders of discourse, and showing the capacity of social agents to use existing social resources, which may contribute to changing the attractiveness of and relations among social practices (Heracleous and Hendry, 2000). From a CDA point of view, the general case for incorporating discourse analysis into organisational research includes the possibility that such study should include a detailed analysis of texts. The argument is a rather obvious one: relations between discourse and other social elements (including the constructive effects of discourse) cannot be researched without a method for analysing linguistic and interdiscursive features of texts in some detail (Fairclough, 2005).

3. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

With the aim to clarify how the social world is constructed through actions of intersubjective meaning-making and to avoid the emphasis placed only on micro-linguistic elements, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was introduced by Norman Fairclough (1989, 1992, 2005) to raise the attention on the macro-social aspects of discourse. The relation between discourse and social structure is dialectical due to the twofold nature of discourse, that is, both as an object and practice (Doyle and Sims, 2002). Accordingly, discourse is continually and recursively acting on individual meaning-making elements in the production of texts (Barrett and Cooperrider, 1990). CDA theorises three categories of social phenomena, that is, text, discourse, and social environment (Fairclough, 1992). Subject positions are first located in

social space from which actors produce texts, and then discourses. Organisations, therefore, can be seen as the result of this discursive construction, made by members in their organisational experience (Gioia, 1986). Engaging in discursive practices can also represent a political action, a way to control power and finally determine the understanding of all the concepts (re)produced and diffused within organisations (Palmer and Dunford, 1996; Hardy, Palmer and Phillips, 2000). More importantly, the individuals who have the right to yield texts also have the possibility of producing concepts, objects, and the position of subjects, even in those cases where the discursive structures produce contradictory results. The consequence is an ambiguous and contested set of discursive structures full of contradictions with their meaning and application subject to continuous negotiations.

The methodological approach to research associated with CDA formulates objects of study on the basis of specific research topics (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). In this way, one should not assume that the research topic is neutral in formulating coherent objects of research. The process of constructing them involves selecting theories and categories that are in line with the research topic. It is thanks to such theorisations of the research topic and object of research that one can select appropriate methods of data collection and analysis. Sometimes, this would be the work of an interdisciplinary research team; or it might be a matter of a discourse analyst drawing on the literature from other disciplines and theories (Fairclough, 2005). Interjecting discourse as the connection between texts and social context offers a framework for the reflection on how the (re)production of sets of texts leads to change or stability in a specific social context, and vice versa. In organisational research, more generally, discourse analysis has been scrutinised in and applied to a number of research topics. For example, Munir and Phillips (2005) examine how the meanings and uses of technologies are discursively constructed. Other examples include Tienari *et al*. (2005), who use discourse analysis to study the construction of understandings of gender discrimination in corporate hierarchies; Doolin (2003) applies ideas from discourse analysis to understand organisational change, while Phillips, Lawrence, and Hardy (2004) employ discourse analysis to theorise the process of social construction subsumed to institutionalisation.

Despite this growing enthusiasm for discourse analysis in management and organisation studies (Grant *et al*., 2005), more broadly, its application of strategy has lagged behind some other areas of the discipline. This observation leads Vaara, Kleymann, and Seristö (2004) to the conclusion that strategy research has paid little attention to the discursive processes involved in strategising. Some researchers have identified crucial areas of social change where CDA can play a fundamental part. For example, Teun van Dijk's (1993) research focuses on the discursive construction of racism in media discourse and everyday interactions, while Norman Fairclough (2004) has worked on issues related to the globalisation. Central to CDA is the statement that discourse is strictly connected to control. Power is held by both institutions and individuals in contemporary society, and any challenge to the *status quo* challenges those who hold power. Thus, a commitment to equality belongs in itself to those who are responsible for maintaining the inequalities in contemporary society and must be of significant concern to those who challenge the *status quo* (Bloor and Bloor, 2007: 4).

In order to provide a methodological approach so as to highlight the connection between the micro-level of everyday language use and the macro-level of social structure, Fairclough (1992)

considers language use as a form of social practice, whereas discursive practice frames the structures. Accordingly, discourse contributes to all the levels of social structure interchangeably, and there is a complex and recursive relation between the texts produced in social interaction, discourse, and social structure (Giddens, 1984). This means that discourse analysis from this perspective "involves working in dialogue with particular bodies of social theory and approaches to social research, identifying specific research questions for discourse analysis within the object of study" (Fairclough, 2005: 927), and trying to ensure that relations between discourse and other social elements are rightly addressed. For instance, Fairclough (2000) discusses the political phenomenon of New Labour from an analytical discourse point of view, "formulating research questions in dialogue with objects of research constructed by political researchers" (Fairclough, 2005: 927). These perspectives are different, but we might say that they are not discrete, in the sense that other elements of the social context (i.e., the social relations, material boundaries, and structuring of space in organisations), in being socially constructed through discourse, come to incorporate or internalise particular discursive elements and, therefore, a specific world-view.

3.1.   Discourses as practices

People within specific domains engage in social practices and can thus be referred to as actors. Social practices are human behaviours that involve following certain socially established conventions within the boundaries of which actors have some degree of individual freedom and opportunities for unique behaviours. Examples of social practices include religious ceremonies as well as business meetings. Most social practices involve knowledge of linguistic and discoursal conventions. For instance, as Bloor and Bloor (2007: 8) argue, in a religious service, one may need to know how to behave in particular situations and when specific actions are more appropriate than others. Therefore, in accordance with Bloor and Bloor (2007), social practices are always linked to specialised forms of knowledge (Bloor and Bloor, 2007: 8):

> The knowledge and skills required to engage in social practices are part of socially shared knowledge. They may have been 'picked up' through experience or contact with other actors, or they may have been learned via specific instruction within the home environment or as part of education or training.

Although social practices are often well-established and persistent within a particular culture, they are rarely unchanging (Bloor and Bloor, 2007: 8). A single instance of social practice is "a social event which, when it is language-based (such as a committee meeting), is also known as a speech event" (Bloor and Bloor, 2007: 8). When discussing the formation of objects, Foucault (1972: 49) concludes that discourses should be treated "as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak". Discourses as practices, in Foucault's view, are regulated by discursive relations, and discursive objects exist "under the positive conditions of a complex group of relations" (Foucault, 1972: 45). He points out that these relations are established among institutions, economic and social processes, behavioural

patterns, systems of norms, techniques, forms of classification, modes of characterisation (Foucault, 1972). These relationships are neither exterior nor internal to discourse, but they have established boundaries. These relations are said to determine tautologically "the group of relations that discourse must establish in order to speak of this or that object, in order to deal with them, name them, analyse them, classify them, explain them, etc." (Foucault, 1972: 46).

Foucault further distinguishes 'discursive relations' from 'real or primary relations', which can be described among institutions, techniques, or social forms "independently of all discourse or all object of discourse" and "reflexive or secondary relations […] formulated in the discourse itself" (Foucault, 1972: 45); and he states that "the problem is to reveal the specificity of these discursive relations, and their interplay with the other two kinds" (Foucault, 1972: 45-46). This theme of the interrelations between discursive and non-discursive domains will be taken up more extensively in Foucault's later, Genealogical writings. In summary, in his Archaeological writings, Foucault viewed discourses as groups of statements that do not form unities but dispersions, which should themselves be analysed. Discourses, in this way, are seen as practices that obey specific rules and are located in archives, or systems that establish statements as events and things. Discourses are constitutive of the objects they address (Fairclough *et al.*, 2011), and especially subjectivity. Subjects, rather than being intentional producers of discourse, are at the mercy of anterior discursive structures.

4.   Practices in organisations

This section will argue for a linking of the daily organisational practices to the production of knowledge, that is, within a specific context, the production of discourse. This process, as will be demonstrated, can be a source of discrimination for those who challenge a binary view of gender.

Knowledge based on practice has an enduring tradition in sociological and organisational studies. In recent times, practices have been recognised as one of the most important categories when we think about the social world (Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina and Von Savigny, 2001). One of the reasons for this attention is the philosophical challenge to the rationalist view of the relationship between object and subject, put forward mainly by Heidegger and Wittgenstein (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011, 2015; Schatzki, 2012). As Heidegger (1996 [1927]) claims in his existential ontology, the core assumption on knowledge is represented by a sense of being in the world, a situated behaviour that has a specific meaning in a specific context. Wittgenstein (1958), on the other hand, assumes that following a rule imposed by society does not avoid the risk of misinterpretation. What is needed is the obedience to that rule, which implies the imitation of others following that rule. For Wittgenstein (1958), the understanding of a social rule is determined by the belongingness to those specific practices.

The repeated and repeatedly corrected common practices lead to the embodiment of a habitus, by learning an activity and an embodiment of specific pieces. Embodied knowledge allows improvisation, and the (following) embodiment of a piece allows being-in-there. Repeated and repeatedly corrected practices also lead to feeling one with each other when

acting 'together with', and this allows being-together-in-there (Bourdieu, 1990: 55, emphasis in the original):

> Because the *habitus* is an infinite capacity for generating products – thoughts, perceptions, expressions and actions – whose limits are set by the historically and socially situated conditions of its production, the conditioned and conditional freedom it provides is as remote from creation of unpredictable novelty as it is from simple mechanical reproduction of the original conditioning.

Indeed, "the term practice is a *topos* that connects 'knowing' with 'doing'" (Gherardi, 2008: 517). The relationship between practices and organisation has attracted the attention of a large number of scholars interested in how knowledge is transmitted through the organisation.

Feldman and Orlikowski (2011) have recognised three ways in which the observation of practices could say something about the organisational reality. The first concerns the understanding of the specific action made by people in the organisation. Dealing with this aspect means understanding and codifying knowledge about the specific activity endeavoured by organisational members. The second way, more theoretical than the former, is related to how structures are engendered and how to interpret them through the continuation of practices. Finally, the third way is concerned with "the constitutive role of practices in producing organizational reality" (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011: 1241). This perspective on organisational practices could also be linked to professional attitude.

One of the theoretical traditions that has mainly focused on organisational learning, and that belongs to the so-called stream of practice-based studies (Corradi, Gherardi and Verzelloni, 2010), is linked to that body of the literature on communities of practice (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Lave and Wenger, 1991) that are characterised by the mutual engagement, the joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire. This influential stream of research introduced to the organisational literature the perspective of the newcomer as an approach to better understand the content of tacit knowledge emerging in the community, which is often taken for granted (Gherardi 2006).

Researching through practice implies a thorough understanding of the corporeal and social field of observation. What is engaged with the observation is something embedded in micro-gestures that act as a source of knowledge. The differences between ordinary uses of language and workplace discourse are not absolute, and of course, workplaces differ from each other (Koester, 2010). Nevertheless, research into workplace discourse has revealed "distinctive interactive and linguistic patterns across different workplaces as well as within particular professional or workplace settings" (Koester, 2010: 7; see also Drew and Heritage, 1992). Such discourses reflect (Koester, 2010: 7):

> […] distinctive workplace practices that result from participants interacting in carrying out their tasks at work. While individuals will have varying degrees of autonomy depending on the nature of the work, working together always involves interacting with others

through spoken or written genres within the constraints of specific ways of doing things or 'practices'.

The primary way of studying such groups in which people do things at work have emerged from the investigation of workplace discourse and its community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Therefore, the main characteristics of the notion of community of practice and discourse communities are highlighted, drawing from the concept of practice, and how knowledge does not only entail a purpose but also becomes a tool to perpetuate organisations over time.

Swales (1990) proposes that a discourse community has a broadly agreed set of common public goals, mechanisms of intercommunication among its members, in addition to owning genres, and has acquired some specific terminology. Although some elements of the community of practice and discourse community are quite similar, such as *mutual engagement* and *mechanisms of intercommunication*, what Wenger (1998) means by the former seems to go far beyond Swales' (1990) categories. Mutual engagement does not exclusively involve mechanisms of intercommunication, but it creates shared relationships, and it connects participants in unexpected ways (Wenger, 1998). In the same way, joint enterprise creates relations of mutual accountability within the group. Looking at Swales' (1990) six defining characteristics of a discourse community, the emphasis is placed on how the discourse is used, and even more, on the use of genres. A discourse community is a socio-rhetorical community and does not require assimilation of world-view or a threshold level of personal involvement (Swales, 1990: 31). More specifically, Swales (1990: 9) defines discourse communities as "sociorhetorical networks that form in order to work towards sets of common goals". However, in Swales' (1990) description of discourse communities, not much attention is actually paid to them beyond their role as users of specific genres. This is rather different in the social constructionist school of genre, as it tries to connect genres to the values and epistemology of the discourse community. Swales' (1990) discourse communities are therefore much more narrowly defined than Wenger's (1998) communities of practice (Koester, 2010), where the focus is on how these communities engage (and not only use) genres. Accordingly, with communities of practice, the role of discourse is much less visibly apparent. Wenger's (1998) notion of *shared repertoire* is again much broader than the notion of genre, and it includes "routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gesture, symbols, genres, actions or concepts" (Wenger, 1998: 83). Shared repertoires, therefore, encompass both linguistic and non-linguistic elements, even though it is not clear what role each of them plays in the enactment of the community.

5. Functional approach to discourse

A functional approach to discourse sees language-based communication as being employed by managerial and social actors for achieving specific organisationally (and often personally) relevant ends. Discourse is seen as a tool at actors' disposal rather than as a constraining, dominating feature of social life (as in the critical approach); or as a shaping influence and a window to the ideational, symbolic world of organisations (as in the interpretive approach).

In this section, the functional approach to organisational discourse is illustrated through a discussion of how aspects of discourse (in particular, the use of metaphors) can be employed in efforts to accomplish more effective organisation change and development.

5.1.   Functional metaphors

The interest in organisation studies for the behavioural aspects of work is well established. Research that was initially considered pioneering has now become part of the most mainstream currents in the field. An example is represented by Mayo's (1933) studies, which paved the way for an increasing interest by researchers towards the 'human factor' in organisations, highlighting motivational aspects of people as both workers and individuals. Other key contributions throughout the development of a person-centred approach in organisational studies that have been used, discussed and critiqued at length, *inter alia*, include the informality within processes of cooperation by Barnard (1938), Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs, Herzberg's (1959, 1979) theory of motivation, but also processes of enactment in the relationship between organisations and the environment (Weick, 1977, 1979), organisational learning (Argyris and Schon, 1978).

There is a turning point that allows the interaction between the human side and the organisation to go from a superficial behavioural level to a deeper level of interlacing with organisational design: a much more significant role is given to unconscious and deeper dimensions of thought. Attention is then shifted from the observation of what motivates workers who, like human resources, are by definition the object of an investment that needs to provide a return on investment, to the person who, by definition, is not merely an investment. Gareth Morgan's (1986) *Images of Organization* aligns with this reasoning since the value for individuals of organisational structures as social mediation is made explicit through his 'images'. In the abovementioned volume, Morgan (1986: 6) uses specific organisational metaphors in "exploring the implications of different metaphors for thinking about the nature of organization": machines, organisms, brains, cultures, political systems, psychic prisons, flux and transformation, and instruments of domination (Morgan, 1986). Psychic prisons, in particular, are visible expressions of unconscious thoughts, which, if not consciously managed, can become traps of organisational activity. A metaphor, in this sense, may be seen as more than just a figure of speech. Seeing A in terms of the metaphor B is not only the archetype of related tropes such as metonymy, synecdoche, simile, and analogy but, more importantly, it is constructive and constitutive of both social reality and scientific inquiry (Morgan, 1986; Oswick, Keenoy and Grant, 2002; Heracleous, 2003, 2006; Jacobs and Heracleous, 2005, 2006), inducing, in actors' minds, ontological and epistemic correspondences between otherwise distinct domains (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Literal views of metaphors see them as merely a statement of similarity or analogy that are potentially expendable since what was stated metaphorically could also be stated literally (Black, 1979). This perspective is identified by Tsoukas (1993) as consistent with objectivist approaches in social science, which view the use of metaphors as not only unnecessary but also distorting of the 'facts' that should be expressed in literal language (Pinder and Bourgeois, 1982).

The roots of these traps can be found in shared beliefs, the comfort of taken-for-granted past success or even in the influence cast by one group on another. In order to explain how these traps of the psyche act on people's minds and actions, Morgan (1986) uses Plato's allegory of the cave, where prisoners can only get an idea of the outside world from inside the cave in the form of shapes projected by the fire on to a wall in the cave. Clearly, that is not the real world nor a truthful projection or representation of it; but, being unable to see anything else, prisoners believe the projections to be reality. For those people, gaining freedom from the prison means the possibility (both as a person and as a human resource) to venture out of the cave in the open to experience the world, nature, its colours, its sounds and scents, thus, rejecting the shapes and shadows from the fire as real. When considered as a metaphor for institutions, getting out of the cave and breaking the chains of the prison of the mind mean recognising institutional fears and anxiety, and escaping from the traps these can hide for the institution itself and individuals.

According to Julia Segal (1991), from the level of the unconscious, the prison is created by the prisoners for the guards; at the same time, the guards can be liberated in the organisational decision-making processes by getting in touch with the unconscious dimension of organisations without letting traps influence them (Renz, 2009). The creative potential of metaphorical statements depends upon there being sufficient differences between the two domains for a creative strain to exist (Morgan, 1983). The capability of metaphors to create situations and to foster organisational change is broadly testified in organisation studies (Pondy, 1983; Sackmann, 1989). Metaphors can offer valuable insights into existing situations (Morgan, 1980, 1983, 1986, 1996; Crider and Cirillo, 1991), while simultaneously acting as a linkage from a familiar to a new state (Pondy, 1983).

6.   Conclusions

As seen in Section 4 and Section 5, the power of discourse plays a seminal role in reproducing phenomena linked to social representation in organisations.

Thus, organisations can play a crucial role in being social mediators for change, which may be somehow contraposed to the natural selection view of organisations, in which only those who adapt themselves to the environment may hopefully survive. The theoretical foundation of discourse supports automatic text analysis in filling the gap between techniques in the calculation and the conceptual reflection concerning the role of discourse in organisations, and widely within society[1]. As suggested by Fairclough in his original idea about the structure of discourse, several elements, such as text (at a micro-level), practices (at a meso-level), and discourse (at a macro-level) contribute in supplying to researcher a weave to interpret texts that contribute to producing and reproducing social contexts.

Keywords

discourse; functionalism; organisations; critical

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[1] This approach follows and develops Bizjak (2018).

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95

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