

# THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING IN ORGANIZATIONS

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## Agenda

A safari into the wilds of organizational discourse

- Eclectic roots of the field and a definition
- Different lenses for studying discourse and the role of context
- Structural features of discourse and the social construction of reality
- Contests over meaning – discourses as sites of power
- Humor and irony – from denotation to connotation

## Eclectic roots of the field and a definition

### The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

- “The fact of the matter is that the ‘real world’ is to a large extent built upon the language habits of the group ... The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached ... the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation”

*Sapir, Edward. 1929. The status of linguistics as a science.*

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Selected Writings  
in Language,  
Culture, and  
Personality

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## The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

- “We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages ... We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way – an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, but its terms are absolutely obligatory...”

*Whorf, Benjamin. 1940. Science and linguistics (in Language, Thought and Reality)*

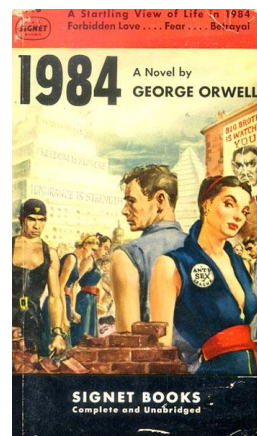
- E.g. Lakoff & Johnson (1970) on root metaphor of time in English language
- Industrial accidents observed by Whorf (“empty” gasoline cans) (Whorf, 1956)
- Studies of Piraha tribe in Brazil (Gordon, 2004)
- Studies with other tribes without terms for certain colours



## Linguistic determinism

- “Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it. Every concept that can ever be needed will be expressed by exactly *one* word, with its meaning rigidly defined and all its subsidiary meanings rubbed out and forgotten. ... But the process will still be continuing long after you and I are dead. Every year fewer and fewer words, and the range of consciousness always a little smaller”

*George Orwell, 1984*



## The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

- An extreme interpretation of this hypothesis involves *linguistic determinism* and *linguistic relativity*. These are unlikely.
- A more plausible version, “Moderate Whorfianism” is broadly accepted. Main ideas:
  - ✓ Language does not determine thought, but it influences it
  - ✓ A two-directional process is involved, so that our experience of the world also influences the language we use
  - ✓ Analysis can be fruitful at the “sociolect” level, or the level of “modes” of discourse in specific social contexts
  - ✓ ...which is where organizational discourse analysis comes in

## What is discourse?

A working definition:

Discourse is a body of texts patterned by certain structural features. Discourses operate at various levels and can interrelate in a variety of reinforcing or conflicting ways.

## Different lenses for studying discourse and the role of context

### Approaches for the study of discourse

- **Functional** – discourse is language-based communication, employed by social actors to achieve certain ends
- **Interpretive** – discourse is constitutive of social reality and to understand meaning construction we need to understand the language involved
- **Critical** – discourse enshrines and perpetuates power / knowledge relations; to accomplish positive change we must unmask these discursive structures
- **Structurational** – discourse is a duality of interrelated communicative actions patterned by deep structures; by tracking both, we can understand shifts over time in both language as well as actions

Heracleous & Barrett, 2001. Organizational change as discourse. *Academy of Management Journal*, 44: 755-778.



To adequately understand the meaning of these constructions context is essential...



Heracleous & Jacobs, 2008, Understanding organizations through embodied metaphors. *Organization Studies*, 29 (1): 45-78

Valid interpretations offer the possibility of advancing theory, in this case outlining some correspondences between symbols, and actors' perceptions of their organizations

Table 8  
Organizational  
Dimensions  
Manifested in  
Embodied  
Metaphors

Physical manifestation	Example	Orientalional metaphor	Rhetorical function in narrative	Example
Elevation	FixCo tower	Up-down: "up is powerful, down is powerless"	Power, observation	"FixCo, the new owners are observing us"
Centrality	Transformative engine	Central-peripheral: "central is important, peripheral is less important"	Importance	"The transformative engine is the core of the strategy development process"
Proximity	Dungeon of management	Close-remote: "close is related; remote is unrelated"	Relatedness	"Management is pivotal to the transformation process"
Directional uniformity	Disoriented animals	Same-different direction: "same direction is coherent; different direction is incoherent"	Coherence	"Country managers are very different"
Similarity of spatial level	Ghost of the founder	Up-down-level: "difference in level is different; same level is equal"	Belongingness	"He used to be one of us"
Solidity of physical connection	"Gearing wheels"	Robust-shaky: "robust is solid; shaky is less solid"	Robustness of relations	"Strategy process has a massive gearing effect"
Dual structures	"3G licence"	Same-different direction: "same direction is coherent; different direction is incoherent"	Duality of relationships	"We don't know whether it is the tiger of growth or an elephant around our neck"
Use of colours	"grey invasion of accountants"	Same-different colour: "same colour is same; different colour is different"	Uniformity/creativity	"Grey invasion of accountants"

Heracleous & Jacobs, 2008, Understanding organizations through embodied metaphors. *Organization Studies*, 29 (1): 45-78

# Structural features of discourse and the social construction of reality

## Features of the Structural and Communicative Levels of Discourse

- Systematic - Example from institutionalized behaviours (action analyzed as text)
- Contextually located: Example from HK managers
- Power / ideology: Example from political action (org analysis often entails a political position)

Communicative Lev	Structural Level
Intra-textual Specific pt in time Functional Situational Explicit	Inter-textual Longitudinal Constructive Trans-situational Implicit
<b>Common Features</b>	
Systematic Contextually located Linked to power relationships, ideologies, and institutions	

Heracleous & Hendry, 2000. Discourse and the study of Organization. *Human Relations*, 53: 1251-1286.

## Structural Discursive Features as Constructive of Social Reality

“Discursive structures and constructions are potent in constructing social reality in the following ways: Firstly, **they persist in the longer term and reside in actors’ practical consciousness.** Secondly, they are **learned through socialization,** in the same way as cultural values and beliefs. ... Thirdly, discursive central themes and their constructions take on the **properties of normative devices for orienting action.** Action is itself a symbolic affirmation or challenge of the importance of these themes. ... if there are statements that do not agree with the dominant discourse, such statements are not potent in constructing social reality”  
... unless conditions are receptive, statements acquire critical mass, they have pragmatic relevance, etc

Heracleous, 2006. A tale of three discourses: The dominant, the strategic and the marginalized.  
*Journal of Management Studies*, 43: 1059-1087

Contests over the social construction of meaning can occur through framing and re-framing...

Jobs clip



CNBC Interviewer (Framing / root metaphor?)	Steve Jobs (Re-framing / root metaphor?)
“Apple Computer is a company that does things in rather <b>unique</b> and <b>dramatic</b> ways”	
“Its <b>unplugging</b> IBM”	
“ <b>Tempestuous</b> ten year relationship”	
“People who were in the room suggested that you were somewhat <b>harshly critical</b> of IBM and its <b>inability to deliver</b> ”	
“What did IBM <b>fail</b> to come up with in your estimation?”	
“Where is it that you want to go that Intel you know is willing to <b>go along with</b> ”	
“What do you mean when you say the <b>direction</b> into which you wanna go?”	
Heracleous & Klaering, 2011, Charismatic leadership and rhetorical competence: An analysis of Steve Jobs’ rhetoric. Work in progress.	

CNBC Interviewer (Framing / root metaphor?)	Steve Jobs (Re-framing / root metaphor?)
“Apple Computer is a company that does things in rather <b>unique</b> and <b>dramatic</b> ways”	“Its <b>not as dramatic</b> as you are characterizing it”
“Its <b>unplugging</b> IBM”	“This is gonna be a more <b>gradual transition</b> ” “Its gonna take maybe a <b>two year transition</b> ”
“ <b>Tempestuous</b> ten year relationship”	“We’ve got some <b>great</b> power PC <b>products</b> today”
“People who were in the room suggested that you were somewhat <b>harshly critical</b> of IBM and its <b>inability to deliver</b> ”	“We have a <b>good relationship</b> with IBM and they’ve got a <b>product roadmap</b> and today the <b>products are really good</b> , but as we <b>look out into the future where we wanna go</b> is maybe a little bit different”
“What did IBM <b>fail</b> to come up with in your estimation?”	“We envision some <b>awesome products</b> we wanna build for our customers, and Intel’s <b>roadmap aligns</b> with <b>where we wanna go</b> much more than any other”
“Where is it that you want to go that Intel you know is willing to <b>go along with</b> ”	“We never talk about unannounced <b>products</b> , so I can’t say. There used to be a saying at Apple “isn’t it funny a <b>ship that leaks form the top</b> ”
“What do you mean when you say the <b>direction</b> into which you wanna go?”	“We’ll just have to <b>wait and see</b> ”
Heracleous & Klaering, 2011, Charismatic leadership and rhetorical competence: An analysis of Steve Jobs’ rhetoric. Work in progress.	

## Rhetorical styles

- **Interviewer:**

- Provocative, fast paced, uses emotionally loaded /negative terms
- Framing situation sensationally, and decision as having abrupt consequences
- Root metaphor: “Business is war” (conflict)

- **Jobs:**



- Calm, composed, answers the questions that he wants to answer (vs interviews earlier in his career)
- Re-framing: Root metaphor: “Business is a journey”, the Apple / IBM journeys are diverging, whereas the Apple / Intel journeys are converging (separation is a natural consequence, and gradual)
- Emphasizing specific themes (product / future themes recurring)
- Using positive terms
- Hand gestures reinforce message

Heracleous & Klaering, 2011, Charismatic leadership and rhetorical competence: An analysis of Steve Jobs’ rhetoric. Work in progress.

Contests over meaning are played through discourse...

## Core Enthymeme Structure of the Dominant Discourse

X – central theme of success  
 Y – higher sales to clients  
 Z – strategic change process

Enthymeme structure	Discursive Manifestation	Nature of Statement
$P1 + P2$  $C1 \rightarrow P1' + P2'$  C2	<i>P1</i> Our key goal is X	<i>P1</i> Value stating desirable state of affairs
	<i>P2</i> Y leads to X	<i>P2</i> General belief of contingent relationship in normative domain
	$C1 \rightarrow P1'$ Therefore, we need to take appropriate action to achieve	$C1 \rightarrow P1'$ General conclusion on required type or class of action
	<i>Y</i>	<i>P2'</i> Belief of contingent relationship in
	<i>P2'</i> Action Z leads to Y	the action-oriented domain
	<i>C2</i> Therefore, we need to do Z	<i>C2</i> Conclusion of required specific action to be taken

Heracleous, 2006. A tale of three discourses: The dominant, the strategic and the marginalized. *Journal of Management Studies*, 43: 1059-1087

## Rhetorical Strategy in People Associates

The rhetorical strategy involved certain “rules” for “proper” argumentation in this social context, that can be stated as follows:

1. To legitimate a certain course of action or inaction, locate it in the structures and constructions of the dominant discourse
2. This can be done through implicit or explicit reference to its contributions to *success* and to its effects on *clients*
3. Follow the particular constructions of these central themes in the dominant discourse; for example, talk of financial success and adding value or selling more to clients
4. Use vocabulary and style of dominant discourse (teleology, instrumentality, measurability)

*Rhetorical strategy is a structural feature of this dominant mode of discourse in PA (structural perspective)  
 E.g. Mock “trial” of consultant*

## Support Staff Concerns

- Not feeling valued in PA
- Being given low priority in terms of consultation, communication, etc
- Being paid low salaries
- Being expected to work overtime without extra pay
- Being treated inconsiderately by many consultants

These concerns were not addressed after one and a half year had passed, even though senior management was continuously stressing that they were as important as consultant concerns

## Features of the Dominant, Strategic Change and Counter Discourses

FEATURES	DOMINANT DISCOURSE	STRAT CHANGE DISCOURSE	COUNTER-DISCOURSE
<b>Discursive elements</b>	Enthymeme structures, central themes, specific constructions	Themes legitimated through the dominant discourse	Satirical images and captions
<b>Channels of expression</b>	Formal, extensive	Formal, extensive,	Informal, scattered
<b>Time scale</b>	Long-term	Temporary	Long-term
<b>Orientation</b>	Normative, instrumental, teleological	Action-oriented	Resistance through humor
<b>Functions in social context</b>	Communicative: Informing, co-ordinating, persuading. Constructive: Defining criteria of "success", allocating worth and value to org groups by reference to these criteria	Enabling organizational responsiveness to competitive demands, within lense of dominant discourse	Expressing dissatisfaction, letting off steam, safeguarding identity and self-worth
		<b>APPROPRIATION</b>	<b>OPPOSITION</b>

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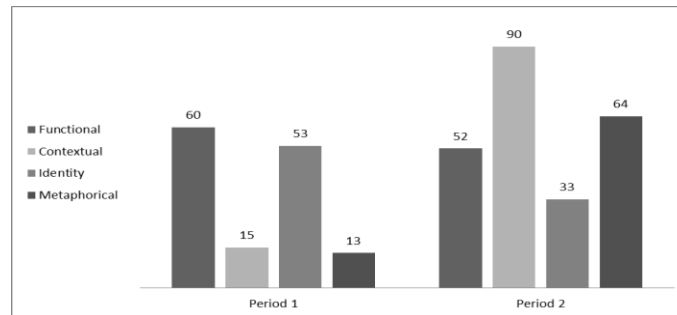
Humor and irony (from  
denotation to connotation)  
...dictionary meaning  
doesn't always help us  
understand the message

Studying discourse is a highly versatile  
way of understanding organizations, e.g.

- What are the central themes, how are they constructed, how discourses are structured (e.g. linkages among central themes, enthymemes)
- How discourses interrelate (e.g. appropriation vs opposition)
- Why agents speak, think and act as they do (e.g. rhetorical strategies, connotations of labels); which can inform understanding / diagnosis / intervention
- Novel ways of reaching and understanding first order perceptions of organizational situations (e.g. embodied metaphors)
- Power / political dimensions of discourse (links of discourse to social practices that marginalise certain groups)

Dimensions of First-order Discourse	Description	Guiding Question	Relevance to strategy-as-practice framework and applicability as a rhetorical resource
<b>Functional</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strategy is goal-oriented; it facilitates decisions among competing alternatives and enables implementation through preparation of detailed plans that guide actions and the allocation of resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How do strategists perceive the task and process of strategy? How does this influence what they do and how do they do it?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Praxis: Conceptions of what the strategy task and process involves, influences what strategists do and how they talk about strategy.</li> </ul>
<b>Contextual</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strategy is contingent on the organizational location of strategic activities and the norms of practicing strategy in particular organizations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How does the organizational context of strategists affect how they do strategy?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Practice: What is appropriate strategic practice depends on where strategists are located (e.g. centre vs units)</li> </ul>
<b>Identity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strategy is a resource for identity construction. A strategist, for example, is able to challenge convention and understand industry value drivers and their shifts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Who are the strategists? How do they think of themselves and their role?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Practitioners: It is strategists' capabilities that make them strategists and distinguishes them from non-strategists</li> </ul>
<b>Metaphorical</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strategic discourse is aspirational, typically expressed in terms of directional and mechanistic metaphors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How do strategists rhetorically express their view of strategy?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Praxis, practices, practitioners: The discourse of strategy provides a set of cognitive toolkits and sensemaking devices for the participants in the strategy process (practitioners), structuring their routinized behaviors (practices) as they engage in specific activities such as strategic planning workshops (praxis)</li> </ul>

Paroutis & Heracleous, 2011, The nature and employment of first-order strategy discourse, Work in progress



Dimension	Period 1 (2000-2001)		Period 2 (2002-2003)	
	Coding References	Percentage	Coding References	Percentage
<b>Functional</b>	60	43%	52	22%
<b>Contextual</b>	15	11%	90	38%
<b>Identity</b>	53	38%	33	14%
<b>Metaphorical</b>	13	9%	64	27%
<b>Total</b>	141	100%	239	100%
<b>Dimensions emphasized</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Functional</li> <li>Identity</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Contextual</li> <li>Metaphorical</li> </ul>	
<b>Key Actors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Central strategy team with the support of the top management team</li> <li>Top management</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Central strategy team</li> <li>Business unit (peripheral) strategy teams established to support the new process</li> <li>Middle level management</li> </ul>	

Paroutis & Heracleous, 2011, The nature and employment of first-order strategy discourse, Work in progress

In conclusion, organizational discourse analysis is...

- A window to ideational world of organizations
- Eclectic in terms of theoretical antecedents
- Methodologically and ontologically pluralist
- Inter-textual and contextually informed
- Scalable in application
- Motivated by a variety of potential aims
- An approach that encourages reflexivity
- ...and challenging to do well but worth it in the end